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Cognitive-emotional processes in divorced parental relationships

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Abstract

Divorced parents with joint custody are expected to collaborate about their children. However, negative emotions are often intense and painful following divorce. This may lead to blocked negotiations about important issues such as children's living arrangements. The present study focused on the intra-psychic processes of general cognitive-emotional tendencies as they appear over time among low and high conflict divorced parents. Interviews were carried out with 56 parents three and five years post-divorce. Data were analyzed thematically and was related to cognitive-behavioral theory and clinical practice for couples. Four themes were found: (1) Changing the situation, (2) Changing the emotions, (3) Stuck in anger, and, (4) Stuck in hopelessness. Four cases were selected to illustrate the sample in the presentation of the findings. Clinical implications are suggested.

Key words: Divorce, emotions, cognitive-behavioral therapy, qualitative analysis

Introduction

The dissolution of marriage and its aftermaths have been associated with many negative emotional and physical responses, ranging from anxiety, depression, psychopathology, immune suppression and decreased longevity for adults (Amato, 2005; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001) as well as negative emotional and behavioural consequences for children (Grych & Fincham, 1993). In particular children are harmed by conflicts that are focused on them. However, after the initial upheaval most adults and children function normally (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Thus it seems as if divorced individuals and couples may need interventions that address these feelings, as they otherwise may have the potential to block effective negotiations about, for instance, children's living arrangements and other concerns regarding the children. The legal

model of mediation (Coogles, 1978) holds that parties are rational and will engage in cooperative mediation practices. However, when people are consumed with emotional pain and maybe also ambivalent regarding the divorce itself, it may not be possible for them to think rationally and put children's best to the forefront. It is common for divorcing parents to attend, or be offered some form of mediation, sometimes to reach binding agreements about custody and contact. But even though mediators respect and acknowledge the parties' emotions, mediation is usually not the forum to go into depth with feeling of continued attachment, grief and anger. Instead some form of divorce therapy would be appropriate. Even though outcome studies of mediation has been quite positive, there is a need to scientifically study the intervention processes that may lead to the positive results, and which do not. Likewise, therapeutic models of divorce have not been enough empirically tested. Discussing these issues Sbarra and Emery (2006) proposed that intra-psychic processes needed to be studied and theoretically framed to help practitioners understand which interventions are effective and how.

In the following I will discuss these issues in more depth. In the present study I therefore wanted to investigate through interviews, how divorced parents manage negative emotions at an intra-psychic level manage negative emotions. As theoretical framework I will relate data to the cognitive-behavioral model for intact couples (Baucom, Epstein, LaTaillade & Kirby, 2008) as well as to an integrative divorce therapy (Lebow, 2008).

Mediation in Sweden

First I want to say a few words about mediation in Sweden. In this country 55 000 children are affected by divorce each year. Among these 10% become the victims of custody conflict between the parents (Björneke et al., 2010). In Sweden there are no current working methods or best practice to help high conflict parents when mediation is not enough to solve custody conflicts and finding a form for cooperation that focus on the children's best interests. Municipalities in Sweden are required to offer family mediation that is generally negotiation based. Mediation is voluntary in Sweden, although the Civil court might recommend it. However, it has been found that this kind of mediation mainly works for people who already have negotiation skills (Ryrstedt, 2010).

Swedish parents may put their case before the general civil court, while some other countries have a special family court. According to Björneke et al., (2010) parents may come to an agreement in court, but these are seldom long lasting and, the parents may continue to fight. Björneke (2010) argued that high conflict parents ought to be helped by psychotherapeutic methods.

Differences between mediation and divorce therapy

Katz (2007) discussed the similarities and differences between mediation and psychotherapy. While they both encourage communication between the parties, as well as effective problem-solving, they are distinctly different in other ways. Mediation is designed to help people making decisions that will be legally binding. Even though mediators acknowledge and respect feelings they generally do not go into depth with them. Sometimes it becomes clear in mediation that clients are not ready to negotiate and make decisions as they may be confused about if they really want the separation or remain so attached that more intense emotional work need to be done. Therapeutic interventions might then be necessary that could focus on psychological issues, such as managing emotions connected with attachment and reformulating a new identity as an individual rather than one in a couple, development of a new social support system and learning to function effectively as a single parent (Glaser & Borduin, 1986).

Divorce therapy

Divorce therapies, sometimes added to mediation, have been developed within different traditions, such as cognitive-behavioral (Baucom, Epstein, LaTaillade & Kirby, 2008), family systems (Lebow, 2007), and solution focused therapies (Sbarra & Emery, 2006). While these therapies have scientific empirical support for marital therapy they have not yet been sufficiently tested for use with divorced parents.

Lebow (2006) developed an integrative divorce therapy which included strategies from several methods for couples. The basis is a family system therapy that is concerned with the cognitions, beliefs, perceptions and behaviors of individual family members and how they influence the functioning of the family (see also Spillane, 2000, for another example of cognitive-behavioral family therapy). Lebow (2006) added attention to the special challenges for divorced parents, such as difficulties over child custody and visitation, and the interface

between divorce therapy and the judicial system. Psycho-education that is central in divorce mediation, divorce therapy and prevention programs, is also prominent in integrative divorce therapy. Focus lies on emotions common in divorce and understanding children's reactions in order to help them communicate their feelings. Reattribution helps in building new narratives that are neither blaming nor destructive. Another way to work with emotions is a catharsis process, allowing individuals to work through the trauma of divorce in a safe environment, and the acknowledgement of the need of some people to reflect over the self. Important differences between couple's therapy and divorce therapy is the focus on disengagement in the latter rather than intimacy building, and on the effects on a third party, i.e., the children.

Empirical support for divorce interventions

Sbarra and Emery (2006) argued that mediators and divorce therapists need to be able to balance an understanding of dissolution-specific outcomes with appropriate intervention strategies. Divorce mediation should be more deeply grounded in scientific understanding of post-relational psychological functioning and associated processes of cognitive emotional recovery. The authors assume that divorce-related grief and emotion regulation is the critical process for building effective interventions.

A research agenda

Following a review of the state of the art in divorce interventions, and a presentation of their model for grief and attachment in divorce, Sbarra and Emery (2006) suggested implications and interventions that could be added to mediation when emotions get in the way of effective negotiations. However, these strategies need to be tested in empirical research: Interventions should be (1) psycho-educational, including finding new ways to regulate emotions, (2) assisting in new narration of one's divorce to be able to make sense of stressful events, (3) attending to reactivation of attachment in that divorced parents may experience unintended effects of improved parenting, and, (4) promote emotional integration, helping people to have easy access to and simultaneously experience feelings of love, sadness and anger, rather than getting stuck in any of these.

Cognitive-behavioural therapy for couples (CBTC)

In the following I will present CBTC theory and clinical practice mainly based on Baucom's et al. (2008) and Datillio's (2010) cognitive-behavioural therapy for (intact) couples. CBTC

has earlier been applied to divorce therapy as a one method approach (Spillane, 2000) or integrated with other methods (Lebow, 2008). The CBTC model in general, implies that emotions, such as depression, anxiety or anger may be modified by changing cognitions and behaviours. Furthermore, it is assumed that cognitions, emotions and behaviours are affected by the context, and in couple or divorce therapy the environment consists of the couple and their extended family context. Thus, both members of a couple are “shaped, strengthened, and weakened, and can be modified in therapy by consequences provided by environmental events, particularly those involving the other partner” (Baucom et al., 2008, p. 32).

The behavioral part of CBCT is based on social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1963), and social exchange theory (Thibaut & Kelly, 1957; Stuart, 1969). The social learning theory concept of operant conditioning suggested that positive behaviours towards the spouse would increase as a consequence of that behaviour being rewarded. Later social exchange theory was added that was based on the assumption that positive relative to negative events determine satisfaction in a couple. CBTC has always been grounded in empirical research and it was found that behavioural intervention principles were effective. However, BCT seemed to be too restrictive in its assumptions as it was observed that a couple’s information processing mattered in how events were interpreted and evaluated (Baucom & Epstein, 1990). Furthermore, other methods, such as cognitive therapy, had shown good results on couple distress.

Beck, Rush, Show and Emery (1979) emphasized how people’s behaviours and emotions was influenced by information processing such as selective attention, attribution processes, expectations and assumptions or general beliefs about others. A person in a distressed couple may for instance only attend to the negative aspects of the other’s behaviour, attribute problems in the marriage to the other’s faults, make predictions about what the other will do in a particular situation, hold general assumptions about how men or women are or, how they “should be” or “should do”.

The CBTC model holds that vulnerability for reacting in certain ways, sets of an interrelated system of cognitions, behaviours and emotions that reinforce each other, can create self-maintaining cycles. These interacting systems can be functional or dysfunctional in terms of its long- or short-termed consequences for the individual (Baucom et al., 2008).

A cognitive therapist's main task is to help couples being observers and evaluators of their own automatic thoughts and their longstanding assumptions and standards (knowledge structures or schemas) regarding their relationship. The idea is that people's negative emotions and behaviours may be modified by altering their information-processing styles (Epstein & Baucom, 2002).

Dattilio went so far as to suggest that working on the cognitive processes were the backbone of CBTC. However, in line with Sbarra and Emery's (2006) suggestion about attending to attachment and grief issues in divorce therapy, Dattilio proposed the inclusion of attachment theory as part of CBTC. Dattilio argued that it is necessary also to focus on emotions in the treatment of distressed couples, something that had not gained much interest in traditional CBTC, because emotions were basically seen as a consequence of cognitions and behaviours. Attachment theory was developed by Bowlby (1979) and Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall (1978) as a description of a child's bonding with a caretaker as a means of survival. Shaver, Hazan and Bradshaw (1988) further elaborated the theory to include adults and proposed that the attachment patterns we develop as children continue to affect our close relationships as we grow up. We can be securely or insecurely attached depending on how reliable our early relationships were. Attachment patterns are hypothesized to affect how we interpret events that in turn affect our feelings. Dattilio (2010) argued that these reactions on emotionally charged stimuli need to be understood in couple's therapy. For instance, a securely attached person is capable of emotional flexibility and complexity while an insecurely attached individual may be particularly vulnerable to separations.

Common interventions in CBTC

Before treatment a CBCT therapist makes a thorough assessment of the individual partners, the relationship, and their social environment. This is mainly performed through communication samples and questionnaires. Targets of assessment are the couple's concerns and areas of possible growth and enrichment, clarifying cognitive, behavioural and affective factors on both individual and dyadic levels, and determining the appropriateness of couples' therapy. The couple's goals and perspectives of the presented concerns are sampled, as well as each partner's motivation for therapy and investment in the relationship.

Clear and measurable goals based on the assessment are set in collaboration between the couple and the therapist. It is important, for couple therapy, that partners may have different goals based on different perspectives or needs and to start any meaningful therapy these differences must be resolved.

According to Baucom et al., (2002) behaviour changes are assumed to occur if the partners agree to perform certain behaviours in order to increase positive and decrease negative behaviours, and help partners getting their needs within the relationship satisfied (Baucom et al., 2002). Contingency contracts, meaning a quid pro quo agreement, are constructed, in which the partners agree to perform some behavior the other partner wants and that way affect the receiver's behaviour in a positive way.

Dattilio (2010) focused on interventions regarding two major types of communication and emotion focused interventions, built on attachment theory. Communication types are (1) the sharing thoughts and feelings, and, (2) to increase decision-making and problem-solving conversations. The first involves teaching partners strategies for effective communication. The second communication intervention teaches partners how to convey empathy and validate each other. Moreover, couples are taught strategies for effective problem-solving. Components of these are: Defining of the problem, generating solutions, evaluating advantages and disadvantages of each solution, selecting one solution, implementing and evaluating the outcome. Furthermore, Dattilio suggested a focus on emotions by for instance helping the client to attend to emotionally charged themes and noticing internal clues. De-escalation techniques aim at regulating upset feelings that may lead to an escalation of conflict.

In order to establish a collaborative therapy it is important that clients understand the model. They need to understand the structure, the concepts, and the principles and methods involved. Such "mini-lectures" are presented throughout the therapy. The clients may also be encouraged, as part of homework, to read recommended popular books. Clients are educated about automatic thoughts and how they relate to emotions and behaviours, and how to identify them. The couple is coached in observing these thoughts during negative relational events. They may keep notes of them in a log.

Imagery and role play may be useful in understanding emotions and thoughts in an emotionally charged situation as they happened in the past. Partners could role play what actually happened or they can reverse roles in order to evoke empathy and understanding of the other's perspective. Dattilio, however, warned that these techniques should be used with caution and the best is when discovery of automatic thoughts takes place in session.

Aims of the study

Building on the above theories, clinical practice and responding to the request for studies of intra-psycho processes in divorce mediation and therapy the primary goal of the present research was to examine cognitive-emotional processes in individual divorced parents who had joint custody of children. Without a therapeutic intervention mediation alone seems to be of little help to many couples. By understanding the emotional dynamics of separated couples it may become clearer how they may get blocked and how therapeutic interventions may be helpful.

1. How do divorced couples regulate and/or prevent negative emotions occurring in their interactions about their children?
2. What cognitive-emotional processes are particularly related to blocks or success in mediation?
3. Based on the results, which therapeutic interventions would be helpful as added to mediation or, separately, in divorce therapy?

Methods

Repeated qualitative face-to-face interviews were carried out three and five years after the divorce. The data was analysed according to a theory driven thematic analysis. This study was part of a project concerned with psychological processes in interactions between divorced parents, such as decision-making processes of making arrangements for children, including conflict behaviour, problem-solving, and emotional and cognitive experiences.

Recruitment

Respondents were recruited from: (1) the civil court register of granted divorces in Göteborg, Sweden, sampling couples divorced March to May 2002, who were contacted by mail and asked to return a slip with phone number if interested in taking part in the study, (2) a single parent support organisation in a smaller town in the south of Sweden, contacted via the organizer who distributed an information sheet including a slip to return with telephone number. 44 respondents were recruited from the civil court. 104 individuals were contacted and 56 responded favourably. Among these were ten couples while the others participated individually.

Sample characteristics

Eventually, the study included 56 parents; 22 men and 34 women. All had joint custody of one-five children aged three-18 years. Income levels varied from low (social benefit) to high (< SEK 450 000/year). Average age for women in the city group was 39.6 years and for men 43 years. The rural group tended to be somewhat younger; 34.4 for women, and 35.5 for men. Average number of children under 18 was 2.0 for the rural group and 2.1 for the city group. Educational level varied from nine year compulsory school to university level. University degrees were more common in the city group while only one person in the rural group had a degree. Most persons had at least 12 years' education. Five people were immigrants. After five years 26 (47 %, 12 men and 14 women) persons of the city group had new partners. Five had new children. In the rural group only two women and one man (25%) had re-partnered. Some of these may be due to selection procedures.

Children from 20 of the families lived mainly with one parent (the father in four families) and visited the other, 21 families practiced a week-week system, with children alternating between homes, and the remaining three families had mixed (one child living with one parent, and another moving in between), or split (all children had one home-base, but the children were split between parents) systems. These arrangements were relatively stable between the first and second interview.

Six families had a court verdict regarding the children's residence or custody, but in most cases there was only a note in the registers, reminding the parents about their continuing joint

custody of their child/ren. Three persons had taken steps towards claiming sole custody at the time of the interview.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, about 1 ½ hour, mostly in the respondent's home and some in the author's office at the Nordic School of Public Health. There were three interviewers; the author and two research assistants, both licensed clinical psychologists. The interviews were repeated two years later. Additionally, two-three brief telephone interviews were carried out with two-three weeks interval to explore psychological processes in the interaction between the parents in more detail. Respondents were asked about in what situations they reacted with negative feelings and what they did and thought as a response to these feelings. We also explored what general feelings respondents had about the parental interactions and how, and if, they acted upon them.

Analysis

Audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim by the two research assistants. The data set comprised 112 transcribed interviews. A thematic theory driven approach for analysis was employed (Boyatzis, 1998). The analysis included the following steps:

(I) Reading through all the data and reducing it to sections where informants talked about emotions in the context of the relationship.

(II) Identifying couples with high and low conflict. Quite early on in the initial coding it was clear that with regard to overt and covert conflict and/or general wellbeing within the parental relationship the sample was dichotomized in that some (about half of the sample) reported being relatively content with how collaboration worked. Some reported that collaboration didn't work at all while others felt angry or discontent. The negative versus positive feelings about the relationship were not necessarily extreme, but there was seldom any doubt about whether positive or negative emotion was dominating.

Many interviews opened with a statement as to the quality of the parental collaboration (or lack of it). Miriam said: "*I know that for some it works very well with joint custody but in my case it doesn't work at all.*" In contrast Clara said: "*I think I have been lucky. I have had a*

happy divorce. And a wonderfully good relationship with my ex and a good relationship with the children.”

(III) Identifying themes within each sub-sample, i.e., high and low conflict couples.

Four themes were found: (1) Changing the situation, (2) Changing the feelings, (3) Stuck in anger, and, (4) Stuck in despair. The first of these included statements about respondents’ attempts to solve the problem triggering negative emotions instead of being engulfed by them. Changing the feelings concerned how negative feelings in the divorce and relationship context were transformed mainly through cognitive processes. Being stuck in anger indicated persons who harboured continuing feelings of anger against the other on a general level, rather than in particular situations. And, finally, stuck in despair were based on statements that concerned the person giving up and having a feeling of ongoing sadness.

(IV) The identification of sub-themes within each theme was based on cognitive-behavioural conceptualization and included attachment, cognitions, emotion management, behaviour and maintaining factors.

(V) All the data were analysed and, finally, four cases were chosen as illustrations, each illustrating the four themes and the sub-themes listed above.

Ethical considerations

The study was ethically approved by the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research.

Findings

As said above four main themes were found: (1) Changing the situation, (2) Changing the emotions, (3) Stuck in anger, and, (4) Stuck in despair. Sub-themes concerned attachment, cognitions, behaviors, emotions and maintaining factors. In two cases I found a continuing process going from initial pain and hurt and to today’s stability and contentedness with their lives (Carl and Anne). In the other two cases the situation was very much the same five years after the divorce, a “stuck-ness” in negative feelings maintained by dysfunctional thoughts and behaviors (Angelica and Miriam).

Changing the situation referred to a solution orientation that helped preventing or resolving emotionally charged issues between the parents. To do this, attachment issues had to be resolved, either in that attachment was over and a more businesslike relationship developed, or there could be a friendly and more involved relationship within clear boundaries. Shared physical care was the norm among these participants but wasn't always the case. Cognitions concerned positive aspects of shared parenthood. Win-win solutions were preferred and since the results of these behaviors were positive both partners were rewarded and the dynamics self-maintained. Negative emotions could be expressed, but often were dealt with outside of the parental relationship. At least that was the goal.

Changing the emotions: Sometimes the parental relationship was not possible to influence, it was too destructive, and therefore shared problem-solving didn't work. This may be because the other parent couldn't let go of the relationship and/or had serious psychosocial or mental problems. The children lived with one parent and could have regular or intermittent contact with the other parent. The path to well-being would instead go through cognitive processes in turn affecting behaviors and feelings. Processes to emotional change included re-focusing attention and re-appraising the meaning of divorce and the life as single parent. A supportive social network was typical of those who coped with the difficulties and emotions and managed to build a meaningful and fulfilling life.

Stuck in anger. Respondents characterized as being stuck in anger could have shared care or there could be a residence parent and a contact parent. Communication had broken down or was infected and hostile. Explicit reasons for anger could concern the other's lack of involvement, that the other was not treating the children well, or wanting the other to see less of the children. Or almost anything. At times anger had occurred as a response to the other finding a new partner or having new children. It was maintained by rumination and difficulties in finding and understanding functional ways to cope with anger, and maybe also lack of motivation for letting go of the old relationship. Unresolved attachment appeared to lie at the heart of these emotional difficulties.

Stuck in despair. Persons who were stuck in despair perceived their situation as hopeless. Arrangements for children varied. Even though the sadness and hopelessness were in common, some were still attached to their ex-spouses and couldn't let go, while others were

the target of the other's anger or possible problems with detaching, and interactions were colored by these processes, in terms of destructive communication, poor problem-solving, shared or individual, and poor management of feelings. Often despairing respondents attempted to re-direct attention but unsuccessfully.

Changing the situation; Carl

Attachment. Carl had felt very vulnerable initially, being left by his wife, his best friend and also other friends. However, early in the divorce process he had *decided and committed* himself to having a good relationship with his children, which meant also having a working relationship with his ex-wife. At first he had hoped for reconciliation, but with time he understood that that would never happen and he was able to accept and *disengage* himself from the relationship.

When I met Carl at the five year follow-up he felt emotionally stable and content. He now had a satisfying life with his children and described the relationship with Clara as "perfect".

"I would say (the relationship) is businesslike. We talk about everything we need to talk about and solve all problems with the children together. Our relationship is over."

Psychosocial context: Carl had lost most of his friends following the divorce so he had to cope mainly on his own. When I met him he had started to make new friends through the support organization and by getting involved in his children's school and leisure activities. The first year after divorce he was too depressed to do anything at all but now he was feeling OK. Even though he wasn't vulnerable in the parental relationship any more, indications that the children were unhappy distressed him. He might be vulnerable in the sense that he had lost most of his network in the divorce, but was now building a new of people in the same situation and also taking an active part in the children's school.

Cognitions. Carl usually *attended to the positive* aspects of sharing parenthood with Clara, and of Clara as a parent and co-parent. He perceived that they shared values and standards. He took for granted that both parents wanted the best for the children and would take responsibility for taking good care of them. In general, he was able to *take Clara's perspective* and to be empathetic with her because he "*didn't want her to suffer*". After the first year's chaos he was *focusing on the present* and the future rather than dwelling on past offences. He mostly tried to be constructive and thought long and carefully about problems as they arose.

Emotion management. Carl was motivated to control negative feelings in front of Clara as he didn't want to lose the close contact with his children. He wasn't successful every time, but on the whole he kept his feelings to himself and took care of them on his own. The first year after divorce he completely rebuilt his house as a way of coping. On the other hand he wasn't always conflict avoiding; on the contrary, he could be quite temperamental and speak his heart rather nastily "if I feel like it". However, typical for Carl was that he, sometimes after an angry argument, stepped back and considered the cause of the disagreement. If there was a problem it needed to be solved.

Behavior: In an actual or potential conflict Carl reflected over different aspects of the issue and possible solutions and presented them to Clara. If they agreed they tried out the solution and after some time it was evaluated. If it didn't work they sought a better solution. The needs of the whole family were taken into the equation if possible and the parents strove for win-win solutions. When this was not feasible children's needs came first. The following is a narrative of a problem-solving situation that turned out to be the best for everyone, according to Carl.

"Then she started a business and began to work longer hours at irregular times and (shared child care) didn't work any longer with two (children) living with her and one here, because she was working late nights and whole days. So we argued about that. I thought that it was mad, because almost every day she called asking me to pick up the children. There was no structure; no one knew where they were meant to be. We talked about it, and decided to try alternate living. And she had to change her work schedule when it was her week. And it works quite well. Of course at times we need to change things, but now it is more normal."

Consequences. Having fought for his children and managed to work out a satisfying collaboration with Clara strengthened and gratified him. The children's wellbeing was the best reward while he was not denying advantages to himself of the current arrangements.

"...the children seem well and happy. That is a pretty good measure isn't it? It is good for me too. I can even see advantages for me of her working so much. It's ok with me, because I have my children here a lot of the time and I like it."

Changing the feelings; Anne

Target of the other's detachment problems. Anne was the target of the other's aggression and difficulties in disengaging. She was constantly anxious about John being so angry, threatening

and she knew he owned a weapon. Anne feared for her life. She went to the police to report the threats but they advised her not to, as that would only make John angrier and he might realize his threats.

Psycho-social context. Furthermore, she was financially vulnerable due to John not wanting to support his children and he refused to allow the daughters to be registered at Anne's address. This meant that Anne couldn't get the state child allowance. She went to the social authorities for help with money, but they said that John should pay and that was it. Social insurance office said the same. She was devastated and had to take a loan from her father. He had just for revenge given not only her, but also the children a hard time.

John's alcohol problem and general lack of concern made the older daughter never want to see him again, while the younger saw him intermittently on her initiative. Anne was still sad for the children that they didn't have a father who cared, something they sometimes talked about.

Anne had a social network that she could rely on and that helped her in several ways during the hard time after the divorce. In the end her father, furious because she didn't get help either from John nor the other authorities, lent her some money. She got support from family and friends, both emotionally, and materially.

"I can only lift the phone and talk to someone if something is really bad. I have got friends in the same situation and I am on good terms with my parents and my sister."

This helped her through and with time also helped her to refocus away from the relationship with John, as it had been and how it was presently. Another resource was that she had a job that she liked, where she five years after divorce had been promoted and got a higher salary.

Cognitions. Anne's prime cognitive strategies were to refocus her energies into her new life, with job, friends and children. She was still angry with John, but she didn't spend time dwelling on blaming him or ruminating the past and his faults. She could feel surprised by not remembering anything good from the marital relationship "*There must have been a time when we were happy*". Although she didn't think about John in positive terms, she could pity him and his joyless life in loneliness and without his children.

Instead she avoided contact with John as much as possible. That helped her in distancing and diminishing the intensity of negative feelings. Avoidance, refocusing and distancing led Anne to reappraise the divorce and what had followed from it. Now she could see it had been something good and led to good things, even though it was painful at the time. The divorce had got a new meaning.

“Now I feel I was right to divorce. I didn’t want that life. And it feels absolutely right for me to live like I do and my children are fine and I am fine, yes everything seem to be going my way now. And I would do the same thing again.”

Her attention was directed at her current and future life, rather than at the past or John’s negativistic and destructive behaviors. At first she focused on “surviving” with her children and giving them all a good life. Later, she found her and the children’s lives happy enough and she could relax and enjoy the present. To more or less make a conscious choice to shift focus from the negative in the relationship with John to the positive aspects of her current life helped in distancing herself and invest less energy in being angry or upset.

Emotion management. Anne had to struggle the first year after divorce with practical and financial issues as well as with her feelings of hatred, fury and sadness. She cried a lot and sought out friends and family for support. It wasn’t hard for her to express her feelings and process the turmoil inside of her. She worked on finding new friends in the same situation that gave opportunity for comparison and put her own experiences in perspective.

Being on her own and being determined to make a good life for herself and the children, she developed a feeling of *mastery and autonomy* and felt that she grew as a person.

Reappraisal was an ongoing and self-reinforcing process. Anne could feel that she had grown as a person with regard to life satisfaction and increased self-efficacy and autonomy.

“I felt I grew as a person.{...}. I have become independent during the last five years, everything have gone really well for me, I manage, I am not afraid to raise my voice. I feel safe, nothing can hurt me.”

She didn't feel guilty anymore and thought that the divorce was the best that could have happened. She was able to put pain and fury behind and accept both her own and the children's disappointment in John. "...I have accepted that I am on my own with the children." Somewhere along the way her feelings about John were transformed into pity and could feel grateful for the little he actually did.

"Now I am very grateful that Mia has contact with her father and they can go and have a coffee or something. So, I am grateful for what we get."

Consequences: Anne had a happy and fulfilling life with her daughters, having left behind the pain of the marriage and divorce, accepted that it had happened, and that the children would never have an involved father.

Stuck in Anger; Angelica

Attachment. Angelica found it hard to let go of hurt, anger and bitterness, and to get on with her life without Anders. The initial betrayal, the adultery, triggered negative emotions, as did the fact that her ex-husband still lived with the new woman. She had difficulties in coping with these feelings and in distancing herself from the past and still nurtured some hope of reconciliation. She was stuck in anger and even hate. This made her vulnerable to cues that triggered feelings of being abandoned.

But the anger may also have been the glue that tied them together and a reason for sticking to it.

(It's been a) little hard to let go of each other, I think, in that one still has the aggressions. There is a lot of aggression, actually. He can be very aggressive too because it was me who threw him out. It was sad it happened like that, of course it was bitter and hard, and especially with three teenagers.

Psycho-social context. Angelica had a teenage daughter that was a source of much worry. She had been depressed and self-harming since the divorce and was a client in child psychiatry and Angelica felt very alone with her as the father didn't take any interest. Angelica blamed him for the daughters' problems in the first place, and was continuously

angry because he left her alone with the distress. In the end Angelica got a support family through the social welfare authorities. It helped with the daughter, but not with the anger.

Cognitions. Angelica selectively attended to the negative aspects of Anders` parenting role. She attributed her negative feelings as well as all the children`s problems to and couldn`t let go as Anne could and focus on building a meaningful life for herself. He *should* take better care of Bella. It is *his fault* entirely. How can he *make me* hate so much?

Angelica's thinking and consequential emotion may be described as a shift between two distinct mindsets. Angelica perceived Anders in one minute as a wrongdoer that she hated, and in the next as someone she loved and hoped to get back with. At that moment he was the victim of the other woman, while really wanting to return to the marriage.

We have actually tried to get together again several times in some way, inside of me it is still very hard to understand or believe that it never can be. That I can willingly admit we are too tight for it never to happen. We can talk about everything too, as a matter of fact.

Emotion management. Angelica`s feelings would quickly go from zero to 100, thus exhibiting strong reactivity with slow return to baseline, making her more vulnerable for relational strain. Her most painful feelings were anger and hate. She got upset talking about the daughter and the father`s behaviour in the interview. Contempt shone through in her account. So did a feeling of helplessness and sadness. Five years after the divorce there was a tendency towards resignation and hopelessness or what could be described as “worn-out” anger. Sadness and hurt most likely were the underlying feelings that she had trouble processing and accepting. If she did that might lead to an acceptance of the loss and that may be painful to think about.

Behavior: Angelica shifted between open and passive aggression. Open aggression was nagging, yelling, criticizing, complaining or threaten Anders into taking his responsibility for his relationship with the children. Passive-aggressive behaviours were withdrawing, not answering the phone and sulking. She ruminated on his offences and the unfairness of Ander`s behaviour and worried about the children. Sometimes she talked with her friend for support. She isolated herself rather than going out to see people and strengthen her network, having fun and find new meaning in life. She did eventually seek help for the daughter and it was arranged by the social welfare authorities that the daughter would spend every second

weekend with another family. She was a bit at a loss as to what could be done to ease her negative feelings.

I: What do you do to cope with your fury?

A: No, maybe I should go and hit a boxing ball or something, I don't know. Maybe I really should start. Eh, no I talk (I: with others?). Because I hold nothing inside of me anymore. And then it doesn't hurt so much. Or rather it doesn't hurt then.

Consequences: Five years is a long time to be angry. Angelica wasn't successful in changing Anders' behaviour and nothing was resolved. She had difficulties in attending to new aspects of her life that might grant her some satisfaction. I had the feeling she really didn't want to let go of her anger and that letting go and accept would be too give in. In the short term she could feel self-righteous and maybe gain a certain satisfaction, but in the long run she risked becoming more alienated as well as her health and well-being being risked.

Angelica's cognitive style maintained her negative emotions rather than resolving them. A change process would involve her thinking about her situation as well as her behavioural responses to it.

Stuck in Despair; Miriam

Target of the other's problems to detach. Miriam appeared to be the most vulnerable of the four cases mostly due to her psychosocial situation:

First, Miriam was the target of another's problem to disengage from her and who was threatening, volatile and unreliable. Miriam was afraid to upset him as that could mean problems in contact between him and the children. If he was angry he could easily block important decisions and Miriam would be even more helpless and powerless.

Psycho-social context. Second, she lacked a social network. Coming from Bosnia to marry seven years earlier and soon having two children she hadn't had opportunity to make friends or even to know the society well enough to search for support confidently. However, she had a supportive boyfriend, but it was still secret to Dragan and she feared the day when he got to know. She had tried to make friends, but felt that it was difficult to find close friends.

Tiredness and unable to cope with all the demands of being a single mother, wore her down. During the interview she cried and gave the impression of hopelessness and resignation.

Third, her children were younger than the others, four and seven years. In this situation Miriam was in desperate need of the father's contribution to raise the children and give her a break. She also needed someone to be with the children when she worked nights. Dragan refused to help.

But with two young children, depending on him and all the decisions that had to be made it wasn't possible. She needed to communicate with him.

Cognitions. Miriam catastrophized and was anxious about the future and of potential disasters. For instance, what would happen if she had to care for the children on her own until they grew up? She was afraid she would lose her energy, to become ill, that the children would get ill, that she wasn't a good mother, the children would turn out badly, they would turn against her, or she would become, or was already mad. She also worried about what Dragan could do to her if she pressed him to hard, especially if she demanded the great deal of money he owed her from the divorce settlement.

Mostly she tried to suppress past and current strains in the relationship and to avoid Dragan as much as possible. When she didn't need to communicate with him she tried to *avoid thinking* about it. This unfortunately didn't help in solving her problems to the extent they might be possible to solve.

"It has been a long time since all this happened, and I have tried to forget some things, I have suppressed everything."

Consequences: Miriam had tried to get help from a family mediator offered by the municipality, and from the social welfare office. In both cases to get some help with the children as Dragan was unwilling to "help her babysit" at a regular basis. He said she was using him for her own purposes, so negotiations broke down.

"To begin with we talked about the evenings when I was working and that was four evenings in six weeks, but then he decided I was using him for babysitting and I said OK, I will find a babysitter those evenings, but then I want every second weekend free. Because I have never

been free under those three and a half year (since divorce), that wasn't possible because he works every weekend."

In the end Miriam gave up her claims and employed a babysitter that was a strain on her money, but it decreased conflict. Instead she saw the mediator individually to have someone to talk to.

"I saw her a few times more and just talked with her, me on my own, to get some relief. But, you know, they are powerless, there is nothing they can do. I just needed a little support, to talk and ...well to feel that someone was listening."

She attempted to get help with the children from the social authorities, but Dragan stopped that. He accused her of trying to get at him by asking the authorities for help. Her latest idea, as yet untried, was to advertize for a stand in "grandma". She had thought about filing for sole custody, but gave that up as fruitless.

"One must have evidence to get it, I think they have changed the rules, it is only when there is alcohol or physical abuse you can get sole custody."

Emotion management. She tried to suppress her feelings of frustration in order to make him listen and eventually agree with her. An example was when the oldest daughter wanted to study her native language at school. Dragan was against it. He didn't like the teacher, who was from another part of former Yugoslavia. Her strategies were to ingratiate, tread carefully, plead to his fatherly concern, or offer extra services.

"I am trying to collaborate with him about the children, how it is going to work. As long as I agree with him everything goes Ok but if I disagree, or say this will not work, he immediately gets angry and then we can't discuss it any more. It always has to be his rules."

Behavior. To cope with her feelings she dived into work and family. Fatigue led her to further withdrawal, not only from Dragan, but from attempts at making friends and pleasurable experiences in general. This behavior in turn fuelled her depressive thoughts of hopelessness and imminent disaster. She tried self-care practices, such as yoga classes and taking walks to relieve and prevent stress that was good while going on, but then reality was there again.

Consequences. Miriam's situation was difficult. She tried in many ways to cope. She sought help from the society, but they seemed as helpless as she was. She tried self-care and to convince Dragan that he should be a present father. She couldn't see a way out of her troubles except to struggle on to take care of her little family. The avoidance strategies, cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally seemed rather to maintain her hopelessness than help her to solve her problems to feel better in the long run. She had made her way out of a difficult marriage despite all her problems, but now she was fatigued and despairing and her initial confidence worn out.

“And, now I have given up, go as it will. I am just waiting for the ten years (when children have grown up) to pass and then maybe it will be better.”

Discussion

Regulating and preventing negative emotions

The present study found two different patterns of regulating or preventing negative feelings in a functional way, i.e., that led to well-being. One of these concerned a focus on shared problem-solving as a main road to preventing negative emotions and to refocus when discussions got heated. This was possible when both parents agreed about how shared parenthood should be carried out. What motivated these respondents was a commitment to do what was best for the children. Thus, motivation and goal setting, mutual commitment to a problem-solving approach, as well as problem-solving and communication skills appeared to be at the heart of positive collaboration.

Sometimes a working relationship was not possible to attain for different reasons. Cognitive strategies, such as refocusing from and re-appraising the divorce and the other's faults, were helpful in accepting and letting go. Negative feelings were expressed and worked through with the support of others.

In contrast, other respondents got stuck in negative emotions for many years. Main predictors of stuck-ness were rumination, attributing negative feelings to and dwelling on the other's faults, and hopelessness with regard to these feelings ever changing because of powerlessness

in relation to the other's behaviour. In some cases this led to a continuing state of anger, and in others sadness and giving up on ever having a good life were predominant.

Attachment and emotions

Sbarra and Emery (2006) suggested that emotional pain related to attachment and grief lay at the heart of problems in negotiating about child issues as well as of mental health and well-being. Also Dattilio (2010) emphasized the importance of attending directly to emotions in couples' therapy. The results of the present study indicated that functional and dysfunctional processes were related to attachment issues. The above discussed cognitive strategies seemed to be related to attachment issues. However, even if "stuck-ness" had its roots in unresolved attachment, rumination, unrealistic hopes combined with powerlessness regarding one's own feelings, as these were attributed to the other, maintained negative emotions and hindered the person to go on with his/her life.

Help from society other than psycho-therapy and mediation

It has been shown (Amato, 2005) that those who benefits most from any current intervention already have resources, such as personal, financial and educational. Others may need help with regard psycho-social context and issues. The present study indicated that interventions for divorced parents may benefit from support from the municipality before or parallel with other interventions. They might be informed in the context of filing for divorce about where and how to find support for loneliness as well as coping with financial problems.

Suggested interventions

Psycho-education is an integral part of CBTC as well as in Lebow's Integrated Divorce Therapy (IDT). However, while in CBTC focus for psycho-education lies in understanding the model, setting goals and collaboratively construct an idiographic treatment plan, IDT emphasize the understanding of emotional processes in adults and children. This study indicates that psycho-education about emotions, how they are maintained and their consequences for well-being are important. In particular cognitive strategies, such as refocusing and re-attribution and their effect on emotions should be taught, possibly in short group lectures and be offered. Also problem-solving skills can be taught in the same way, while practice could be performed in individual or couple sessions. These suggestions go far beyond common practice in mediation. Free psychological treatment sessions, while probably

limited because of costs for society, by psychologists or psychotherapists with special training for divorced parents should be offered. Regarding societal costs prevention and free psychological early interventions might be less costly in the long run than the consequences of future health problems (Kieholt et al., 2001).

Limitations

The sampling was partly one of convenience (support organization) and the other an attempt at a more representative sample (civil court registers). However, the response rate was lower than 50% which makes the results less reliable. Despite this flaw we gained a wealth of individual and couple data from people with varied backgrounds and circumstances for analysis on inter-relational and intra-psychic levels. In this study I focused on the individual level, however, as material for studying parents at an inter-relational level data were limited, which may lower reliability for couples. The two research assistants and I analyzed data independently and compared and discussed our codes for parts of the data. This procedure increased trustworthiness in the resulting themes. The interviewers followed a semi-structured questionnaire. Parental couples were interviewed separately by different interviewers, so they would be unaffected by the other parents. Using qualitative data for this study rendered detailed insight into the individual cognitive-emotional processes, that wouldn't have been possible with quantitative data. Moreover, the qualitative prospective approach was informative regarding emotional processes and strategies over time and suggests areas for future research.

Future research

CBTC and IDT, as well as Sbarra and Emery (2006) suggested future research to focus on the processes of re-attribution, the creating of a new narrative and finding a new meaning. This study indicated that processes of emotion regulation with regard to acceptance, the development of a collaborative problem-solving approach and the building of motivation could be other important subjects for research in for instance a critical incident approach. Certainly, the study of interactional processes and development over time is needed. Another way forward might be communication samples from mediation/divorce therapy to detect when and how attachment issues come across in these settings and how they were met from the other party and the mediator/therapist.

Conclusions

1. Emotion regulation strategies, in particular problem-solving skills and cognitive strategies need to be taught and practiced.
2. Attachment issues need to be attended to.
3. A focus on how a future life as divorced parent could be satisfying through exploring the client's values and goals as separate from the life with old partner.
4. Motivation needs to be explored and built.
5. Psycho-social problems that hinder effective negotiation should be acknowledged and support offered.

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