

**DIVORCE AND JOINT CUSTODY:
LOSS AND TRANSITION IN THE END OF PARENTAL MARRIAGE,
MOURNING THE MARITAL RELATIONSHIP, AND THE RE-FORMULATION
OF A CO-PARENTAL DYAD**

by

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ABSTRACT

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by

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This study examined the experience of children raised in joint custody following divorce and identified strategies for empathic, responsive co-parenting within a refashioned family design. Retrospective accounts of seven adults reared in joint custody, supplemented by the accounts of seven parents, representing fourteen families, were gathered via semi-structured interviews. Qualitative coding was employed to identify emotional and practical struggles that are commonly found, but are often insufficiently addressed. Results are supplemented with four extensive case studies, providing close analysis of broad themes emergent in the research. Children of divorce suffer losses at both the environmental and the object-relational level. The environmental losses are more easily observed: loss of familial intactness, loss of daily contact with each parent, and loss of contact with both parents together, referenced here as the ‘marital-parental dyad.’ Loss and disruption at the representational level is more difficult to recognize. When parents divorce, and as children move repeatedly between parental homes in joint custody, what becomes significantly compromised is the ‘parental-dyadic object’: an internalization of parents as a joined and cooperative entity, providing important parental scaffolding and definition at a primary object relational level. Findings suggest that parents might ease loss reactions in children through the establishment of a post-divorce cooperative parental relationship that emphasizes the aspect of the marital-parental relationship that is not dissolved

with the marriage. In addition to a literature review from psychoanalysis and from contemporary writings on divorce, theories of immigration and biculturalism were reviewed to consider movement from the ‘old world’ of the intact family to the ‘new world’ of the family of divorce, and the subsequent back-and-forth movement between the different ‘cultures’ of parental homes. Much of the existing literature on divorce and joint custody highlights the problem of ongoing post-marital conflict. In this study, overt conflict was less evident than passive expressions of anger between parents, via disparagement and avoidance of contact, which interfered with parents’ capacity to provide post-divorce cooperative co-parenting and left children susceptible to loyalty binds and competing identifications, impeding their sense of broad family belonging. Recommendations for moving through conflict and toward cooperative co-parenting are outlined.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Following parental divorce, custody of children will occur in one of three ways. In sole physical and legal custody, one parent assumes all parental duties for care and decision making though the non-custodial parent will most often be expected to contribute financially to the child's livelihood. In joint legal and sole physical custody, one parent cares for the child on a daily basis, but both parents are legally responsible to participate in decision-making pertaining to their child. Joint legal with joint physical custody is considered the most 'fair' design since parents share in decision-making and children divide their time in equal portions between homes (Schwartz & Kaslow, 1997).

While joint physical custody has become a popular and growing trend (Juby, et al., 2005), there is not overwhelming consensus that joint custody promotes well-being in children post-divorce or even that its effects are benign. There is meta-analytic evidence to show that children reared in joint custody exhibit fewer adjustment problems than those reared in sole custody (Bauserman, 2002) while older studies had concluded that child adjustment was not affected by a particular custody arrangement (Kline, et al., 1989; Johnston, et al., 1989; Leupnitz, 1986); one study demonstrated that parent-child relationships are not better enhanced by joint custody (Donnelly & Finkelhor, 1992).¹

When joint custody came of age in the 1970's, its proponents pointed to the adjustment difficulties observed in children raised in single-parent households and argued

¹ Researchers Mullis and Otwell (1998) have determined that courts often pay more attention to the satisfaction of the parents than to the well-being of children in finding for joint custody.

that children would benefit from regular contact with both parents.² Judith Wallerstein (2000) makes the important point that “the divorced family is not just a cut-off version of the two-parent family. The post-divorce family is a new family form that makes very different demands on each parent, each child, and each of the many new adults who enter the family orbit” (p. 10); such an arrangement can require a child to become a sort of ‘chameleon,’ as phrased by one author (Marquardt, 2006), requiring a type of ‘shape-shifting’ to accommodate the varying demands and expectations of different homes. While joint physical custody does provide the important presence of both primary caregivers, the alternating separations in the joint custody situation may exacerbate original loss reactions stemming from divorce.

For this qualitative study I collected the retrospective accounts of children reared in joint physical custody following divorce. My research led me to examine issues of loss, the impact of differences emergent when residing in two homes, the internalization of parental conflict and resulting intrapsychic implications. I employed the metaphor of bi-culturalism and reviewed related theory to explore how the immigration experience of departure from a country of origin, movement between distinct cultures, and issues of loyalty and identity might shed light on the phenomena of children of divorce living in a joint custodial arrangement. Additionally, I interviewed parents of children reared in joint custody to examine the degree to which parents embarking on new lives were able to

² One practical, yet insufficient, argument for shared custody is the well-established fact that when fathers are guaranteed more contact with their children post-divorce, they are more inclined to maintain their commitment to financial support (Bartfeld, 2000; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Jacobsen & Edmondson, 1993; Juby, Le Bourdais, Marcil-Gratton, 2005; Lowery, 1985; McLanahan, Seltzer, Hanson, & Thompson, 1994; Seltzer, 1991; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

reflectively apprehend their children's experience and the effect of this on the provision of empathy and support.

Much of the literature on divorce and joint custody focuses on the problems of unending, or escalating, post-marital conflict. This literature tends to overlook, however, the important issue of *internal conflict*, in terms of relational loyalties and competing identifications that emerged in the present research as a strong feature of post-divorce life when a cooperative co-parenting relationship wasn't achieved. While marital conflict will occur in the observable, interpersonal realm, there are intrapsychic parallels that often go unrecognized and unaddressed, but might have far-reaching implications for the development of a child's personality and their capacity to achieve relational harmony in adult intimate relationships. Wallerstein and her fellow researchers (2001) explain that when divorce occurs, "the [children's] image of [their parents] together as a happy couple is forever lost...As children grow up and choose partners of their own, they lack this central image of the intact marriage," (p. 33) meaning that "the psychological scaffolding that they need to construct a happy marriage has been badly damaged by the two people they depended on while growing up" (p. 32). Thus, not only will children of divorce suffer the loss of an intact system of others from which to grow, there might be a limited capacity to forge new, potentially reparative relationships going forward.

While researchers have noted that adjustment difficulties in children are a most pronounced feature in children following divorce, usually improving after the first couple years following divorce (Hetherington, 1981), experiences of loss have been found to be lasting and reoccurring for years to come (Hancock, 1980). In consideration of the potential loss reactions of children weathering parental divorce, I will review loss

reactions common in the event of parental death and consider psychoanalytic conceptions of mourning and its varieties. I will also explore how childhood mourning differs from adult mourning, given the unique implications of loss during crucial development periods, when internalization of primary representational objects is still occurring, and present how children's loss reactions can assume a range of expression, seem counter-intuitive, and might deviate from the most straightforward expressions of grief. For example, many children might appear to vacillate between idealization of the former dyad related to internal protest against loss, and self-directed attacks that are simultaneous attacks against the disappointing, abandoning 'parental-dyadic object' so deeply identified with self and self-conception.

The importance of parental recognition and empathic support of their children's attempts to manage parental conflict, loss, and ongoing transition appears neglected in the literature. Existing literature has likewise paid insufficient attention to the primacy of loss and necessity for mourning following divorce and how issues of separation are stirred by alternating moves between parental homes, with the alternating primacy of each parent. Given that many divorcing couples will have grown apart and differentiated to a degree that they no longer feel compatible as partners, it is expectable that children living in joint custody might travel between homes that are quite different in terms of lifestyle, values, and an assortment of aesthetic, philosophical, and cultural characteristics. With few features of consistency between parental homes and with the constant transitions of joint custody, children are at risk of feeling consistently disoriented and displaced.

Even in situations where the parents assume a sound 'working relationship' or maintain a shared commitment to child-rearing, the challenges of traveling between two

households requires a dressing and undressing with each trip in the various accoutrements provided and favored by the respective parents. The reversal of identification, moving in one moment from an affinity with one then the other culture has been described by as “a life lived in pieces” (Pfeiffer 1976, quoted in Akhtar (1995a) and speaks to the fragmentation that can result when one feels unable to settle into a place, or into a particular identification.

The literature on the bi-cultural experience of immigrants has provided a useful metaphor for contemplating the ways children of divorce and joint custody can become lost, grappling with the breakdown of the family they’ve known and unable to draw upon the traditional support of the adults who have become warring factions or objects of mutual disdain. Children are required to take up residence first in one, then the other, parent-child relational dyad, with resulting disorganization and inevitable mourning for the structure of the parental unit and the intact family. Grinberg & Grinberg (1989) have, conversely, referenced the ‘disorienting anxiety’ and ‘confused states’ that “the emigrant experiences as if his parents were divorced, [as] he engages in fantasies of forming an alliance with one against the other” (p. 89).

I will argue that it is possible for parents to ease loss reactions in children through the establishment of a post-divorce cooperative parental relationship that emphasizes the shared status of parents to children - the aspect of the marital-parental relationship that is not dissolved with the marriage. This is not a simple task for separated couples, especially when they have been embroiled in pronounced conflict, have become fatigued by disappointing and failed efforts to salvage their marriage, or have begun relishing their independence from a former spouse; parents must become swayed by the incentive, in the

interest of their children, to rise above, or work through, difficulties related to the marital relationship to create a space for cooperative co-parenting to occur. I argue that in order for parents to achieve increased capacity for cooperative parenting they must make the crucial distinction between the *marital* partnership and the *parental* partnership so that as one comes to pass the other is allowed to persist. Lowery (1985) references this distinction below:

It is becoming clear that the nature of the continuing parental relationship, although no longer a marital dyad after divorce, has a major impact on the lives of all members of the restructured family. Effective intervention when problems arise may well depend on the active involvement of both parents in the effort to bring about change (p. 248).

The topic of divorce and joint custody holds personal significance for me and this was instrumental in my decision to pursue this subject for my dissertation research. In the mid-1970's, Ms. Magazine published an article titled 'Who Gets the Kids: New Solutions for the Big Dilemma,' as a four-part discussion of different accounts of the climate of divorce and custody battles of the day. One brief, one page, contribution written by a free-lance writer from New Haven, Connecticut and titled 'Joint Custody, the New Haven Plan,' anticipated much of the discussion in this present paper, though the former was written over 35 years ago. The author of this piece introducing the New Haven Plan, Marcia Holly, described that she and her ex-husband, in conjunction with 25 families embroiled in similar dilemmas in New Haven at the time, developed "a concept of shared custody that offered our children the security of two parents, even though those two parents chose not to live together." The aim of this collective project was to provide children equal time with both parents, to communicate to the children, via shared

custody, that they were “always overtly wanted by each parent,” and to address the traditional model of single-parent custody that could leave a parent “burdened by a child whose demands are naturally broad and intense.”

The author was writing four years after first instituting the joint custody arrangement, an arrangement quite common by today’s standards, and reflected on the positive effect this had had on her child as well as on both parents. She observed that the children in this New Haven Plan were “more independent” than other children, were less likely to experience abandonment fears since “abandonment seems less likely to children when there are two parents and two homes that welcome them,” and that having two homes “force[d] them to develop more ways of interacting with a variety of people.” Finally, she observed mostly “pleasurable anticipation about alternating homes” and little “resentment or sadness at leaving one house for the other.”

The favorable results of this design, as depicted in this Ms. Magazine article, were to have important implications for me personally and for the design of my own childhood family following parental divorce. My parents had found themselves at an impasse, uncertain how to proceed given the wreckage of a marriage, me and my sister the young bystanders of a family falling apart, both parents wanting to assume custody and a battle on the horizon, and when my father opened this magazine he must have felt tremendous relief at having found a realistic solution. My parents implemented the equal custody design, avoided drawn-out court battles, and assured me and my sister ongoing contact with both of our parents, but the optimistic results of this article were not quite realized.

When I discovered this article, this relatively brief article, I realized that my parents, like many of the parents interviewed or described in this current study, had

embraced the temporal logistics of joint custody design, but had neglected to fulfill an obligation for cooperative parenting that was the most important feature in this original article, arguably accounting for the positive adjustment of the children depicted. The author wrote that she and her former spouse had “learned that in order to make joint custody successful we need to share our ideas about child-rearing practices, to be consistent in our primary values, and most important to respect one another.” She made the important aside, as seen in this present study, that joint custody is an expensive solution, unavailable to all divorcing parents, but stressed that “wealth and privilege is less a condition for the success of shared custody than is the basic condition of geographical closeness and the crucial need for divorced parents to learn to trust one another and develop a sincere friendship.” When the author continues, she is careful not to recommend this lightly, or to suppose that harmony between ex-spouse co-parents is easily arrived at, she wrote: “I do not suggest that glibly, having spent great amounts of time, energy, and emotion trying to do both.”

As an adult of divorce and joint custody, with the knowledge that this very article was instrumental in the subsequent design of my own family of origin, I have to assume that the author’s final appeal that co-parents achieve trust and friendship was either overlooked by my parents in their haste to find a workable, practical solution to custody logistics or that it was not significantly stressed as they embarked on the new arrangement. When I read this passage, upon completion of my research, my arguments for cooperative child-rearing having been written, I realized that I was echoing a sentiment clearly stated, but long forgotten or abandoned by many of the parents who have opted for joint custody since this article was published.

The author of the New Haven Plan wasn't arguing for mere civility, she certainly didn't argue for a climate of ongoing conflict lived through and around the children; she argued for cooperation, consensus building, and ongoing relational good-will between ex-spouses, in the interest of the children. The reasons why such features are crucial for optimal child adjustment, ongoing sense of belonging, and internalization of a sense of broad-family relatedness will be explored and outlined in the discussion section, illustrated with the excerpts and accounts of parents and children of divorce and joint custody interviewed in this present study.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

This review of literature will focus on several issues relevant to children's and parents' transition from intact family life to divorced family life, in joint custody. The transition that parents and children must undergo in the event of parental separation, divorce and in the institution of joint custody is characterized by significant loss and requires transformation into re-fashioned family design that begins with the process of mourning. To begin, I will introduce the notion of the 'parental dyadic object' to explore what precisely is experienced as lost or disrupted for children when parents separate. I will examine potential loss reactions in children and their parents, the need for parents to undergo their own mourning process and make a clear distinction between the marital and parental dimensions of their partnership in order to best provide support to their children. I will then review particular patterns of post-divorce co-parenting, highlight particular challenges associated with joint custody, and discuss how loss reactions and adjustment difficulties in children can be mitigated through the development of a cooperative co-parenting endeavor. Literature will be drawn from psychoanalytic theory, contemporary writings on divorce and custody, and from theories of bi-cultural identity and marginalization.

The Marital-Parental Dyad and the Parental Dyadic Object

In parental separation and divorce, children suffer losses at both the environmental and at the object-relational level. The environmental losses are most easily recognized and straightforward: the loss of familial intactness and daily contact with each parent, loss of contact with both parents³ together, referenced here as the ‘marital-parental dyad.’ The loss and disruption at the representational level is more difficult to recognize. It is proposed here that when parents separate then divorce, and as children move successively between parental homes in joint custody, what becomes significantly compromised is the parental-dyadic object, that is, an internalization of parents as a joined and cooperative entity that provides important parental scaffolding and definition, at a primary object relational level. At the beginning of his treatise on loss, *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), Freud makes an important aside, relevant to an understanding of object relations and how the loss of the marital-parental dyad as a cohesive entity is experienced internally as the loss of a singular (parental-dyadic) object. Freud states that “mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction *which has taken the place of one*, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on (italics added, p. 243).” When we consider that the parental dyad is experienced internally, and unconsciously, as a singular object of attachment, co-existing with the more individualized maternal and paternal representations, we can best assess the implications of parental separation on the object world of a child.

³ Throughout my writing I refer to parental categories in terms of mom/dad and husband/wife, or spouse.. These categories are used for simplicity of language and unless specifically referenced, are considered as applicable to same sex couples as to opposite sex couples.

It is posited here that, at the level of representation, the *parental-dyadic* object exists side-by-side (and in ongoing interaction with) the *maternal* and *paternal* objects and that it is the relationship to this ‘object’ that becomes particularly tweaked in the environmental fragmentation of divorce and the loss of an intact marital-parental dyad. This internal representation of the parental dyad is not to be understood as the cumulative effect of a maternal representation alongside or in working in concert with a paternal representation, but as something unique. The emphasis on the parental dyad, (and by extension, a familial triad), is not intended to diminish the significance of the mother–child dyad in early life, but it does allow more appreciation for the father’s early role in children’s lives; indeed, the maternal and paternal objects are not seen as in competition, nor only existing side-by-side, but as intrinsically linked. Gurwitt (1988) has written how “paternal nurturing components have characteristics similar to, yet different from, the maternal. As with music emanating from two stereo speakers, they at times blend as one, yet are also distinguishable as separate” (p. 271). In more every day, outer-world terms, we might think of the experience of a person sitting with both of their parents together, in conversation, contrasted with the experience of conversation with first one parent, then the other. Probably, each of the three interactions would be comprised of different tones, topics, and tensions; the combined interaction of the three would offer up a unique flavor, far beyond the mere ingredients of separate interactions, nourishing in its own particular way. When a family remains intact, a child experiences the parental unit, internally, as one taken-for-granted object, even as they simultaneously experience both parents individually. In divorce, this unified parental representation is what suffers fragmentation, though the maternal and paternal representations maintain something of

their integrity. Related to this, Foster (1996) has posited that for bilingual persons, “internal life and experience of self comprise a delicate duet of voices emanating from two different symbolic worlds that must coexist, cooperate, and probably compete to ultimately form the illusion of a harmonized (bilingual) self” (p. 101). When the marital-parental dyad divides in divorce, and if parents cease to work together in a functional way, the internal ‘duet of voices’ might create a confused cacophony for children struggling with issues of strained identifications, warring loyalties, and globalized feelings of displacement since their parents feel unable, or refuse, to harmonize.

The ‘parental dyadic object’ is not new idea, but is a concept that has been largely overlooked in analytic thought. Given the significant reverberations suffered as a result of the unique disruptions and transitions of divorce, the subject of parental separation and joint custody offer an especially useful context to consider the significance of the parental dyad for children’s inner-world and outer-world experience. The parental dyadic object is most recognized in Klein’s (1929, 1932) ‘combined parent figure,’ represented as the mother having taken the father within her, and an inherently related, but more primitive, version of Freud’s primal scene concept (an object of envy and a precursor to the jealous and rivalrous strivings to follow). In her earlier writings, Klein’s combined parent figure is typically described in hostile and threatening terms, which might account for the limited popularity of the term in broad psychoanalysis: “these *united parents* are extremely cruel and much dreaded assailants” (Italics hers, 1929, p. 213), and the source of dreaded fantasies of retribution: “sadistic impulses against his father and mother copulating together lead the child to expect punishment from both parents in concert (p. 191, 1932), related to the projections of “an early sadistic super-ego” (1929, p. 213). At

this early stage (both in children's development and in the development of her theory), Klein stressed the hostile and tormenting aspects of this phantasmagoric combined figure, but once Klein began emphasizing how Oedipal processes are inextricably linked with the emergence of the depressive position, with its reparative strivings and the refinement from part- object to whole-object relatedness, she presented a more balanced view of the child's relation to the internalized dyad, when "there is more integration and a diminution of paranoid anxieties, and by degrees love and concern take the upper hand over the hatred" (Segal, p. 2). Klein wrote:

The infant's capacity to enjoy at the same time the relation to both parents which is an important feature in his mental life and conflicts with his desires prompted by jealousy and anxiety to separate them depends on his feelings that they are separate individuals. This more integrated relation to the parents (which is distinct from the compulsive need to keep the parents apart from one another and to prevent their sexual intercourse) implies the greater understanding of their relation to one another and is a pre-condition for the infant's hope that he can bring them together and unite them in a happy way. [Klein, 1952, quoted in Segal, 1989, pp. 3-4]

It is crucial to remember that while specific aspects of a given object will emerge as more salient in certain moments, an overall ambivalent picture must be taken for granted; Klein herself wrote that "the child attaches to its imaginary objects not only feelings of hatred and anxiety but positive feelings as well" (1932, 192). Some authors have managed to stress the benevolent and beneficial features of the combined parental image, to present a more balanced overall picture. Meltzer (1967), for instance, has broadened Winnicott's (1953) notion of 'good enough' mothering to encompass the

reparative capacity of the good internal ‘combined parents’ and elsewhere references the important developmental achievement of a positive conjuring of this image, as the “combined object, of parental figures in loving harmony,” (1986, p. 264).

Segal (1989), in her discussion of Klein, described that the rupture and repair indicative of the shift toward the depressive position occurs not only at the level of individual parent- child relationships (and their internal correlates), but within a broader familial-representative matrix that includes the dyadic object, triadic relationships, and beyond:

The awareness of ambivalence in relation to both parents and to their inter-relationship brings in defences, including some regression to splitting and paranoid anxieties as a defence against guilt. But it also brings in reparative impulses aimed not only at the restoration of the breast and mother, but also, and increasingly, at restoring a good parental couple and a good family as a whole (Segal p. 1-2).

Blum (1978) describes how the combined parent image, as reflected in primal scene fantasy, might be conjured as a means of seeking comfort in a reminiscent sense of familial unity and integrity:

The primal-scene fantasy, with its condensation of both sexuality and the wished-for parental contact, may serve a neutralizing function, soothing painful or traumatic distresses of all sorts... the primal scene may be an organizer of painful, chaotic experiences. The primal-scene memory may be evoked during the course of an analysis or demonstrated through action or encompassed in a perversion to express the wish to see the separated parents together again, to be with them once more as an only child. Under these circumstances, the primal-scene memory seeks to re-establish the idealized nuclear family (p. 138).

Stimmel (1996) has taken issue with Klein's emphasis on the 'frightening' aspect of the combined parent figure, but still recognized the validity of the overall construct:

The early superego, primitive though it is, is fundamental to [Klein's] model of the mind. This superego must be a blend of both objects—mother and father. Even while disagreeing with Klein's idea that the fantasy of a combined parent figure is most likely frightening, the blend of the two has significance for the unconscious quandary of wanting and fearing possession of the genitals of the opposite sexed parent. The possibility of having two sets of genitals implies either a kind of rotating or alternating self-representation or a kind of fusion, which is what we find in iconic and religious depictions. The fused primal-scene couple comes close to one version of an anatomically complete individual in that lines of demarcation between the two are blurred so that they may become one in the child's fantasy" (1996, p. 207).

Jones (1933) also recognized the significance of the 'combined parent concept' and identified the error of assigning more differentiation to primary objects than is realistically experienced in early life:

When we consider the parents as two distinct beings, to be viewed separately one from the other, we are doing something that the infant is not yet capable of and something that does not greatly concern the infant in his (or her) most secret phantasies. We are artificially dissecting the elements of a concept (the 'combined parent concept', as Melanie Klein well terms it) which to the infant are still closely interwoven. The findings of child analysis lead us to ascribe ever increasing importance to the phantasies and emotions attaching to this concept, and I am very inclined to think that the expression 'per-Oedipal phase' used

recently by Freud and other writers must correspond extensively with the phase of life dominated by the 'combined parent' concept (p. 11- 12).

Evans (1952) emphasized the significance of the lasting representation of the parental relationship on personality development:

One of the psychic tasks all children are faced with, for the satisfactory attainment of a unified personality, is the bringing together in a stable union of the two internalized parents. Such a union is a step towards the assimilation of the parents, together with their good qualities, in successive identifications. A number of symptoms as well as inhibitions have their basis in the child's relation with this internal combined figure (p.106).

Jacobson (1954) recognized the combined parental imago as an extension of the primacy of the maternal object:

For some years the child still feels himself to be only an extension of the mother and participates in her imagined omnipotence or, the reverse, regards the mother as a part of his own omnipotent self. He is also inclined to equate or to blend significant maternal and paternal body parts, such as breast and phallus, to attach the latter to the mother and, in general, to forge from maternal and paternal images combined parental image-units. (241-242).

More recently, Aron (1995) has reconceptualized Klein's 'combined parent figure' as the 'internalized primal scene,' highlighting how "these concepts seemed to be underemphasized, if not altogether lost, in contemporary relational theory"(1995b) and offers the most contemporary parallel to the 'parental-dyadic object.' Aron argues that

not only do (maternal and paternal) objects become internalized, but relational systems as well- a point particularly relevant to the present discussion since the parental dyadic representation is understood not only as the internalized presence of the combined parent figure, but the internal experience of holding, scaffolding and mutuality that it provides.

Aron (1995) writes:

One implication of the idea of the combined parent figure is that the child internalizes not just the mother or the father but also internalizes a representation of the perceived relationship between the parents: not only are representations of others formed in the internal world, but also relational configurations between self and other are internalized... It is not only the self and object that are internalized, but, rather, the individual internalizes the systems of perceived relations among others. This means that the child comes to internalize not only a representation of mother as an individual, and not only the relationship between mother and child, but that the child is capable of internalizing the relationship between the mother and the father” (215).

Consistent with an idea of the parental dyad object comprised of stabilizing and containing properties, (as well as hostile and envy inducing aspects), Scharff and Scharff (1989), in their integration of object-relations and family systems theory, have emphasized the more protective aspect of the ‘combined parent’ imago that becomes expectedly shaken during the oedipal period.

Suddenly, the child can no longer ignore the triangular implications of his or her wishes, feelings, and actions, because cognitive advancement makes this recognition inevitable... The sexual energizing makes the child's splitting of the parental pair occur, if at all possible, along sexual lines, but this does not produce pure gain for the

child, even in fantasy. Not only is there the threatened retaliation and loss of the good parts of the rejected parent but there is the threat of the loss of the combined protecting and containing parental image—essentially, the loss of the internalized family unit... The loss of the opposite-sex parent presents the child with the threat of the loss of the couple as a container, and therefore of the keystone of the family's holding capacity (pp. 114–115).

Burlingham (1973) has criticized the generalizations made “of predominantly feminine mothers and predominantly masculine fathers, i.e., a constellation which is not matched by what we meet in many ordinary families. Moreover, the distinctions between motherly and fatherly care are further lessened by present-day attitudes and realities. Our picture changes where the infant's care is indiscriminately divided between the parents, both fulfilling the same needs and tasks, according to time, work, or other preoccupations. The result in the child's mind might well be the ‘combined parent’ image which at one time used to figure prominently in analytic literature” (p.45). Here, the combined parent concept is employed to demonstrate that the paternal and maternal demarcations are rarely so split, in life or in representation; in divorce, however, ‘distinctions between motherly and fatherly care’ can become so dramatic as to create either/or parental categories.

While the mother-infant metaphor has often been employed to characterize the analytic/therapeutic holding environment (Balint 1969; Winnicott 1960; Kohut 1971; Loewald, 1962), Slochower (1996) views this as an incomplete picture and while taking specific issue with Winnicott’s assignment of ‘being’ and ‘doing’ to gendered categories, describes how both ‘maternal’ and ‘paternal’ containing functions are operative in analytic work:

Key dimensions of the analytic function in fact are associated with the separate elements of 'being' and 'doing,' ... I connect the analyst's capacity to tolerate the holding dimension of psychoanalytic work to her or his capacity, to "be." The analyst's role as a more differentiated, stimulating, boundary-setting rather than containing object is associated with the "doing" element of self-experience (p. 202).

In Slochower's view we hear reference to a 'dual parental' containing experience. To the degree that these dual aspects of the analyst are tolerated together and experienced as complementary by the patient, we might say that the transference is located in some (recollection) of unified relatedness to the 'dyad.' Elsewhere, the combined entity has been summoned metaphorically, to discuss clinical transference phenomena or clinical process, and references, inherently, the significance of the dyadic object. Simo (2000) has considered the reparative potential of the analytic relationship as comprised of transference reference to *both* the maternal object and the combined parental object: "When dependence on the metabolic capacity of the internal objects has been badly damaged, only an external object, the analyst, can restore transference the reparative vitality of these exhausted internal objects-*if* the analyst can become the bearer of the mother's breast and *the creative coitus of the archaic parents*" (Italics added, p. 254). Fogel (2006) has described how the "analytic attunement and containment functions are as crucial as interpretive ones, and these may also be gendered: sometimes maternal, sometimes paternal, but *often an ambiguous combination of the two*" (italics added, p. 1150).

Loss and the Facilitation of Mourning

Child Loss Reactions

The relevance of the parental-dyadic object is deeply felt in parental separation, in terms of loss, and contributes to many of the problematic reactions seen in some children who struggle after parental separation and/or in joint custody. While guaranteed contact with both parents is an important benefit of the joint custodial design, the lack of emphasis placed on coordinated parenting, ‘same page’ approach to parenting, and opportunities for time spent with the two parents together, neglects an important feature of loss and adjustment for children following divorce. Many researchers reference the loss of contact with both parents as a significant factor in children’s adjustment following divorce, but fail to recognize the loss of the dyadic, cooperative entity:

When a parent – an attachment figure for the child – disappears from the child’s daily life, it is normal for the child to experience grief and longing, and it behooves divorcing parents and judges to make arrangements that minimize suffering by maximizing the child’s contact with both parents (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006, p. 27-28).

Such emphasis on contact with both (individual) parents is important as a corrective to the single home custody model that was typical prior to the 1960’s, but it neglects the fact that children not only attach to their mother and their father, but to the dyadic entity of parents parenting together. The loss of this dyadic figure, or dyadic holding space, has tremendous implications on a child’s sense of belonging in the family; children are given the task of belonging to the two parents, to two families, in regular

succession and denied a sense of broad family identity. It is posited here that the transition from married family life to divorced family life represents not only a ‘breakdown’ of the family, but the loss of a primary attachment figure, the parental dyadic object, and that children experience the end of parental marriage as the death of a *coordination* of persons, or a combined object.

It is important to note that all children, from divorced or intact families, will experience an inevitable loss of the parental dyad in its most pristine form, and become less connected to a fantasy of embodying parental love that characterizes early life. The parental dyadic representation will be a complex, ambivalently held dyad even in the most harmonious families – oedipal rivalries and competing identifications necessarily complicate the experience of the two parents represented internally as one. “In intact families, parents do not always agree on such things as discipline, household rules, or standards to be applied, but in most families parents make some effort to present a united front to the children on these matters” (Maccoby, et al., 1990, p. 142) and the parents’ re-investment in the union, will communicate to children as a verification of the existence of this worthy object, an object that persists despite hardship. While the representation of the parental dyad will undergo change over time due to normative developmental issues, and will also be influenced by the quality of the parental relationship as experienced by the child, implications of divorce on a child’s inner world differs dramatically. According to Nordhaus (1991), “depending on the child’s age and level of development at the time of separation and divorce, there is a risk of loss of both the real object in the sense of the noncustodial parent’s physical absence from daily life as well as a loss or distortion of the internalized representation of the object including the representation of the parent, *the*

parent-child unit, and the self” (italics added, p. 382). While she references loss as occurring at both environmental and representational levels, and makes note of a combined parent-child representation, she stops short of identifying a parental dyadic representation that is also altered in significant ways.

While this internal dyadic object will be tested throughout life, and suffer the quakes of individuation, just as the internal maternal and paternal objects reverberate with separation from the individual parents, parental divorce can be characterized as a severe fracture, even for adult children of divorce, long departed from home and no longer reliant on daily contact with the united (outer-world) dyad. This points to the existence of the representational dyad as an abiding, nostalgic entity, providing one with a sense of origin, original conception of self, and original belonging in an ongoing, persisting way. While honest reflection and reality testing might provide a more ambiguous picture of the parental pair, the internal experience of all-loving (idealized) parents, the all-embracing (idealized) dyad, will continue to reside as an inner object long after one gives up residence of the parental home.

One case study (in Fonagy, Gyorgy, Jurist & Target, 2002), depicts a young man, who, having just left home for college, learned that his parents would be divorcing – an announcement that came as a surprise given that in the culture of his family there was a tendency to suppress negative affect and avoid conflict. Given that the divorce occurred “without warning and without [the children’s] input,” he felt “that the life of his family was out of his control when his parents announced their intention to divorce” (p. 464) arousing feelings of impotency to affect change and confronting him with limitations of self-agency. In the following excerpt, we hear the significance of the representational

marital-parental dyad as an unconscious, intrinsic support structure: “the divorce evoked intense anxiety because [this patient] felt that he was prematurely on his own and would have to fend for himself with less support... [He] wept in a session as he realized that leaving home for him coincided with there being no more home left” (p. 462). We hear further feelings of displacement, a compromised sense of belonging and the revival/solidification of loss, when the patient learned that his father and new wife would be beginning a family. He “felt angry and betrayed. He understands that part of his reaction is irrational: that at some level he knew this might happen, that his father is perfectly entitled to choose to have a new family, and that this need not exclude him. The inception of this new family, however, has meant that Rob is facing anew the demise of his old family...” (pp. 463-464) with “the fresh reminder that his own nuclear family dissolved as his father begins to constitute a new family” (p. 466).

One aspect of loss suffered by children (of all ages) of divorcing parents involves the relationship between a child’s self representation to the dyadic representation. It is posited that the child’s most primary sense of self is located in their notion of having been conceived in the coming together of their two parents, the dyad, toward the creation of a familial triad, comprised of the child being held in common by these two. Akhtar (1995) quotes Settlege (1992) as noting that, “the predominance of love is the glue of a unified self-representation” (p. 83). A child’s internal parental-dyad object, the parental imago, is inherently romanticized and the ending of the parental romance, in divorce, has deep representational reverberations, disrupting the dyadic representation as well as aspects of the child’s self-representation because the dyad embodies a child’s very sense of where they come from. Corbett (2001) has written:

Stories or ‘family romances’ are one way a family becomes. Freud first introduced the idea of the ‘family romance’ in describing how adolescents, in the service of separation, sometimes fantasize having been born to parents other than their own. While Freud situated this experience with the child and with the act of separation, I suggest that family romances are also told by parents or between parent and child in the service of attachment. Children frequently request that stories of conception and birth be repeatedly told, as they strive to comprehend reproduction, parental sexuality, and family formation (610).

When parents are ‘splitting up,’ their children’s sense of origin, as conceived by these two together, is irrevocably disrupted and their sense of familial unity is compromised, leading to an internal ‘split.’ Children of divorce will long to believe that the dyadic ‘object’ that created them was once upon a time constituted in love, but the dissolution of the present-day marriage, compounded by parental conflict or parental disparagement, will complicate this and compromise a child’s inherent sense of belonging. Since children feel ‘made’ of this dyad, when it is attacked, trivialized, or devalued - messages heard often around discussions to terminate the marriage - or when there is an absence of acknowledging that it was ever worthy, for the child a precious and narcissistically bound object is desecrated. Given a child’s early identification with this dyad, the injury occurs at a basic sense of self⁴. As the parental representation gives way to disrepair, as it is experienced externally as fragmented and internally as ruptured, we can expect to see a wearing away effect on one’s sense of self as product of this all-powerful, creative union. Thus, the child can feel diminished as their ‘creator,’ the dyad,

⁴ It is arguable that the parental dyadic experience provides a child with the crucial, narcissistic pleasure of being held in (two) mind(s) together, infusing one with a sense of centrality to this most beloved and primary dyadic object via a sort of ‘dyadic mentalization.’]

falls from grace while they also suffer their impotence to reinstate unity internally and environmentally. In an Eden overgrown, denied the nourishment of moisture and light, fruit rots on the ground, berries shrink on the vine. When the dyad is felt to have died, the child, as product of this dyad, suffers a diminishment of self-integrity at the level of self-representation.

This argument, that one's sense of having-been-created by the parental dyad is importantly related to sense of self, (and conversely, that self-regard becomes implicated when the dyad is experienced as broken or disrupted), is at odds with other perspectives that maintain that it is the 'lived' relationship with parents that promote attachment and one's identity as child-of-parent(s). According to Anna Freud, "unlike adults, children have no psychological conception of relationship to blood-tie, whereas in the adult the fact of having engendered, borne, or given birth to a child produces an understandable sense of proprietorship and possessiveness... These considerations carry no weight with the children who are emotionally unaware of the events leading to their births. What registers in their minds are the day-to-day interchanges with the adults who take care of them and who, on the strength of these, become the parent figures to whom they are attached" (1972, p. 624).

A problematic aspect of Freud's formulation above is that it neglects how the parents' regard for the child – as 'engendered, borne, or given birth to' – and as dyadically created, is going to have a contributing quality to a child's internalized sense of origin and to their (environmentally established/sanctioned) definition/meaning of familial relationships. Further, Freud's argument overlooks the phenomenon, often seen clinically, of the emotionally evocative parental object(s) of fantasy in those raised

without contact with one or both biological parents, even when adoptive parents, single parents, or a blended family arrangement have provided strong (substitute) - attachment relationships. In regards to such fantasy, in children who have suffered 'real' loss and also of the normative struggle to maintain an idealized imago in light of reality,

Heineman (2004) has written:

We have learned much about the idealization of the absent parent from our work with children who have lost a parent through death, divorce, or abandonment. We also know the importance of fantasy in children's struggles to manage their longing for the lost "perfect" parents of their infancy. A child's fantasy of idealized parents helps him both cope with the loss of a real or imagined parent and master the disappointment in the flawed parents of his daily existence (p. 110).

Since a child's sense of self is related in large part to their broad family identity and identifications, the loss of the parental dyad in divorce disrupts their self-concept while they are simultaneously experiencing profound object loss. "Children's reaction to a divorce is like their reaction to the death of a loved one. They experience stress, guilt, loneliness, and sadness. These feelings and diminished functioning can last a long time, and even years later there may be residual effects" (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, p. 113). Steiner (1993) has made the important point that severe loss reactions are not reserved for cases of 'actual death' and writes: "that what applies for the mourning connected with an actual bereavement is in its essentials also true for all experience of separateness which at a primitive level is felt as a loss" (p.62). According to Aragno (2003), adjustment to loss can "be of longer or shorter duration, varying according to temperament and particular

circumstance, but above all, according to the depth and quality of the object tie, and the *significance* of the deceased to the survivor” (p. 431).

Themes of parental death have frequently been observed in the play of young children of divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) and in one study, preschool children represented divorce as marking the death of the family, or the family being killed⁵ (Kurdek, & Siesky, 1979). The acceptance, and letting go, necessary for mourning to occur becomes quite complex in the case of divorce since it is not a ‘death’ in the literal sense of the word, and because it is difficult for one to actually *name* what has been lost in parental separation and divorce. According to Freud (1917), in many a melancholic formation, “the object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love (e.g. in the case of a betrothed girl who has been jilted)” (p. 245) and one is often unable to “consciously perceive” what has been lost, or “only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him” (italics included, p. 245). The process of childhood mourning in divorce might be called a profound grief state that circumvents acceptance with incredulity, because the important figures haven’t actually died, still existing as living entities, but exist now as separate entities where they were previously experienced as joined, constituted at an unconscious level as the ‘parental dyadic object.’

Many parents will feel ill-equipped to make sense of a child’s complex, even puzzling, grief reaction when that which is being grieved, the deeply cathected, formerly intact parental dyadic object, is not quite clear to or explicitly named for them either. As in Freud’s observation, when “the inhibition of the melancholic seems puzzling to us

⁵ The loss of the family home after divorce has also been shown to stir loss reactions in children that closely resemble reactions suffered when a loved one dies (Anthony, 1997).

because we cannot see what it is that is absorbing him so entirely” (1917, p. 246), many parents will fail to recognize the variety of loss children are experiencing and be unprepared to provide support. It is a tall order to process feelings of loss for something that has never been formerly named, so it is important that the marital-parental dyad as an entity unto itself, related to and distinct from the individual parents, is acknowledged, and honored, in words.⁶

Whereas parental death is typically given name, explicitly mourned in the outer environment with traditional rites and rituals, there is an absence of naming what is ‘lost’ in divorce, (marriages ending in divorce are traditionally regarded as ‘failed’) with little if any sort of ritual activity to mark the passing. Mannoni (1999) has written that “it is only when trauma is finally expressed in words that mourning can finally take place, and, as a result, reparative forces can be employed in the service of pleasure or simply of permission to live” (p. 44). When experience is symbolized in language or ritual, it becomes bounded, more tangible, more accessible, and less inchoate. Parents might be inclined to recognize how significant the disruptions of divorce are for children, but might overlook or misunderstand the internal, representational and emotional disruption that is occurring and requires a process of mourning for moving on.

There is an inherent healing component of naming aloud that something has been lost and openly, and communally acknowledged, it seems a dramatic oversight that children of divorce don’t get more opportunity to mourn aloud, or with others. In this vein, we might consider the universal tradition of ritual to mark significant loss in the

⁶ It is significant that there doesn’t exist a specific term for the child who survives a divorce. As it stands, the term ‘child of divorce,’ makes primary reference to the rupture between the parents with only secondary reference to the child. We have words to reference other experiences of profound, personal loss: ‘Widow,’ ‘widower,’ ‘orphan,’ even ‘divorcee,’ but there isn’t a particular signifier for children of divorce.

event of ‘actual’ death; regardless of the ambivalent regard for the person lost, their life is acknowledged. If nothing else, it is spoken aloud that someone lived and someone has passed, and this implies the life had worth. In divorce, couples often rush to ‘burial,’ become immersed in the division of property (and the division of children), without time or space set aside for ‘honoring’ what has been ‘laid to rest.’ Klein has observed the importance of outer world acknowledgement of one’s loss: “If the mourner has people whom he loves and who share his grief, and if he can accept their sympathy, the restoration of the harmony in his inner world is promoted, and his fears and distress are more quickly reduced” (p. 362).

Freud (1917) distinguished mourning proper from melancholic loss reaction, which might also be termed ‘pathological mourning.’ He stresses that both normative mourning and the melancholic variety share symptoms in common: “the painful frame of mind, the same loss of interest in the outside world – in so far as it does not recall him – the same loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love (which would mean replacing him) and the same turning away from any activity that is not connected with thoughts of him” (p. 244). The notion of the outside world recalling or not recalling the object, is particularly important point, given that in the present discussion we are concerned with whether, or to what degree the child is ‘allowed’ to recall the original family, whether the ‘old family’ is ever given mention, conjured up, experienced in whole family settings, or is instead denied, never discussed, as if a closed case. It is arguable that when feelings of loss go unspoken or unacknowledged, this interferes with optimal mourning and can promote a melancholic reaction to loss.

When life changes dramatically, as in divorce, it is not only environmental change to which one must adapt, but also to the representational reverberations that proceed to color our interpretations of environmental change, in a complex and cyclical relationship. The inner-world and outer-world characteristics of the loss in divorce ought not to be viewed separately or in succession, but as mutually engaged, mutually interactive, and mutually constituting one's experience of self and of life as lived in an ongoing dialogue of experience and representation. To use an analogy from clinical work, a clinician is at once concerned with outer-world deficiencies, for instance, in the amount of love bestowed on one from important others in their relational/ familial environment, and simultaneously with inner-world conflict, for instance, in an individual's capacity to 'take in' and make use of love that is offered. It is this continuous back and forth relationship between the (object-) representational world and the world of relatedness to ('real') others, and the way in which one's projections onto the world of others alters one's experience of others, just as aspects of these relationships are introjected and leave one's representations ever-changed, to differing degrees, that comprise one's experience of self-in-world.

When we consider the relationship between the 'environmental loss' in divorce, understood here as a loss of daily contact with each parent and familial cohesion, and the experience of representational loss of the intact parental dyad, it is worthwhile to consider the following excerpt from Klein: "The poignancy of the actual loss of a loved person is, in my view, greatly increased by the mourner's unconscious phantasies of having lost his *internal* 'good' objects as well. He then reels that his internal 'bad' objects predominate and his inner world is in danger or disruption... He not only takes into himself

(reincorporates) the person whom he has just lost, but also reinstates his internalized good objects (ultimately his loved parents), who became part of his inner world from the earliest stages of development onwards” (p. 353). In other language, one might say that the ‘attachment system’ will be activated during such intense experiences of loss and longing. Klein continued that “these [internalized parental objects] too are felt to have gone under, to be destroyed, whenever the loss of a loved person is experienced.

Thereupon the early depressive position, and with it anxieties, guilt and feelings of loss and grief derived from the breast situation, the Oedipus situation and from all sources, are reactivated. Among all these emotions, the fears of being robbed and punished by both dreaded parents that is to say, feelings of persecution- have also been revived in deep layers of the mind” (p. 353). It is useful to consider the added complexities for one who strives to reincorporate the good objects of the parents when it is the parents – represented by the dyadic imago – that have been experienced as forsaking the child of their consistent, intact and joined presence. With the dyadic fall from grace, children can suffer a number of loss reactions, related in large part to identification with the parental-dyad and due to what is, essentially, the death of the dyad.

When children are confronted with the epiphany of parental divorce, it marks the beginning of a sudden and dramatic transition from the way life was and life unknown. Grinberg & Grinberg (1984) have explained how “the phenomenon of migration can trigger different types of anxieties in the subject who emigrates: separation anxiety, superego anxieties over loyalties and values, persecutory anxieties when confronted with the new and unknown, depressive anxieties which give rise to mourning for objects left behind and for the lost parts of the self, and confusional anxieties because of failure to

discriminate between the old and the new” (p. 13). Grinberg & Grinberg explain that when such “anxieties, the feelings of being uprooted, and the feelings of loss” are not sufficiently processed and worked through, it can result in what they term a “psychopathology of migration” (p. 13). These anxieties closely resemble the reactions children can have in making the transition, the move, to life post-divorce and if these reactions are insufficiently observed and addressed by their parents, children will be forsaken of crucial holding and support necessary to weather internal (emotional-representational) and external (environmental-relational) upheaval.

The relationship between loss and mourning can be understood, generally, in terms of a necessary turning inward for a period of time to re-constitute the self and prepare to re-enter the world of other (love) objects. Until this work of mourning is accomplished, we can anticipate that children will be resistant to accept a substitute object (i.e. an individual parent or a dyad comprised of parent- stepparent or even a re-constituted post-divorce parental dyad). When children are not given adequate support through mourning and transition, they might strongly resist a new family design. Wolfenstein (1966) wrote about a child who could not accept her father’s decision to remarry because she was not ready to detach and accept the absence of her deceased mother; her father, however, had endured an extended mourning period and was ready to move on. This is a scenario quite common in divorce, when a parent is ready (or eager) to embrace a new partnership, but the child remains loyal to the family of origin. Children might inflate the original family, and original parental relationship, because this is where they experienced a sense of primacy and centrality that went without question. As in parental death, children might come to idealize the dyadic object, displacing any

ambivalent regard onto the parents of the present: “Their real mother or father would have been so much nicer, more tolerant and understanding. In short, there is a facilitation in the direction of the idealization of the dead parent and a tendency to split the ambivalence with the positive feelings cathecting the idealized dead parent and the negative ones the substitute parent” (Nagera, 1970, p. 365). It is important to note, that in addition to the resistance children might bring to the new family arrangement, they might also encounter ambivalent reception from step-parents or a lack of ‘fit’ in the newly fashioned lifestyles of parents. Considering the distinction between ‘chosen’ and ‘forced’ migration, we might consider that “the immigrant arrives with less sociopolitical baggage and encounters greater hospitality than the exile, who is viewed with suspicion and accepted reluctantly by the host population” (Akhtar, 1999, p.8). While children might witness their parents settling in nicely to a new arrangement, they might feel marginalized and insufficiently invited to come along.

According to Freud (1917), the ultimate task of mourning is to relinquish emotional ties to the lost object, via the decathecting of attachment to the object. The process, first, involves reviving the other via memory, fantasy, in the psyche, while finally succumbing to the demands of reality that show us that the object no longer exists. A period of resistance to the demands of reality, or internal protest is a natural reaction to loss of an important other, often recognizable in initial denial or attempts at bargaining. We can anticipate an internal pressure to ‘revolt’ in Freud’s terms, against the facts of reality that insist that loss has most certainly occurred, to maintain one’s connection to the internalized dyad, this fantasy of intactness, even though it has been irrevocably altered and attachment to the dyad has become deeply compromised. Wolfenstein (1966)

has written poignantly of the gradual awakening to the fact of loss, once mourning is achieved: “The lost object is thus gradually decathected, by a process of remembering and reality testing, separating memory from hope. The mourner convinces himself of the irrevocable pastness of what he remembers: this will not come again, and this will not come again” (p. 93). Freud describes the unconscious struggle to breathe new life into the object – when this is not possible, one either succumbs to mourning par typical, or turns inward, creating a magical substitute, now constituted in the self. When this failure of mourning occurs, we see melancholic reaction to loss and its emotional dimming of lights.

While Freud (1917) offered a poignant depiction of the various trajectories in loss, he wrote in reference to adult dynamics, and his conceptualization cannot be applied to the loss reactions of children without careful clarification. Conversely, Klein (1940) highlights how an adult’s processing of loss must be understood within the context of the child development that came before: “While it is true that the characteristic feature of normal mourning is the individual’s setting up the lost loved object inside himself, he is not doing so for the first time but, through the work of mourning, is reinstating that object as well as all his loved *internal* objects which he feels he has lost. He is therefore *recovering* what he had already attained in childhood” (italics hers, p. 362). With that said, we might consider what we have to learn about loss reactions in children by looking to mourning gone awry in adults. Wolfenstein (1966) points out that Bowlby’s observations of childhood loss, with “the persistence of the demand on a more or less conscious level, for the return of the lost object, the inability to renounce it” are understood to also characterize “nonadaptive reactions to loss in adults” (p. 94).

Employing reverse reasoning, this provides some justification for looking to adult loss reactions, with special emphasis on the pathological or melancholic variety, to illuminate processes at work throughout earlier development.

It is important to stress that typical childhood development plays host to multiple normative losses, beginning with emergence from one's experience of symbiotic connectedness and during periods of individuation, and that subsequent experiences of 'real' loss can reactivate associated affect. We understand normative loss as something similar to mourning in normative development, for instance, in Klein's description of the internal struggle that ensues when the child finds a frustrating mother in place of the gratifying mother. The event of divorce will present unique challenges to manage loss given a child's immersion in particular developmental stage dynamics. In the case of earlier development, for instance, Wolfenstein (1966) emphasizes that "the younger child's panic at the prospect of having to give up a lost parent is related to the characteristics of the object relation. The parent is felt to be an indispensable source of material and narcissistic supplies, an auxiliary ego and superego, a part of the self" (p. 117). In reference to developmental age at the time of loss, we can consider the implications of normative individuation colliding in a complex way with the separation of parental death or divorce.

An absence of sad affect or 'typical' grief reactions in children does not mean that grief is absent. It has been observed by Kowalski in Cohen & Etazady, 1983, that "in those children who need to adapt to extraordinary circumstances, certain aspects of their defensive or adaptive functions may become precociously developed. These children give the impression of being especially bright or well adjusted only to develop other problems

at a later time and under other circumstances” (p. 251). Some older children have been shown to exhibit anger more readily than feelings of grief; this is attributed to more awareness of parental suffering, the presence of loyalty binds, disruption of chumships, and the hassle of moving between homes (Drapeau, Samson, & Saint-Jacques, 1999).

Wolfenstein (1966) has stressed that loss reactions in children will often present as strikingly different, and even counterintuitive, from the loss reactions of adults. For example, she described a child who had lost her mother as exhibiting behavior (also sometimes seen in children of divorce), that indicated feelings of loss had been ‘shrugged off’ or had gone underground. In Wolfenstein’s patient, “sad feelings were curtailed; there was little weeping. Immersion in the activities of everyday life continued. There was no withdrawal into preoccupation with thoughts of the lost parent” (p. 96).

Wolfenstein stresses throughout her writing the “intimate relation between tolerance for sad affects and reality testing” (p. 105). She has noted that this warding off of the affective loss reaction was accompanied by a disavowal of reality; she writes, “overtly or covertly the child was denying the finality of the loss... with the more or less conscious expectation of [the object's] return” (p. 96). Per our discussion here, the persistence of hope - a wishful demand to undo the loss - illuminates the possible relationship between hope and wish in cases of parental death and in cases of parental divorce. We might suppose that the child’s determination to ‘keep hope alive’ is in part related to hope that an original wish for parental absence, apparently come true, can be corrected via a more determined wish for their presence once more. In such a scenario, we recognize that the child is not only buffering herself against full recognition of the loss, but protecting

herself from encroaching guilt feelings for murderous fantasies, or more lightly, for not having been a better child.

In her clinical illustration exploring the “denial of the finality of the loss” and “the defenses against related affects” in an adolescent girl, referenced above, Wolfenstein (1966) described that around the time of her mother’s death the patient was in the midst of “adolescent detachment from and devaluation of her mother,” “shrank from her mother’s demonstrations of affection and was intensely irritated by her little mannerisms” (p. 97), with contrasting glorification and idealization at the time following her death, in a seeming attempt to ‘love her back.’ Here we can imagine a similar disavowal of the importance of the parental dyad, as for the individual parents during adolescence, with behaviors of detachment, devaluation, shrinking away, and a general tone of irritation – especially when a dyad has become increasingly toxic, or conflictual, or distant; in such settings, the internal pressure to participate in the normative pulling away of adolescence, for instance, is heightened by the desire to de-identify from such a negatively-charged dyad.

We must also consider the paradox that “the more ambivalent the relation [to the lost object] has been, the harder it is to give it up” (Wolfenstein, 1966, p. 120). There is a normative ambivalence that characterizes all love-object relationships since every important object will inevitably disappoint, will be experienced as depriving as well as loving, hostile as well as satisfying, together-with, but also apart-from. Importantly, this fosters one’s early recognition of the otherness of others: of other minds, of separateness and autonomy in togetherness. Freud (1917) has written that “the loss of a love-object is an excellent opportunity for the ambivalence in love-relationships to make itself effective

and come into the open...” (pp. 250-251), since the experience of “being slighted, neglected or disappointed, [can] import opposed feelings of love and hate into the relationship or reinforce an already existing ambivalence” (p. 251). It can be argued that the loss of the intact parental dyad is riddled with more internal conflict than is present in other losses because the parents, the individual objects of desire continue to exist but are no longer experienced, or conceived, as joined in the way they once were. Since we imagine that the dyadic representation is always characterized by some ambivalence, especially where parental conflict has existed in more overt ways and due to the expectable limitations of any object, necessarily disappointing when held up to some internalized ideal, we now consider a heavy loading of internal conflict since this now spoiled dyadic representation has not been fully named, cannot be relinquished despite the ardent demands of reality.

Some children will exhibit a host of adjustment difficulties following divorce: an evident loss of self-esteem, a lessening of social or academic capacities, or instances of misbehavior not previously seen; children from divorced families exhibit more impulsivity, more antisocial behavior, and more somatic complaints than peers from intact families (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Bergman, et al., 1987). “Compared with children in intact families, children in divorced families are more likely to have conduct problems and show signs of psychological maladjustment; they have lower academic achievement, more social difficulties, and poorer self-esteem” (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006, p. 107). Importantly, “there are more subtle costs for children when they have to cope with their parents’ divorce, costs that do not necessarily show up on standard tests of achievement, behavior, or health. These emotional costs include

embarrassment, fear of abandonment, grief over loss, irrational hopes of reconciliation, worry about their parents' well-being, anxiety about divided loyalties, and uncertainty about romantic relationships" (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, p. 108). It is possible to conceptualize many of the adjustment difficulties traditionally observed in children of divorce, as related to a combination of forces: the wearing away of the (dyadically identified) self-representation, 'inappropriate' guilt reactions, and the lessening of available parental resources; while declines in child functioning are typically attributed to 'divorce,' they might be more specifically located in the loss of the co-parental function – that need not cease to exist after divorce.

To begin understanding the complexity children's struggles with agency, coping, and assertion of strengths following parental divorce, it is useful to look to Wolfenstein's insights: "We may suppose that the child who... declines in his accomplishments or deviates from previous good behavior is suffering from the loss of narcissistic rewards and external ego and superego support" previously provided (1966, p.108). We can conceive of this scenario as related on one hand to the parents, traditional purveyors of reward and support, being over-taxed by demands related to fashioning new lives for themselves and forming new relational connections, and also to the loss of the reward and support provided children when they are held in shared, mutual regard and consideration by two parents, together, compared to that provided by two individual parents, in quick succession. Another possible aspect of self-diminishment relates back to the representational dyad and the perception of oneself as the product of a marriage that has failed. After divorce, and in the proximity demanded by joint custody, parents might regard the former marriage as 'never any better,' compromising their children's attempts

to maintain a ‘good object’ depiction of the parental dyad. In a family where parents leave a decidedly and absolutely ‘bad and regrettable marriage,’ children can also internalize, at the level of self-representation, that they are - as the product of this ‘bad marriage-’ a ‘bad and regrettable child.’

An important aspect of the diminishment of self often seen in children adjusting to parental divorce, is similar to Freud’s (1917) formulation of the deflated, despondent subject embroiled in a pathological mourning process and how melancholic attacks against the self are in fact, attacks against the abandoned (lost) object that has been taken in at the level of identification. It might be said that such diminishments of self represent internal, unconscious attacks on the parental dyad, strongly identified with in terms of an ‘origin of self’ relationship, and that with the shattering, dramatic loss of this object representation, such diminishment signifies both a retreat from object relatedness to a more “preliminary stage of object-choice” (p. 241), namely a desire for incorporation and a narcissistic relatedness to maintain a hold on this lost object, easy to envisage when we consider that the parental dyad is infused with such early identification. Thus, “the love for the object – a love which cannot be given up though the object itself is given up - takes refuge in narcissistic identification, then the hate comes into operation onto this substitutive object, abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering” (p. 251). The resort to “self-punishment, in taking revenge on the original object and in tormenting their loved one through their [suffering]” is “in order to avoid the need to express their hostility [to the parents] openly” (p. 251). Interestingly, in our formulation, the attack against the self in lieu of attacking the lost object of love – the parental dyad – is in effect an attack on the product of that unit, as the

child at its earliest sense of being, it's earliest conception of self, is as part and parcel of this dyad, conceived of and created within this dyad. Freud has described how:

A good, capable, conscientious woman will speak no better of herself after she develops melancholia than one who is in fact worthless... (p. 247) if one listens patiently to a melancholic's many and various self-accusations, one cannot in the end avoid the impression that often the most violent of them are hardly at all applicable to the [individual], but with significant modifications they do fit someone else... we perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to [one's] own ego... the woman who loudly pities her husband for being tied to such an incapable wife as herself is really accusing her *husband* of being incapable...they are not ashamed and do not hide themselves, since everything derogatory they say about themselves is at bottom said about someone else" (italics his, 1917, p. 248).

It is also necessary to consider the observed guilt-reactions suffered by children who feel that they successfully 'wished' the parental separation. Wolfenstein (1966) has described how a child's regard for a lost object can "become, for a time, ideally loving." She continues that "this is partly an attempt at posthumous undoing of bad feelings or wishes previously directed toward the [object of loss]" (p. 106). In such a scenario, a child might experience an excess of inappropriate guilt, reverse the blame onto one's self to avoid a further tarnishing of the desperately needed parental imago. With this masochistically hued compromise, there might be depression of a silent variety, and isolative retreat or the child's sense of guilt might be witnessed in self-attack or diminishment of self, based on fantasies that they are somehow to blame for the parental divorce (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). Alternatively, we might see dramatic strides and

earnest appeals to help and support the parents, a child's attempts to make amends for what they haven't done.

The impact of a parent's adjustment to divorce is profoundly significant for children, because it will impact the availability of parents as supportive, regulating figures and at times children will be called upon to step in as a supportive, regulating figure for a parent in the throes of loss, loneliness, or overwhelm. Older children will often be more aware of parental struggles and exposure to parental fragilities, and therefore more susceptible to negative reactions (Walczak, & Burns, 1984), but many will step into provide practical or emotional support to a parent, assume increased self-care needs and display advanced maturity (Wallerstein, 1983, cited in Garnezy & Rutter, 1983; Reinhard, 1977; Kurdek & Siesky, 1979; Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morrell, 2001). For instance, if children view one parent identified as victimized by the divorce, or protesting the divorce, (as in some dramatic expressions of an inability to relinquish and mourn the relationship,) loyalty pressures can result in attempts to comfort or take care of a parent. Providing emotional support or stepping in as a sort of surrogate for the parent perceived as having left, represents a disruption of the parent-child hierarchy and another significant loss of parental support. This reversal of roles, in terms of provision of emotional support, is an aspect of what family theorists have termed 'parentification' and is related to another phenomenon often resulting from divorce, when one or both of the parents undergoes their own sort of regressive process and become less equipped to support the child as they had been able to previously. Some children might exhibit a willingness to help 'carry the load' of parent responsibilities, aroused from feelings of obligation to help the parent heal emotionally, or out of a desire to create stability

amongst the upheaval of post-divorce life. According to Byng-Hall (2002), in addition to adult duties such as caring for siblings or keeping house, “the [parentified] child may also take responsibility for the emotional well-being of family members who are in distress, in other words become an attachment figure to whom others go for comfort when in distress” (p. 375). Children’s offerings of support to their parents can be understood as unconscious attempts to take care of the parents so that they will, in turn, be more equipped to care for the child. In such a ‘parentified’ dynamic, children can lose their traditional feeling of centrality in the family, as they make accommodations for the parents’ newly emergent needs. In such scenarios, the parent’s needs can be moved into the foreground and children can be ‘enlisted’ into roles that require a setting aside of their own needs to attend to their parents, demanding emotional maturity that well exceed their developmental capacities, as demonstrated in the following excerpt from Wallerstein’s (2005) research:

The loss of the ex-spouse’s presence often gives rise to an intense dependence by the adult on the child, which is at odds with our expectation of the child’s dependence on the parent. This reversal of roles can readily translate into the adult’s temporarily or lasting inability to distinguish his or her own needs and wishes from those that are attributed to the child. Following the divorce, parents often find they need the child to fill their own emptiness, to ward off depression, to give purpose to their lives, to give them the courage to go on... ‘He understands everything I say,’ declared the successful businessman of his 3-year-old son. ‘Sometimes I talk to him for hours.’ In [the project] playroom, this same child, during the course of a conversation about his father, repeatedly pretended that he was a little car being run over by a Mack truck – a strikingly different take on this relationship (p. 405).

Some writers have referenced the feeling of powerlessness that can accompany children's experience of taking up residence in the post-divorce family (Drapeau, Samson, & Saint-Jacques, 1999). Highlighting the important distinction between 'chosen migration' versus 'forced migration' Pollock (1989) has written "when one is forced to leave one's land or home it is a loss and a severance;" (p.147). Akhtar (1999) quotes Grinberg & Grinberg (1989, p. 125): "parents may be voluntary or involuntary emigrants, but children are always 'exiled:' they are not the ones who decide to leave and they cannot decide to return at will (p. 11). There is a strikingly different meaning in choosing to leave and in feeling cast out, and this presents the essential issue of agency and subjugation. In our parallel, the parent might be likened to the immigrant, consciously making a move, in contrast to the children, trailing along, without choice and exiled from the life left behind. Akhtar has stressed an important distinction between the immigrant and the exile, both traveling from the old to the new world, but with significantly different degrees of agency. Just as a person choosing to fast has a different perspective on hunger from the person who starves, the parent in the midst of divorce is an agent of a *changing family* whereas the child is subject to *a family of change*. Akhtar cites the lack of opportunity to visit one's original home as an important distinguishing feature between the immigrant and the exile, who "not only lacks emotional refueling but also cannot update and revise the internalized pictures of his early environment" (1999, p. 11).

When parents fail to provide their children with an ongoing parental dyad, a 'substitute co-parenting dyad' in place of the lost marital-parental dyad, children might take flight, to form an alliance with the parents of the past: nostalgic, fantastic and fairy tale imaginings, an idealized conjuring of the unified familial representation that has been

lost. Some children will have fantasies of parental reunion and tend to idealize the lost parental dyad. To the parents' confusion, a child might express his preference for the former, intact family, no matter how conflictual and troubled a family it was. Pollock, in a useful parallel, recalls: "a political refugee from a South American country telling [him] how much he missed his beautiful homeland, even with its tyrannies and risks" (1989, p. 148). It is important to stress that, in both these scenarios, this is probably due in part to a reflexive idealization of the original family/country, but is most likely also related to a desire to resurrect the sense of internal intactness that is shaken with such dramatic transition and the loss of unifying internal integrity this object (dyad/country) had previously provided. We can imagine a more willing giving-up of the fallible, conflictual, 'recent past' dyad in divorce, even recognition of the legitimacy or need for separation, with simultaneous stubborn holding on to the dyad of representation, the dyad of fantasy, the dyad of the 'remote past,' infused with wishful imaginings of peaceful intactness. A child's attempts to maintain this object as internally cohesive, at times seen in wishful fantasies of reunion, will be experienced as futile, just as if a child tried to become caretaker of the family home, keeping up repairs, managing its affairs, when parents have accepted foreclosure or moved away. Such nostalgia in children might be understood as a conjuring of the glorified parents of the past rather than the embattled parents of the present while fantasies of parental reunion might be understood as a deep-seated wish for a sense of overall representational 'intactness' that has been disrupted with divorce.

Wolfenstein (1966) viewed adolescence as the period when 'formal' mourning can occur and observed, in reference to parental death, that "fantasies of the parent's return are either more clearly conscious or more readily admitted in adolescence than at

earlier ages (p. 105). It is in adolescence [in contrast to earlier phases] that the sense of longed-for past develops with the conviction that it can never come again. The past assumes a mythical aura. Fantasies of a golden age of the personal and the historic past probably have their inception in this time of life” (p. 114). Hence, while there is more capacity to relinquish that which is lost, the sense of loss can be intensified at this stage with romantic nostalgia of early childhood life. Referencing the normative developmental loss, inherent in adolescence, Wolfenstein writes: “The adolescent, in the enforced giving up of his parents, feels a sense of all he is losing. He conjures up regressively the most ideal aspects of being a child encompassed by parental love” (p. 115). Wolfenstein considers how, in contrast, “it seems likely that the fantasy of the parent’s return may be a more closely guarded secret in younger children” (p. 105) and stresses the importance of acknowledging such yearnings: “A readiness to admit this fantasy, thus risking confrontation with reality, may represent one of the many steps toward giving up the lost parent,” (p. 105) or, in the present discussion, the lost marital-parental dyad.

While in the event of death, idealized recollections of the lost object will be acceptable, at times encouraged, and often “echoed...in the family circle” (Wolfenstein, 1966, p. 97), feelings of idealization for the marital-parental dyad following divorce will likely assume little public expression. Such idealization of the intact parental dyad (or of the former intact family), might go underground and even be forcefully resisted, aided by disparaging recollections or dramatic negations in the external (parental) environment. We can imagine children of divorce holding such idealized longings to themselves, because of anticipated (negative) parental reactions at a more conscious level, due to the pronounced ambivalence of this combined object, and given an inability to find words for

dyadic longing, because the (lost) dyad is a representational entity rarely given name. Children need assistance articulating the experience of loss to do the work of mourning, but also need permission to speak of the loss, and both parents and children need to mourn the loss of the previous era to sufficiently transition and engage in what is to come. In terms of healthy adjustment, Pollock (1989) contends “that each individual must go through an individual internal mourning-liberation process so that there can finally be a sense of belonging to the new without giving up all ties to one' heritage that are valuable, needed, and should be transmitted. This mourning-liberation process facilitates the processes of healing the losses and allows for acculturation, identification, and successful adaptation” (p. 150).

Wolfenstein's clinical observations led her to propose that “children and young adolescents lack the capacity for [the necessary] kind of dosage in emotional letting go” (1966, p. 109), related to her argument that there might exist at certain stages a “developmental unreadiness” (p. 97) in processing significant loss. Wolfenstein recommends therapy to assist in the promotion of mourning by helping one “achieve a greater tolerance for painful feelings” and in children, in particular, “can help to insure that painful affects are released at a rate which the immature individual is unable to control independently” (p. 103), given the threat, (in economic language), of “a release of traumatic quantities of objectless libido” (p. 103). More contemporary studies, have shown that individual and group therapy has been effective in lessening anxiety and depression in children of divorce, but when parents are embattled this can become another site of discord (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006).

Nordhaus (1991) has argued, from a clinical intervention standpoint, that as long as a child is employed as a 'pawn' in a parental contest, "the child may be symptomatic but does not benefit from treatment. When the child has special meaning to the parents and is the vehicle through which the parents express their conflict... the child can be hated or prized, the receptacle of hostile projection or rapturous idealizations – so long as he is required by the parents in their warfare, treatment is of little use. Indeed, the parents often make the child's therapy a subject of dispute along with disagreements about music and swimming lessons, discipline, diet, school, and everything else" (p. 387). While therapy is, without argument, often useful and sometimes necessary to assist children with processing feelings of loss and problematic reactions to parental divorce, sensitive parenting (and co-parenting) can also provide an important affect regulatory function by allowing expression of the array of feelings emergent from the loss and assistance in processing reactions to change. Parental recognition of the child's experience of loss and internal 'protest,' and the permission to put these feelings into language will promote an increased tolerance and regulation of painful affect.

Parental loss reactions

Just as children need to relinquish attachment to the marital-parental dyad to become receptive to a new-fashioned dyad, most promising in a cooperative parenting design that provides an ongoing parental partnership and opportunities for parental-dyadic relating, parents must also submit to the 'migration' from marital partnership to parental partnership. "Although parents' explicit intent is to end their spousal relationship, they need to recognize that their parenting relationship endures and that they continue to be related to each other because of their children" (Clarke-Stewart &

Brentano, p. 58). All too often, divorcing parents settle on separation, with an emphasis on strained civility and ‘split’ relatedness, because they haven’t made the distinction between the marital partnership and the parental partnership, which paves the way for cooperative parenting. For a co-parenting dyad to be sufficiently established and offered as a substitute, will require the parents to let go their previous spousal definition, “for joint custody to succeed, hostile ex-spouses need to separate the marital and parental dimensions of their relationship” (Clingempeel & Reppucci, 1982, p.110). Difficulties separating the marital and parental dimensions has been termed “boundary ambiguity” and described as an “inability to redefine and reorganize family structure in a way that clearly removes the former partner from the spousal role” (Madden-Derdich et al., 1999, p. 590).

Nordhaus (1991) has employed the myth of the Gordian knot to describe the quandary of divorce, a process which “signifies a matter of extreme difficulty, it evokes the notion of a bond which appears indissoluble” (p. 381). Her therapeutic work with couples, some in the midst of custody disputes, points to a need to identify the charge of ongoing parental conflict and the need to separate, as much as possible, conflict related to the (marital) ‘duo’ and conflict related to the (parental) ‘dyad.’ She stresses that “in some cases of post divorce conflict, a long effort of skill, patience, and strength is required to help the partners loosen the tie” (p. 381). Separating the ‘knots’ of shared identity is crucial in crafting a refashioned parental dyad that locates children’s needs as primary and recognizes the child’s sense of primacy in the lives of their parents as emergent from a shared parental identity. Cohen and Weissman (1984) have distinguished the marital relationship from the parenting relationship or ‘the parenting alliance’ and explain: “The

former is an experience of sexual and libidinal ties along with self-self object functions; the latter is a self-object relationship between the parents which evolves as they engage in child rearing and encompasses the experiential and transactional aspects of self-esteem regulating” (p. 35). Losso (2003) has written that following the divorce, or dissolution of the “conjugal link,” “other forms of links must be re-constituted... This process implies libidinal divestment of the other as an object of desire...” yet also involves “a reinvestment of the other, but only as a limited object that becomes a partner in the sharing of parenting” (pp. 325-326).

Confusion about relational definition between parents has been cited as an important source of post-marital conflict, as divorced parents move from a shared identity of ‘partners with children’ to ‘former partners and current co-parents,’ (Ahrons, 1981; Emory, 1994; Madden- Derdich, et al., 1999). Losso has pointed out that “frequently, the place that was occupied by the couple’s link is filled by a permanent conflict that has the function of keeping the ex-spouses united through conflict, and that paradoxically favours the denial of their respective separation anxieties” (p. 323). One study found that “a third of the couples were fighting at the same high pitch ten years after their divorce was final [meaning that] the children were exposed to the hurt and anger that led to the breakup throughout their growing up years” (Wallerstein, et al., 2000, p. 5); it is crucial to stress that the *meaning* of the conflict, not merely its presence, must be understood in its complexity if it is to be worked through effectively. Lowery (1985) has made the important point that observing the problematic aspects of ex-spousal conflict is insufficient while “much remains to be done in identifying precursors to [post-divorce parental] conflict. Identification of those contributing factors will be needed before

focused and effective intervention with high risk families can be developed” (1985, p. 248). Downey (1988) has written that when there is intense conflictual engagement following divorce, the “divorce remains unconsummated” (pg. 280). We can conceive of the need for ‘consummation’ as the closure and relinquishment that occurs with mourning, which in turn creates possibility for a new form of parental relatedness and engagement.

Parents’ resistance to let go and move on from the former relationship, so to establish themselves as co-parents, directly impedes the child’s ability to let go and embrace the new. Many couples have been observed to keep conflict alive and experience “strife over the children, over money, over new relationships, over old problems, over new problems – indeed, over anything... unable to detach themselves from their former spouse” (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, p. 87). The energy parents afford their pre-existing relationship, the quantity of time reserved ostensibly for co-parenting concerns, but spent instead on rehashing the relationship, the expressions of anger, regret, injury still aired and ongoing, can prolong a problematic loss reaction in children. Abiding hostility and expressed anger, for instance, represents a failure to mourn and abiding attachment via ongoing, intense engagement with an ex-spouse, can be quite confusing for children (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1978). When children witness their parents embroiled in ongoing conflict, while also hearing negation or minimization of the importance of the former marital relationship, they will receive contradictory messages: of ongoing parental investment in the former relationship, but a relationship not worth fighting for. Further, the romantic implications in jealousy, power-ridden battles in belabored negotiations around logistics, affectively charged contact in the volume, tearfulness, and harshness of

communications can all contribute to strengthen the child's internal protest of the loss of the intact parental dyad, infuse magical wish for reunion, and delay a relinquishment of this wish and of the dyadic object itself.

One author (Donner, 2006) has conceptualized some high conflict couples' disputes in terms of pathological narcissism, perverse thinking and profound envy. Even couples such as these, sometimes quite disturbed, who become embroiled in emotionally vicious, financially expensive, and child-wielding assaults, can be understood as not yet having 'mourned' the marital relationship. While it is typical for the *topics* of argument to change following divorce, focused on issues related to custody negotiations such as finances, scheduling, and principles of child-rearing (Schwartz & Kaslow, 1997), problematic patterns of relating and obstacles to effective communication between ex-spouses will often persist and such ongoing conflict and power struggles are most likely evidence of some reluctance to let go of a former spouse, or the institution of marriage. Pronounced anger, attempts to upset or inconvenience the other parent, reveals an unresolved, ongoing attachment and incomplete relinquishment of investment (even mean-spirited investment); many couples become decidedly divorced, but remain 'wedded' to the conflicts of the marriage and oftentimes, the (often unconscious) resistance to relinquish the marital attachment will manifest in a continuation of marital quarreling, disparagement, expressions of anger that at first glance do not appear to signify parental 'loss' reactions, per se, but will profoundly interfere with establishment of a workable parenting relationship.

Once the marital relationship is relinquished (mourned), former couples will experience a relief from the intensity of intractable conflict, or the need for active

avoidance and be able to participate in joint parenting. Their children will be provided a space of more positive co-existence, receive reassurance of their centrality in the family, and instead of a climate of familial deficiency and fragmentation, they can be provided with a new kind of family – a parenting dyad without the partnership features of an intact marital-parenting relationship, but a new fashioned partnership identified by the shared, valued project of raising the kids, and an object worthy of worthy of ongoing internalization. Presenting children with such a united front, once again, allows them to maintain a sense of belonging, a sense of family and as much cooperative contact parents can achieve, and they will be given the sense that they are still held within an existing parental dyadic space. When this is accomplished, there is the added benefit of parents modeling for children the transition to a new-fashioned way of relating, the relinquishing of one dyad for a worthy other.

The establishment of a new fashioned co-parenting dyad is no simple task, and until parents have sufficiently mourned their own attachment to the former marriage, whether manifest in feelings of having been abandoned, in expressions of ongoing anger or disappointment, or some other variety, they will have difficulty separating their identities as ex-marital partners from that of existing parental partners. Prior to a discussion of how parents can help children cope with the internal and environmental upheavals of divorce and joint custody, it is necessary to consider the internal conflict (and failure to mourn) that can inhibit parents' ability to avail themselves in this regard. We must also consider the impact of marital separation on parents' well-being. Feelings of loneliness, anxiety, depression, and an increase in self-destructive lifestyle behaviors (e.g. heavy drinking) is common among recently separated adults and the process of

“uncoupling,” (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, p. 56) will require individuation,⁷ redefinition, and grieving the loss of the marriage, presents significant adjustment demands. Additionally, parents might struggle, as their children do, with the loss of broad family identity: “Separated people often report a profound sense of loneliness and emptiness that goes beyond missing having a warm body to sleep beside and represents a deeper need for a sense of belonging and groundedness” (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, p. 56).

Parents’ resistance to mourn can manifest in a variety of ways. In some cases, parents might experience melancholic reactions and refuse to submit to the demands of reality: that the marital era is coming to a close, and will appear unable or unwilling to let go of the former spouse. In other scenarios, parents will experience such evident relief that the marriage is over, they will be barely able to look back, and might resist forging a co-parenting partnership with the ex-spouse they are relieved to let go of entirely. A third possible manifestation of incomplete mourning is evidenced in ongoing conflict and/or disparagement of an ex-spouse, as referenced above. Ultimately, parental mourning will allow for empathic recognition of children’s grief process and represents a necessary step in the establishment of a cooperative co-parenting relationship and provision of an adequate substitute object when the marital-parental object is lost to divorce.

Resisted mourning can manifest in a number of problematic ways and typically prevents the establishment of a parenting relationship distinct from the (former) marital relationship. Ongoing parental investment in the (lost) marital relationship might

⁷ At times I enlist the terms ‘individuation’ and ‘differentiation’ to describe the adult’s emergence from a failed marriage; these are used colloquially and should not be confused with the traditional psychoanalytic context, specifying the child’s emergence from a symbiotic unity with the mother.

manifest in straightforward feelings of loss, as when one ex-partner identifies as having been ‘left’ by the other; a parent in the throes of feeling abandoned might not only be ill-equipped to step out of their experience of loss to avail themselves empathically and supportively to their children, but might also come to identify with the children in a problematic way. If they identify this other parent as breaking up the family, upending theirs and the children’s world, they will not be able to align themselves sufficiently with the other parent to communicate a shared and joint decision of divorce to the children. Another risk in this situation is that a parent who feels left will want their children to know that it is the other, not they, who is ending the marriage; this might represent a wishful (and unconscious) desire to emerge as the good parent in contrast to the bad ‘leaving’ parent, or to punish the ex-spouse by fueling feelings of protective anger in the child. This will undoubtedly backfire – ultimately, children will come to feel anger at such enforced loyalty binds and might also rail against the perceived weakness of the parent identifying as abandoned.

Losso (2003) has observed that “generally, guilt predominates in the partner who ‘abandons’ and the narcissistic wound predominates in the ‘abandoned’ partner” (p. 322); it is important to stress that the pain of each family member takes on a unique quality, and that children will have a heightened awareness of parental fragilities as they struggle to make sense of what is happening. In the case of one explicitly grieving parent, for instance, the nature of their grief will be significantly different from the grief of their child, so appreciation of intensity of loss is insufficient to sensitize a parent to their child’s experience: while the child grieves for their ideal of the intact family, a parent might grieve for the loss of an idealizable self or other. In such instances, parents, or one

of the parents, might be unconsciously reluctant to let go some of the attachment to their former partner and former life. This might manifest straightforwardly, as when one partner instigates divorce and the other partner resists. The children might witness one parent trying to revive the dying marriage, while the other parent calls out the time of death; lack of consensus in separation can create a particularly confusing environment for the child already in the throes of their own internal revolt against the reality demands of loss and draw the child into marital drama in untoward ways.

While it is useful to consider features of ‘pathological’ mourning and melancholia to understand the pitfalls in some children’s reaction to loss of the intact dyad, (extended to the loss of the intact family, and to one’s internal sense of intactness), it is worthwhile to consider Freud’s (1917) conception of mania to illustrate the possible opposed reaction to loss we often see in parents, representing another example of incomplete or resisted mourning. When parents take ‘flight’ from their former marriage, and its associated conflict, it can result in an avoidance of parental contact altogether, which is problematic from the perspective of providing the child an ongoing, cooperative parental entity. Such a strategy can undermine parents’ empathic availability to their children as they resist feelings of loss in themselves and commit fully to the pursuit of a new life. Since parental mourning requires full and courageous acknowledgement of what is lost, the denial and distraction inherent in a ‘manic flight’ solution interferes with this in an unambiguous way.

If we consider loss reactions as existing on a continuum, with melancholic deflation on one pole and the manic inflation, or liberation, on the other, it helps to clarify parents’ difficulties, at times, in empathically ascertaining and providing appropriate

support for their children; when parents and children occupy opposite poles in relation to the loss suffered, they are experientially a world apart. Indeed, in many scenarios, divorcing parents could be said to occupy the space of ‘liberation,’ to a ‘manic’ extreme, while their children will experience a preponderance of, (and possibly the parents’ disavowed) ‘mourning.’ Losso (2003) has stressed that when parents are unsuccessful in resolving conflict and relinquishing the marital bond, “children of divorce, on the other hand, must do the mourning of the parental couple. For them the situation can be more difficult: the separation is an invasive and imposed reality that they cannot control. This imposition reactivates regressive fantasies and behaviors of different levels. Frequently, the children show symptoms, as ‘spokespersons’ of the group anxiety” (p. 323). In the case of parents’ manic flight from loss, we recognize an effort to deny the pain of the loss, a desire for full and utter relinquishment of the significant other, and a denial of the importance of this previously loved object, factors which impair one’s ability to mourn properly themselves or promote the mourning process of their children. It is crucial to note the probable denial and disavowal at work in such manic formations and not take exuberant unburdening at face value. We can surmise that in many cases, an aspect of parental denial, avoidance or minimization of loss is fueled by disavowed guilt feelings, combined with the energy dedicated toward fashioning a new life for themselves. Wolfenstein (1966) put it nicely: “good moods are the affective counterpart of denial and help to reinforce it: if one does not feel bad, then nothing bad has happened” (p. 101).

Freud (1917) explained that such manic burst is “the excess of positivity and activity is attributed to a large expenditure of physical energy, long maintained or habitually occurring, has at last become unnecessary” (p. 254). In contrast to the picture

of turning inward we see in extended mourning or melancholia, “the manic subject plainly demonstrates his liberation from the object of which was the cause of his suffering, by seeking like a ravenously hungry man for new object-cathexes” (p. 255). Freud cited the following examples to illustrate this phenomenon: rags-to-riches relieving a person of chronic worry, completion of a project long toiled over, and tackling an internal obstacle. Another fitting example of such ‘liberation’ and unburdening, might be our present subject: abandoning a hopeless marriage to embark on a new life. This helps to explain how a parent might rush from a marriage and in the process of freeing themselves from their marital duties, they might also neglect their parental duties of assisting their children in identifying, feeling and managing grief, and in ascribing meaning and understanding to the mourning process.

Regardless of the form a parent’s resistance to mourning takes, it will be defensively problematic for them to acknowledge their children’s grief for the lost marital dyad (and the non-present parent), because parents must fully embark upon their own grief process to support their child in theirs (Mullis and Otwell, 1998). A parent might not be at all conscious of their need to ‘grieve,’ yet it might be observed in the fierceness of their anger or forthright avoidance of the other. Other parents might be so embroiled in their own loss reaction it will blind them to what their children are experiencing. Parents will first have to acknowledge and *contain* their own feelings of disappointment, traces of longing and nostalgia before they can create a space to hold and honor such feelings in their children. A failure on the part of parents to recognize their child’s need to mourn will impair their capacity to address the myriad struggles that might follow. A risk to children of divorce is that when the environment is not equipped to facilitate proper

mourning, they might grow up to encounter new object-relationships insufficiently prepared for intimacy and subsequent losses will go unmourned, just incorporated into a firmly established, melancholic system.

Borrowing from the parallel of migration, in the transition from a country of origin to a country of adoption “there still can be emotional sequelae, especially in the older adults who cannot adapt as easily to the ‘new life’ because they feel estranged and at times even in exile, in contrast to the younger members of the family, who adapt more easily” (Pollack, 1989, p. 149). In the transition from intact family to family of divorce, we often see the reverse, with the younger members, the children, often having the most difficulty in adjusting and feeling ‘exiled.’ Volkan (1993) has written that “all dislocation experiences may be examined in terms of the immigrant’s or the refugee’s ability to mourn and/or resist the mourning process. The extent to which the individual is able intrapsychically to accept his or her loss will determine the degree to which the adjustment is made to the new life” (quoted in Akhtar, 1995a, 1053-1054). Drawing from this, it is important to consider the ways a parent might help (or hinder) facilitation of their children’s mourning-liberation process, and begin the process of healing the losses, or, at the very least, allowing them to resignedly count their losses and successfully move on. While the parents might shed the trappings of the former family, often eager to settle into a new life, the child might resemble an old-world elder, still clothed in the family-of-origin garb, speaking in the tongue of the old world, and a constant reminder of the features of the old world that don’t quite fit the new. Since a child’s experience of loss during divorce and joint custody will be such a profoundly different variety from that of their parents, this can contribute to feelings of alienation and aloneness.

In the midst of the parents' problematic loss reactions related to the divorce, whether a fervent holding onto negative feelings or an avoidance of negative feelings altogether, children might feel forsaken of reliable empathic responsiveness from their parents, and this will compound their loss. "The respective role of each parent in the divorce process sets the tone to a significant extent for the psychological responses of the adults and certainly the children. This sudden interruption of family life and the major upheaval that divorce action causes interfere with adequate protection and consideration that children might receive at such a difficult time" (Kelly in Cohen & Etazady, 1983, p. 252). It has been estimated that 10% of divorced adults "are unable to work through feelings of anger and loss" and that this impacts their functioning in a number of ways, including being "unable to focus on their children's needs" (Lamb, et al., 1999, cited in Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, p. 101). With the transition of divorce, parents and children are cast into such distinct relationships to the change that is occurring, and given that divorcing parents might feel quite overwhelmed themselves with feelings of loss or adjustment demands, there can be a particularly dramatic reduction in mindful, attentive parenting as families transition from intact to divorced: "Because divorced parents are themselves often emotional wrecks, many children go 'unparented' in the first year after the separation. During this period, it is natural that divorcing parents are distracted, involved with their own problems, suffering their own pain" (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006, p. 138). Mentalization might 'slip' in even previously attuned, curious, and empathic parents. Parents have been observed to exhibit increased "self-centeredness and lack of awareness of the children's needs and vulnerability" following divorce (Burland

in Cohen & Etazady, 1983, p. 251) or to minimize the severity of their children's reactions to divorce (Hingst, 1981).

Nevertheless, children will look to their parents to make sense of events and will be significantly influenced by how their parents are coping and by the messages parents unwittingly send about what is happening. It has been observed that "in addition to various aspects of the effects of divorce on children, the parents' response to the divorce was a major facet of the child's experience" (Kelly in Cohen & Etazady, 1983, p. 251); another author notes "how significant a [parent's] conscious and unconscious interpretations of divorce are in the child's emerging mental representations of the family" (Cath summarized in Cohen & Etazady, 1983, p. 254).⁸ Wolfenstein (1966) has written, in reference to parental death, but relevant to our discussion here: "the different tempos of reaction to loss in children and their widowed parents, which put them out of phase with one another, are generally a cause of much mutual misunderstanding" (99). One case study (Linna in Grossman, 1990) introduced a patient who kept a journal of her children's reactions to her husband leaving the family, observing a range of emotional reactions with the notable exception of sadness; it was only after she began processing feelings of sadness in herself that she came to recognize sadness in her children. In a study examining children's reactions to President Kennedy's death, the authors found it necessary to sound a warning about the reliability of "the descriptions of children's bereavement reactions given by mourning adults," because they determined that "it was impossible to distinguish between adult misperceptions and confusions, the children's

⁸ One study (Rozendal & Wells, 1983) measured participants' attitudes to relevant stimulus words and found that respondents from the 'child of divorce' sample related less favorable attitudes to the concepts 'mother,' 'father,' and 'family' than did respondents from intact families.' It is plausible that these 'attitudes' might extend to the level of representation where such internalized concepts are not simply devalued by divorce, but deeply altered.

reaction to the tragedy, and the children's reactions to the changes in the adult" (Harrison et al., 1967, p. 596). Another case study depicted a single mother's attempts to help her son cope with the absence of his father and then the death of his maternal grandfather and highlighted how it was as the result of undergoing her own mourning process that she was able to support her son in his: "the fact that in her treatment the mother was helped with the mourning of the loss of her own father/husband, made an enormous difference in the son's ability to develop well" (Galenson in Cohen & Etazady, 1983, p. 257).

Joint Custody and Formulation of the Co-Parenting Relationship

In recent generations, the definition of family has become more flexible and adaptable, evolving from the rigid frame of a nuclear family ideal to a more loosely and less conventionally defined chosen family construct. As notions of marriage and commitment have evolved, families have become better prepared to accommodate divorce, remarriage, step and half relatives:

Before the 1960's, most households were composed of two parents, some children, and sometimes extended family members, but today's households may be quite different. The number of unmarried-couple households increased sevenfold between 1970 and 1994, and between 1990 and 2000, households composed of two or more unrelated people increased faster than family households (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006, p. 31).

Still, in many ways, post-divorce family culture appears too slow to evolve in terms of openness to family re-definition and new parenting partnership constructs and as a result, co-parenting has been sacrificed. Often, families of divorce – even with shared custody – dissolve into an autonomous two-family design that seems to suggest an

attitude of ‘nuclear family or nothing at all.’ Clarke-Stewart & Brentano (2006) have made the point that nowadays, “greater emphasis is now placed on mutual feelings of love and fulfillment than on obligation to marriage vows and children, and marriages are supposed to be based on romantic love and free choice, not duty and dynasty” (p. 310). This evolution has been beneficial in terms of the promotion of individual freedom, pursuit of happiness, and liberation from oppressive systems and has paved the way for other admirable causes, such as gay rights. Too great an emphasis on adult independence following divorce, however, ignores the still existing familial obligation of raising children – a very real and abiding issue of duty and dynasty. It is worth noting that in a post-divorce family parents’ needs and those of their children might sometimes be at odds, requiring parents to consciously shift their own needs to the background. For instance, divorced parents have shown to benefit from ‘adjustment groups’ in terms of their ability to transition from marriage, but parents’ participation in such group have been shown to have minimal effect on their children’s well-being (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006).

Anna Freud (1972) expressed concern that parents and courts often remain uninformed or neglect consideration of the psychological needs of children in terms of understanding or adjusting to custody assignment:

Decisions about a child’s custody or placement may proceed wholly on the basis of adult reasoning, regardless of what this means in terms of the child’s own emotional language... Following *divorce*... children are expected to concur peacefully with the Court’s decision, disregarding the fact that they are the prey of their own distorting and unsettling interpretations of the break-up... what is fair to the

adults, their standards and their interests... may be far from being in the best interests of the children concerned, or even the least detrimental alternative for them (*italics hers*, p. 624-625).

Nordhaus (1991) describes how extended custody negotiations can result in “an untenable and apparently paradoxical position;” (p. 386) whereby a child can feel “insignificant except as a pawn in her parents’ warfare but that as a pawn [with] exaggerated ‘power’” leaving her in “a position of simultaneous insignificance and inappropriate power in relationship to her parents” (p. 386). Often, a court’s emphasis on ‘fairness’ and equal sharing caters to parental needs even when shrouded in ‘the child’s best interest.’⁹ In one case illustration, Nordhaus described a situation in which a child, merely 6 years old, “was asked to decide what she wanted [in terms of visitation schedule]... an impossible request since she felt she must choose between two parents whom she loved” (p. 386). Such solicitation of a child’s preference might be cast as an attempt to move her interests to the foreground, but presents a profound loyalty dilemma. Mullis & Otwell (1998) have argued that the presumption that children’s best interests are most often served by granting joint custody seems unwarranted and propose:

in many cases, when both parents have an equal voice in the affairs of their children and disagree with one another, children may become confused, upset, and disoriented. Therefore, it is possible that sole custody is preferable to joint custody, primarily so that such confusion can be eliminated... Parents who use the child as a go-between or messenger, who provoke guilt in the child about the amount of time spent away from them, or who continually make derogatory statements about the other parent,

⁹ Significantly, representatives of the court might overlook their own recognition that some parents who vie for custody are not primarily mindful of children’s needs in the least: “More than twice as many attorneys reported that their male clients sought custody for reasons of revenge or financial leverage than out of genuine concern and affection. Similarly, judges reported that they felt approximately 25% of all fathers seeking custody were doing so as a bargaining tool or to gain revenge” (Felner, et al., 1985, pg. 32).

may not be the best ones to have sole or joint physical custody of a child (pp. 103-104).

Nordhaus (1991) has described the powerful and sometimes damaging role the courts can play when parents are unable to arrive at an agreement themselves and turn to the judicial system to determine the fate of the child. She has argued that “joint custody is contraindicated in these families, although judges who procrastinate or who concern themselves with fairness to the parents continue to award or force joint custody upon parents who cannot cooperate together” (p. 383).¹⁰ When parents act out abiding conflict through children, as is often the case in custody battles, children’s needs can shrink into the background, at times in dramatically damaging ways. When the ‘fairness’ of a custody schedule takes precedence over a divorcing couple’s ability to work together cooperatively, the courts are essentially regarding children as a commodity to be shared, since such emphasis on ‘fairness’ is more applicable to parceling real estate than to psychologically informed child-rearing. Thus, for the purposes of the present discussion of joint custody and formulation of a co-parental dyad post-divorce, the focus will be on custody arrangements where shared custody is arrived at with relatively minimal intervention, where there are not allegations of abuse by either of the parents, and where joint custody is not mandated by the courts.

Too primary a focus on establishing *equal time* between homes when designing a shared custody agreement overlooks the fact that children have social and relational needs that extend beyond the family and will have different relational needs at different

¹⁰ At another extreme, joint custody might be discouraged to a fault: “In French law, it is ruled out entirely as being against the best interest of children” (Juby, Le Bourdais, Marcil-Gratton, 2005, pg. 170).

developmental stages. Extra-familial activities and chumships, important for all children as they separate, individuate, and move out into the larger social world can become difficult to maintain in an alternating custody situation and can limit access for support and experiences of self-definition outside the home(s) at the very time they might need it most. Wallerstein (2005) observed “when custody and visiting plans are drawn up, the lack of consideration for the child’s interests, and preferences as to how she wishes to spend her time separate from her parents can be quite striking. The child’s time is divided between Mom and Dad as if the child herself has disappeared from the equation and become mere property” (p. 409). Elsewhere, Wallerstein and her colleagues have observed:

When visiting and custody plans are made, the child’s friendships and play activities are rarely considered by parents. The courts never acknowledge them. In the common scenario, parents are the major protagonists. Their schedules, wishes, and rights occupy center stage. In the hundreds of court evaluations and decisions that [Wallerstein has] read and in thousands conversations with parents, I’ve rarely heard a word about the importance of maintaining the child’s friendships and play activities (2000, p. 20).

Such neglect of children’s extra-familial identity and relational needs points to insufficient parental regard and represents an absurd misinterpretation of children’s needs. According to Wallerstein: “In the view of officialdom, the only thing of value in a child’s life is her time with each parent. It should be sobering to parents and others who allocate the child’s time to take the memories of these research subjects into account. Peer play looms much larger in their fond memories than afternoons spent with either Dad or Mom” (2000, pp. 20-21). Indeed, Wallerstein has emphasized how loss of the

intact family begets other losses that the child must now withstand, especially when parents' needs for 'equal' time with their children neglect consideration of children's needs for socialization outside the family system:

We found that although children in joint custody gained more contact with both parents, they suffered greater losses in peer activities and friendships than those in sole custody. As one boy put it, 'kids don't keep appointment books. They [his friends] forget that I am coming and I don't get invited to lots of stuff'... One sad little 7-year-old in joint custody explained to me, 'My coach said 'Son, you're a really good pitcher, but you have to be here if you want to pitch!' (2005, p. 409).

It appears, that the best interest of children might require that parents create a flexible and responsive, developmentally sensitive, joint –custody schedule, with willingness to periodically reevaluate what schedule is most advantageous for their children at a given time, and perhaps an abandonment of a, say, consistent week-to-week design. In regards to children's ever-changing needs, Anna Freud (1972) has written:

Children change constantly: from one state of growth to another; with regard to their understanding of events, their tolerance for frustration, their demands on motherly or fatherly care for stimulation, support, guidance, and restraint, or, according to the degree in which their personalities mature, for increasing freedom from control and for independence. Since, due to these changes, none of their needs remain stable, what serves their developmental interests on one level may be detrimental to progression on another (p. 623).

Children reared in joint custody are required to exist within a state of ongoing upheaval, with little rest for mourning and potentially organizing reflection to take place. In joint custody, children are not only burdened with mourning the original loss of the intact family, but must process the loss of regular contact with each parent, in an alternating custodial schedule, as they immerse themselves in successive contact, then separation from, each parent. Shuttling between two parental homes will also present ample opportunity to internalize ongoing parental conflict. While parents will often experience relief in separation, the children are not liberated from the problematic system, but occupy the space between both parents, on the border between two worlds. Given that ongoing conflict between former spouses might occur primarily in reference to negotiations about the children, the children might resemble a living battlefield where the continuing conflict unfolds as they simultaneously try to take up shared residence of the two warring states.

It is useful to employ the metaphors of bi-culturalism, immigration, and marginality to explore the issues of identity and questions of belonging that can occur for children occupying the ‘borderland’ of joint custody. The term ‘culture’ applied here is not meant to imply particular ethnic, racial, religious or class designation, but is employed more broadly, to describe a body of learned behaviors and belief systems common to a given social group.¹¹ Howard (1991) has defined ‘culture’ as “a community of individuals who see their world in a particular manner – who share particular interpretations as central to the meaning of their lives and action” (p. 190). Some children

¹¹ Significantly, it is very common for children to move between class brackets as they travel between homes, since women are traditionally worse off financially following divorce whereas men usually fare better (Bursik, 1991; Clarke-Stewart & Bailey, 1990; Weitzman, 1985).

in joint custody will indeed reside in ethnically or religiously different households from week to week, in addition to the broad 'bi-culturalism' spoken of here. However, if they have 'immigrated' from an intact household of diverse traditions this might feel relatively familiar. We are more concerned with the increasing variation between homes that will emerge post-divorce and the challenges and contradictions these present.

LaFromboise and colleagues (1993) have identified "various skills [they] believe are needed to successfully negotiate bicultural challenges and obstacles" and to achieve what they term "bicultural competence" (396). While LaFromboise and her colleagues are specifically focused on "ethnic group membership" (p. 396), many of their guidelines can be usefully applied to children of divorce, thrown into the bi-cultural waters of joint custody. They list several requirements that encompass what they term 'cultural competence':

[The culturally competent] individual would have to
a) possess a strong personal identity, b) have knowledge of and facility with the beliefs and values of the culture, c) display sensitivity to the affective processes of the culture, d) communicate clearly in the language of the given cultural group, e) perform socially sanctioned behavior, f) maintain active social relations within the cultural group, and g) negotiate the institutional structures of that culture (p. 396).

It is important to note that children might feel more competent in one household over the other, in different moments, but an overall sense of competency, a persistent competency, will be more difficult to achieve. Additionally, just as children become re-acclimated to a given home, it might be time to move, and readjust, again. Given that children's identities are still forming, they cannot draw on a fully-formed and

differentiated sense of self to withstand such cultural upheaval.¹² When children are (implicitly or explicitly) expected to take on different roles in each home, this further complicates their ability to achieve a sense of self-constancy. Additionally, parents' narcissistic attachment to their children might lead to certain aspects of a child receiving positive recognition or encouragement in one home versus the other, while aspects of the child that are reminders of the other parent might be ignored, vilified or suppressed.

Following divorce, children (in contradistinction to their parents) inherit the task of operating between parental differences, which are likely to become increasingly pronounced following the marital split, while children are attempting to maintain self-cohesion and necessary identifications.¹³ As parents differentiate and create new lives for themselves, a child might find themselves with two houses, neither which feel like home. The features of a mother's home and a father's home might not only be experienced as 'different' but as dramatically opposed. As parents emerge from the original family to redefine, to 'find themselves,' free of the constraints of the marital partnership, personality differences and personal preferences might become increasingly evident, requiring increasing adjustment on the part of their children. Clingempeel & Reppucci (1982) have identified "four dimensions" of similarity/dissimilarity of home environments that children might have to contend with in joint custody: "child-rearing and disciplinary practices," "daily routines," "characteristics of peers and potential peers

¹² In contrast, children who immigrate to a country of adoption typically embark upon this process with parents who are also immigrating and can help ease the transition for them, at least initially, as both parent and child draw upon the 'personal identity' of the grown parent.

¹³ The idea that parental differences will increase following divorce is a relatively straightforward notion, given that "fundamental differences between spouses lead to conflict and increase the divorce risk" in married couples (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006, pg. 42).

associated with each home environment,” and “the physical/economic characteristics of the two homes” (p. 113).

Akhtar (1999) has described that “drastic change in his external environment taxes the ego’s adaptive capacities. Changed societal dictates on acceptable behavior cause drive dysregulation... Regardless of the specific form it takes, the cultural change consequent upon immigration is bound to test ego resilience both from the outside and from the forces released within” (Akhtar, p. 79). As Akhtar considers the internal and external pressures present for the immigrant struggling to adapt, we might consider the internal ambivalence and propensity for splitting as the child of divorce struggles to maintain coherent representations in the midst of a family system in flux and simultaneously adjusts to ‘changed societal dictates’ – first from the intact family to a family defined by fragmentation, then to the different and at times contradictory expectations of social conduct from home to home. Akhtar has further observed that “confusion increases when culture, language, place, points of reference, memories, and experiences become mixed up and superimposed on one another (1999, pp. 87-88). Wallerstein has stressed the disrupting effects of the back-and-forth of shared custody when there is a lack of consistency and routine from home to home. “A child can’t go to bed at eight o’clock in one home and ten o’clock in the other, watch unlimited television in one and have severe restrictions in another, or for that matter sleep with a parent in one house and by herself in the other without serious consequences” (2000, p. 216). The everyday routines and structure, organizing and necessary, for children are difficult to establish when the most subtle and taken-for-granted aspects of daily living are exchanged week-to-week or month-to-month as one moves into a different room, in a

different house, with different people. In some cases, children will feel pressure to conform to respective parent's expectations while feeling repeatedly reminded of the need to manage the separation of two homes, as reflected in the experience of a teenage girl from Wallerstein's (2000) study:

As a young adolescent, Lisa took on the responsibility and role for keeping her two worlds separate. She tried with all her might to conform to the standards of each household... When she was fourteen, she explained: 'I have two different lives. Everybody is happier this way. They have different expectations. Mom let's me do more of what I want. She has few rules. She understands more. Dad expects a lot more, especially in schoolwork. He and my stepmother are into table manners and formal dinners (p. 276).

Children in joint custody will be expected to grapple with different socio-economic brackets, divergent politics, different modes of communicating, different foods, different clothes, and different kinds of neighbors. Nagera (1970) has written of the importance of consistent features in one's environment: "I believe that we tend to underestimate the tremendous importance of perceptual and environmental constancy for the human being and especially for the child. Familiar surroundings and objects, familiar possessions (room, bed, toys, etc.), familiar noises, are important for our well-being (p. 373). Such contradictions might create confusion on an ideological level as well, because "if children spend significant amounts of time in two different households, the children are likely to be exposed to different and perhaps conflicting values and demands (Maccoby, et al., 1990, 142). What is regarded as expectable behavior might change between homes leaving children with the task of having to accommodate a variety of expectations. Such a lack of consistency has implications for discipline, degree of calm in

the parent-child relationships but also upon super-ego development as the child comes to terms with an ever shifting sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong,’ ‘permitted’ and ‘prohibited.’ The differences in what is sanctioned or not sanctioned might be so dramatic that the child has to sit with complex contradictions beyond her maturity level.

Writing about the process of immigration in broad terms, Akhtar (1999) has stressed that the “coexistence of culture shock and mourning causes a serious shake-up of the individual’s identity” (p. 77). In addition to potential idealization of the ‘old world’ which has passed, and a devaluation of the ‘new world’ that is coming into being, children might also experience a shifting and transferring of idealization/devaluation between each parental home. The subsequent splits-upon-splits create a psychically disorganizing ground from which to grow. Even normative, expectable parent-child conflict, post-divorce, can be troubling at a deeply relational level when the child can no longer engage in the functional, permissible splitting that occurs in an intact scenario, wherein parents might be cast into good parent or bad parent roles with some degree of alternating regularity, systemically contained within the broad triangle. Given the sort of parental tug-of-war that can occur post-divorce, and in joint custody, parents might bemoan idealization of the original family, while simultaneously invest in emerging as the ‘good’ parent, over the ‘bad’ parent, and promote this problematic dynamic in their children. When a child receives communications that parental ‘sides’ are to be taken, it interferes with unconscious identificatory processes because the impulse to emulate, idealize, or identify with one parent will feel like a betrayal or a forsaking of the other.¹⁴ In such a scenario, not only will the child feel torn in the outer systemic environment, but

¹⁴ In my study the issue of taking parental ‘sides’ also contributed to splitting along sibling lines.

at the level of representation, will internalize a message of further fracturing of the dyad. A child's sense of belonging might feel contingent upon the degree to which they take care of a parent or take a given parent's side against the other.; one study (Donnelly & Finkelhor, 1992) even considered the amount of "support and affection" given to parents by children as a measure of the positive effects of a particular custody arrangement.

Residing between the mother-land/father-land cultures, taking up full-time residence in neither, can potentially lead to feelings of homelessness, isolation, and alienation. The most prominent feature of constancy these will experience might be the regularity of transition. This transitional space, as it were, becomes its own, unique third culture that the child comes to reside in on their own (and in some cases with sibling companions), between the respective cultures of his parents, and forming a distinct and isolated 'cultural third' experience. Since neither parent shares residence with the children in this 'third' territory, they can fail to recognize or fully appreciate their child's feelings of displacement, marginalization and lack of firm belonging. We can compare this to the experience of a bi-racial family wherein "neither the mother nor father of an interracial child is capable of empathic understanding or role model provision for a mixed-race person, as neither parent is mixed-race her or himself" (Miller & Miller, 1990, p. 177).

Of course, all people live in a world of multiple meanings and cultural contradictions requiring social and psychological agility and intact families, as in families of divorce, children might have to adapt to disparate styles of emotional reactivity and affective expression between parents. McGoldrick (1993) has written that "probably no one ever has such a complete sense of connection to a culture that there is no sense of

dysjunction ever, and for most of us finding out who we are culturally means putting together a unique internal combination of cultural identities” (pp. 333-334). In an intact home, these ‘cultural’ identities are still contained within an overall family system, no matter how conflictual, and children are not left to negotiate this variability alone but alongside their parents who must be sensitive to one another and find compromise to keep the family intact and functioning. In joint custody, however, children must adapt to an ever shifting arrangement as they navigate the two distinct ‘cultures’ of their parental homes and cannot rely on one collective and more constant narrative. Fowers & Richardson (1996) have offered the view that “every culture’s traditions have some vision of the good life at their core that provide touchstones of meaning and direction for living” (p. 617). The dilemma faced by children in joint custody is that the respective culture of each parental home might have different definitions of what is ‘good’ and might point them in very different directions. LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton (1993) have cited Goldberg (1941) and Green (1947) as insisting “people who live within two cultures do not inevitably suffer” and “that being a ‘marginal person’ is disconcerting only if the individual internalizes the conflict between the two cultures in which he or she is living” (p. 395).

In their review of the psychological impact of bi-culturalism (1993), LaFromboise and colleagues have discussed the challenges of isolated, and marginal, identity:

Park (1928) and Stonequist (1935) developed the argument that individuals who live at the juncture between two cultures and can lay a claim to belonging to both cultures, either by being of mixed racial heritage or born in one culture and raised in a second, should be considered marginal people. Park suggested that marginality leads to psychological conflict, a divided self, and disjointed person.

Stonequist contended that marginality has certain social and psychological properties... The psychological properties involve a state of what DuBois (1961) labeled double-consciousness or the simultaneous awareness of oneself as being a member and an alien of two or more cultures (p.395).

LaFromboise and her colleagues have offered what could be regarded as a 'strengths perspective' on 'marginal' or bi-cultural identity. They have explained that while the "complexity of [managing] dual reference points" often "generates ambiguity, identity confusion, and normlessness... the individual who is the product of this interaction [is] the 'cosmophile,' the independent and wiser person even though marginality is psychologically uncomfortable for the individual, it has long-term benefits for society (p. 395). Akhtar has echoed this optimistic take on marginality and cites increased capacities as a result of "a hyphenated identity" which can lead a person to "possess a greater than usual breadth of experience – a sense of relativity, knowledge, and, at times, wisdom" (p. 83).

In their research, Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan (1999) also found that coping with the adversities of post- divorce life can have a strengthening effect on children who are provided adequate support if they possess pre-existing personality features that promote positive coping: "the psychologically rich may get richer and the poor get poorer in dealing with the challenges of divorce" (p. 133). For children in joint custody, becoming sensitive to the distinct affective styles of two different homes might, eventually, lead to increased empathic capacities and an ability to function successfully in a variety of interpersonal contexts. Initially, however, they might find it harrowing, even

overwhelming, to learn how to anticipate, adopt, then join the particular affective climate of one home versus the other.

Clingempeel & Reppucci (1982) have argued that “in the long run social adaptation skills may be enhanced by navigating the dissimilarities of two homes” (p. 118) and also cite increased social agility that may result when “two parents living in different households are likely to develop independent friendships after a divorce - children in joint custody may be exposed to a greater diversity of interaction, activities, and settings, and competence in making friends and in adapting to new social situations” (p.118). Another researcher described a subject’s experience with the duality - both of bi-culturalism and with very different parents in different locales - and alluded to its strengthening effects, amidst challenges:

Living in England with his mother and regularly going back to Italy to spend the holidays with his father, he has grown up between the two countries, geographical distance emphasizing the personality differences between his parents:
 Carlo: “Let’s say that I have always seen my parents as two very separate things, two... two very different people, and maybe even two people that in any kind of situation would not have been able to live close to one another, so the fact of having known two such different people has in some way doubled my experience, because maybe two people who do live together do not get the chance to be that different.” The divorce has effectively ‘doubled’ Carlo’s experience, making him relate to his parents as ‘two very separate and different people’ with distinct individualities, literally inhabiting two different worlds. This double experience has allowed him to live between two different cultures, both of which have contributed, albeit separately, to the development of his identity (Bagnoli, 2003, p. 213).

Wallerstein (2000) has made the point that the movement between two distinct families in joint custody often makes children of divorce well-equipped in terms of business mediation and for their capacity to assume multiple perspectives, (but she cautions us that this ability does not translate easily in their romantic-emotional lives). According to Wallerstein, “having been forced to stand between their two worlds and to examine each carefully in their lifelong efforts to understand the events that changed their lives, they are often more independent in their thinking than children in intact homes” (p. 407). Lest we glorify their experience, however, Wallerstein added soberly that “children grow up more quickly in divorced and remarried families. They have to” (p. 407).

While a marriage is intact, one of the primary activities shared between spouses will be co-parenting, dual child-management and discussion. Prior to divorce, co-parenting might even act as a *protective factor for the marriage*, providing definition, unity and commonality in an otherwise strained system:

Today, husbands and wives potentially have about as many years together after the children leave home as before, and this places demands of a different sort on their relationship. A marriage has to be solid and satisfying enough to endure beyond the activities of bearing and raising children (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006, p. 31).

Given the significant binding effect that co-parenting provides marital partners, it is unfortunate that the shared activity of raising children appears to be often abandoned as a collective enterprise when it is no longer convenient or necessary to serve the survival of the marital partnership. In addition to the factors of adult individuation that contribute to the waning of parental resources in divorce and joint custody, there are also the shared parental resources, the ‘dyadic’ factors that are rarely retained, in shared custody. The

disruption of the parental dyadic object in divorce presents itself in startling contradistinction from the more expectable pulling away at play in adolescence, or even in the normative oedipal struggle, for example, when children first feel the hard edges of the triangle and parents become experienced as strikingly independent objects. In those cases of divorce when parents become functionally estranged and children are burdened with the task of traveling between homes that are characterized by dramatic autonomy, difference, or opposition, “loss of the couple as a container” (Scharff & Scharff, 1989, p. 115) will be quite dramatically felt.

Many of the shared efforts in child rearing will probably be missed by parents as well since “with the termination of the joint household, parents’ division of labor also ceases. This means that tasks previously tackled by two must be borne by one in each household” (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006, p. 59). “Sharing time and access to children [does not] imply sharing child-rearing tasks evenly or coordinating parenting efforts; even if parents share equal time with their children, they may be parenting independently rather than cooperating and communicating with each other about their children’s needs and child-care tasks” (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006, pp. 199-200).

In an intact home, a child might seek support from a more reliable parent when the other disappoints or is ill-equipped to meet a child’s needs. As Hetherington (1981) has written:

One parent can serve as a protective buffer between the other parent and child in a nuclear family. In a nuclear family a loving, competent or well adjusted parent can help counteract the effects of a rejecting, incompetent emotionally unstable parent (quoted in Clingempeel & Reppucci, 1982, p. 27).

In the post-divorce family, children can suffer the loss of this “protective buffering function” (Cohen & Etzady, 1983, p. 249) and the absence of a compensating, ‘buffering’ parent can leave a child with the responsibility ill-equipped, ill, or otherwise incompetent parent, exposing children to parental fragilities in an upsetting and lasting way. Often, loss of the other, ‘compensating’ parent can lead to a form of neglect, with pressure on children to mature more quickly, resulting in disruptions of the parent/child hierarchy. Loyalty strains common in ‘split’ custody, and born out of inadequate provision of cooperative co-parenting, might result in a child feeling they must keep ‘secrets’ about a troubled parent either to protect them from the other parent’s attack or disparagement, or because children receive the message that issues at mom’s house and issues at dad’s must be managed (by the child) as entirely discrete. When parents are embroiled in ongoing conflict and cannot tolerate holding loving aspects of the former spouse, (because that would interfere with efforts to ward off feelings of loss, or compromise angry inflation), they will not be able to appropriately accommodate the child’s need to hold loving aspects of both parents, together, as another protective factor.

Maccoby and colleagues (1990) have identified several co-parenting patterns, with differing degrees of conflict-versus-cooperation, which emerge following divorce. It is worthwhile to consider how these co-parenting patterns will manifest given tendencies toward post-marital conflict, conflict avoidance, and contact avoidance, and how more optimal co-parenting can be promoted via parental efforts toward ongoing cooperation.

One pattern, termed ‘conflicted,’ is characterized by little in the way of cooperative parenting and the present of pronounced, abiding parental discord: “they seldom talk to each other about the children’s welfare or schedules and do not attempt to

coordinate the children's environments in the two households... there is considerable conflict between the parents: they argue, and do not manage the children's transitions between households well" (p. 146). In this scenario, spousal conflict is kept alive beyond the marriage and there is pronounced difficulty focusing on the needs of children as a shared priority. Conflict might be acted out through the children and children's practical and emotional needs neglected as parents continue to find themselves embroiled in their own emotional drama. Indeed, parental conflict does not necessarily diminish following divorce (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Hanson, 1999) and may be one of the few recognizable remnants of the life prior. Despite the supposedly 'cooperative' design of joint custody, "sharing the residential custody of children after divorce does not systematically exacerbate conflict between the parents, nor does it systematically moderate such conflict" (Maccoby, et al., p. 153). Davies & Cummings (1994) have observed that "one of the most significant aspects of the family environment for children of divorce is the level of parental fighting...[and this] predicts behavior problems in children of divorce" (p. 387). These authors make the important point that "the prediction of child outcomes may be improved substantially by greater specification of how conflict is expressed within families" (p.388) which is important to note since parents of divorce will undoubtedly encounter conflict and need to find the best way to process and work through disagreements to minimize detrimental effects on their children.

The negative impact of ongoing parental conflict on children is unambiguous¹⁵. Post-marital conflict between parents has been found in a number of studies to contribute substantially to psychosocial problems in children (Emery, 1982; Emery, 1992;

¹⁵ Some studies have even suggested that if there is little conflict in an unhappy marriage, children fare better when parents stay together (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006).

Hetherington, 1981; Johnston, et al., 1989; Luepnitz, 1986; Lowery & Settle, 1985; Maccoby, et al., 1990; Madden-Derdich, et al., 1999; Wallerstein, 1980;) and this appears to hold true regardless of the custody arrangement (Bowman & Ahrons, 1985, Maccoby, et al., 1990). Often, more passive expressions of anger, as in disparagement of one parent by the other, are features of the post-divorce familial culture and while not overtly combative, will undermine effective and authentic co-parenting efforts. Such critical communications might not occur directly, however, and is often spoken or lived through the children. Disparagement of a co-parent will be injurious to children, and might communicate a desire for complicity, or an expectation of unfavorable regard of the disparaged parent in order to please the disparaging one. Conflict and/ or parental disparagement between divorced parents is easily internalized for children in terms of loyalty competitions, a phenomenon easily intensified by the alternation of contact in the joint custody arrangement. Even in the ‘best-case-scenario’ divorces “continuing tensions between ex-partners and stepparents are conveyed directly to children via countless nonverbal signals. A roll of the eyes, a shrug of the shoulders, an edge in the voice are enough to tell any child the truth – these adults are getting along on my behalf but they are pretending” (Wallerstein, et al. 2000, p. 277). Many of the positive effects derived from contact with both parents in joint custody are negatively offset when conflict between parents remains high (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1978) and some authors argue that while “divorce is the best solution if conflict is high in a marriage, this is true only if the parental conflict ends after divorce” (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006, p. 152).

A second pattern observed by Maccoby and colleagues is a ‘disengaged’ pattern, wherein parents will “seldom talk to their ‘ex,’ do not attempt any coordination in the

activities or rules of the two households, and manage the logistics of visitation with little conflict – often because they exchange the children at times and places where the parents will not have to come into contact with each other” (Maccoby, et al., p. 146). In their attempt to avoid opportunities for conflict parents might operate with little contact at all, creating independent homes with minimal interaction, void of important dialogue and negotiation, what two authors have dubbed ‘parallel parenting’ (Furstenberg and Nord, 1985). In this pattern, we can imagine that conflict is minimized at the cost of cooperation, consensus-building, and promotion of consistency between homes. While children (and ex-spouses) are protected from overt conflict in this parenting approach, it is reasonable to predict that parental disparagement will often persist under the guise of ‘civility,’ that children will become enlisted to maintain secrecy or autonomy between parents, and without a doubt, that children will be deprived the benefits of an ongoing parental dyadic relationship.

Clingempeel & Reppucci (1982), arguing from a strengths perspective, have suggested that the “multiple attachments” formed by children, with each parent, “to some extent, attenuates concerns about the deleterious effects of separations and reunions in joint custody” (p. 112) and seem to support a ‘civil’ or ‘disengaged’ approach to parenting. They have laid stress on the importance of individual relationships with each parent and have downplayed the importance of more broad family experience; they underemphasize the loyalty strains unique to the joint custody situation, and fail to consider the disruption of the shared-parental (dyadic) attachment that exists as distinct from the independent attachments formed with each parent. Clingempeel & Reppucci (1982) posit, that in terms of managing parental differences, children in joint custody

might have an advantage over children in intact families because in joint custody, differences “would be compartmentalized in accordance with the specific pattern of alternations” from home to home, and the children might be free of the less predictably shifting differences of a nuclear family where “interparental inconsistencies... manifest themselves on a day-to-day basis.” (pp. 113-114). Elsewhere they argue that the ongoing, alternating, relationship with each parent can provide benefits similar to an intact family, wherein one parent might step in to help soften conflict with the other parent: “regular shifts to the home of the parent with whom the child *currently* has a positive relationship may serve as emotional support at times when staying with the other parent is particularly stressful and nonrewarding” (p. 109). While it is plausible that a child might experience palpable relief in shifting homes at times, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that positive experiences with one parent are sufficiently internalized to negate the effects of a strained relationship with the other.

Though parents in joint custody might choose to maintain very limited, even business-like interaction, the children are expected to remain a solid member of each parent’s household. The expectation to transcend familial separation by remaining ‘intact’ and involved with each parent, in an alternating fashion, despite the conflicts and differences that abide for the family as a whole requires tremendous agility. In many cases, parents will not only have little sense of life at the other home, and minimal influence on the child’s life there, but will discourage any discussion of the other parent and the other home. The process of traveling between parental homes, now defined by separation, within a ‘civil’ or ‘disengaged’ pattern of relating can further exacerbate the sense of environmental and internal ‘splitting.’ Wallerstein (2000) has stressed:

Even parents who get along well after the breakup rarely share a strategy for raising their children, although they may come together around an emergency or scheduling. Like quality time, parallel parenting – a term coined by mediators to mean that two parents who raise a child separately are comparable to two parents who raise a child together – is a great slogan, but it can't replicate the cooperative parenting that children and parents need. In a good intact family, a constant parental dialogue revolves around the day's events and interactions within the family. Daily conversations and the pillow talk that follows literally shape the child's environment to fit her needs as she grows up and changes. Such parental dialogue, if it existed, is abruptly shut off by divorce (pp. 24-25).

The demands of maintaining sound relations with both parents in distinct home environments will present a significant challenge given the potential for loyalty strains, differing role expectations, and unique ways of communicating and relating between homes - not to mention residual feelings of hurt, anger, confusion and grief the child might experience. When divorced parents are unable to co-exist cooperatively on behalf of their children, instead functioning via 'disengagement,' the demands of maintaining active relationships with the two parents and families becomes more problematic. When occasions such as sports games, performances, or graduations require the presence of both parents (and possibly stepparents), the child might be overtly or covertly called upon to play diplomat, peacekeeper, or segregator for their parental charges, dividing their attention (as always), but even away from their event of the day. Some children might feel enlisted to help manage contact between parents and become keen negotiators and sensitive protectors of established parental distance by virtue of their position in the space between. As one teenage subject girl in Wallerstein's (2000) study, explained:

My parents still don't get along. My dad and stepmother really hate my mom. They would tell her how much they hate her except for me. I keep them apart. You see, my mom is pretty isolated. She would like a relationship with my dad and stepmother but there is nothing there for her. I don't want her to find out what they really think. So I keep it cool and I always, always watch what I say. And we manage (pp. 276-277).

From one point of view, 'parallel' or 'disengaged' co-parenting, characterized by conflict avoidance and an emphasis on 'civility' can seem useful, insofar as it minimizes opportunity for disdainful interactions deleterious to harmonious relational functioning and exposure to disparaging remarks that deny permission for positive identification with both parents. Research has demonstrated that when former spouses cannot establish peaceful interrelating post-divorce, children in shared custody are most prone to psychological disturbances (Johnston et al., 1989), "probably because frequent access allows more opportunity for conflict between the divorced parents" (Mullis & Otwell, 1998, p. 105). However, when divorced parents sharing custody of children function with an emphasis on autonomy, there will indeed be less direct conflict for the children to endure, but parents' capacity to assist children in coping with the emotional fallout of divorce and transition will be undermined by forced civility just as much as by ongoing, negative parental interaction. Again, more meaningful than the *presence* or *absence* of parental conflict, are the strategies parents employ to manage unresolved anger, disappointment, resisted yearning and whatever other artifacts of the former marriage.

The most promising pattern of co-parenting identified by Maccoby and colleagues is the "cooperative" variety, achieved when parents "attempt to isolate their interpersonal conflicts from the functions as parents. They discuss plans for the children or problems

encountered with them, attempt coordination between households, and back up each other's parenting" (p. 146).¹⁶ This approach requires parents to work together, and presumably, work through feelings of loss, resentment, or disappointment left over from their marriage, for the good of their children. In this 'cooperative' approach to parenting, children are provided an ongoing parental 'team' to call upon, to rely upon, and there is less threat of the loyalty struggles and 'split' reality that can occur when parents are actively at odds, or function through avoidance. It is this pattern that reflects the most successful transition from a shared identity as spouses, through mourning of the loss of the former relationship, to a shared identity as co-parents.¹⁷ It is worthwhile to note that in one study, (Lowery, 1985) it was observed that parents identified "responsibility, a warm relationship [between parent and child], available time and environmental continuity" as most significant factors in determining a custody arrangement, but "did not assign substantial importance [to] a parent's willingness to maintain a good relationship with the other parent" (p. 248). In order to create more positive outcomes for children of divorce, emphasis must be shifted from equity and autonomy in child-rearing post-

¹⁶ Maccoby and colleagues another co-parenting pattern, termed "mixed," that they describe as "puzzling" because while the parents do attempt to coordinate child-rearing and engage in dialogue about the children they engage in a pronounced degree of post-marital conflict (p. 46). In this scenario we can recognize admirable attempts made for cooperation, but difficulty emerging from traditional, problematic ways of interacting. These parents can be commended for remaining focused on their shared role as parents, and not employing the avoidant strategies of those practicing 'disengaged' parenting, but need to either work through feelings of ill-will about the failed marriage, and/or acquire skills for effective communication going forward. Otherwise, it is plausible that parents in this "mixed" pattern of interaction will finally retreat to a "disengaged" stance, with less overt conflict, but a neglect of parental coordination and promotion of dual-parental functioning.

¹⁷ We might consider that each of the co-parenting patterns discussed above resemble patterns of adult attachment with the 'disengaged' parents functioning through avoidance, similar to a dismissive style of attachment, the 'conflicted' parents exhibiting the emotional intensity of the 'preoccupied' attachment style, the 'mixed' pattern similar to the 'disorganized' category in infant attachment, with its difficult-to-assign features, and the 'cooperative' parents promoting qualities of secure attachment.

divorce to factors such as contact, cooperation, and flexible collaboration in custody design that will ensure the benefits of an enduring co-parental relationship.

Cooperative co-parenting might be likened to ‘laying concrete’ – establishing a foundation for a family to build upon, and children to develop upon; where something no longer stands, something else can be built. It is argued here that in order to prevent more fragmentation at the representational level, there must be a concerted effort to create something of an abiding, holistic familial relationship. Often, this will include the incorporation of new parental figures as well and while this new ‘blended’ constellation of co-parents and step-parents will not resemble perfectly the original dyadic cloistering, might offer up a version of intactness to be relied upon and re-internalized. The creation of a broad, redesigned family that supports positive cooperation between parents will also provide the crucial message to children that although their parents are no longer husband and wife, they are engaged in a lasting partnership, founded upon their shared identity of parents to their children. This new fashioned dyad and co-parenting entity can become a worthy substitute for the marital- parental dyad and when children are provided this substitute dyad, in the context of a refashioned and broadened family, supported by a viable co-parenting relationship, it can lead to a sort of “identity consolation” borrowing Akhtar’s (1995) term. He describes the “external manifestation of this psychostructural achievement” as “a ‘mixed’ guest list for a dinner at the immigrant’s home” (p. 83). We might consider, as a parallel, a child’s birthday party with both parents (and maybe step-parents) present – an opportunity for a new, yet still coherent, family system wherein the child can again draw upon the comfort of a sense of primacy, centrality, and unity.

CHAPTER THREE - METHODS

Introduction

This qualitative study was designed to investigate the retrospective experience of children raised in joint physical custody following divorce. This study aimed to identify prominent themes in the lives of children raised in joint custody and to identify and recommend parental strategies for the provision of attuned, responsive caretaking assistance and familial-structural design to best ease environmental transition. Insufficient attention has been paid to the retrospective experience of adults who were raised in joint custody to inform clinicians, parents, and lawmakers of the emotional challenges of traversing the territory of two homes over an extended period of time, and of the sort of emotional and environmental scaffolding that parents might provide to ease this transition. This study employed open-ended interviews with adult children of joint custody and their parents, to gain understanding, retrospectively, of the challenges, benefits, and features of transitioning regularly between two family homes.

One objective in interviewing both children and parents of divorce and joint custody was to explore the ways in which parents empathically appreciated their children's experience post-divorce and in joint custody, and the degree to which they provided practical and emotional support. Bowlby (1973), writing about his observations of parental mis-attunement to children's separation reactions, described that parents might at times:

exaggerate or minimize the intensity of her child's fear responses, or overlook or invent situations that

elicit fear in him. In such matters the possibility of wishful thinking or of attributing to her child fears that belong only to herself is obvious. Another difficulty is that inevitably a mother is often ignorant of what does and what does not make her child afraid” (p. 98).

I expected that as parents reflected on their children’s struggles and distressing emotional experiences during and following divorce, they might similarly tend toward defensive minimization, mis-attunement and projection, or denial of their children’s pain and suffering and this was largely borne out.

There were few differences, in terms of parental availability or parenting styles, observed in terms of gender of parent subjects and with the exception of a more avoidant emotional style amongst male child subjects compared to female child subjects in this small study, there was little distinction in terms of emergent themes or developmental/adjustment issues between males and females.

Sample and Population

Black’s Law Dictionary (8th Edition) defines joint custody as “both parents sharing responsibility and authority with respect to the children; it may involve joint ‘legal’ custody and joint ‘physical’ custody.” [In this project, ‘joint custody’ will reference joint ‘physical’ custody, specifically.] The incidence of joint-physical custody in the United States is difficult to determine. According to the National Center of State Courts (www.ncsconline.org), “custody statistics are difficult to come by because jurisdiction over domestic-relations cases varies widely from state to state, and even within a state. Moreover, outcomes of cases are not always recorded uniformly. Thus,

there is no national data on this topic.” As the majority of custody arrangements are determined without court involvement, it is even more difficult to acquire exact, or close to exact, statistics. Census data does not include a category for joint physical custody and counts children as residents of the home where they live the majority of the time; thus, if a child spends 55% of her time in her mother’s home, but 45% in her father’s home, she is counted as a full-time resident of her mother’s home. In the case of equally shared custody, 50% of the time in the mother’s home and 50% of the time in the father’s home, children are assigned arbitrarily, counted as living with the parent who had them on the day the census was taken (U.S. Census, *America’s Families and Living Arrangements 2004*, Current Population Survey, March 2005).

Joint physical custody emerged in the 1970’s and has risen steadily in popularity. Estimates suggest that there continues to be a gradual increase, from approximately one in seven divorced families in the early 1990’s. The National Center for Health Statistics found that courts awarded joint physical custody (defined as at least a 30/70 time arrangement) in 15.7 % of cases (Clarke, 1995).

The 14 subjects in the current study were recruited via word of mouth and intra-family relative referral; some family members were unwilling to participate in the study and the original plan to interview both divorced parents and at least one child in the family proved impossible. Ultimately, the 14 subjects in the study represented 7 families: One ‘triad,’ a mother, father, and their daughter; two father and son dyads; one father and daughter dyad; one mother and daughter dyad; one mother and son dyad; and one individual daughter. The majority of subjects were white, well educated, from middle-class to upper-middle class backgrounds, consistent with the typical profile of families

who establish a joint custodial arrangement following divorce (Donnelly & Finklehor, 1993; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Shrier, et al., 1991.)¹⁸ One child subject was adopted from Asia at 7-years-old and one parent subject emigrated from Europe in his adulthood; the remaining subjects were born in the United States. Subjects represented a broad sample in terms of region, i.e. rural/suburban/urban. The families interviewed represented a broad range in terms of generation; child subjects resided in joint custodial families during the 1970's, 1980's and/or the 1990's. All of the families represented in the study entered into joint custody voluntarily, meaning that the custody arrangement was not mandated by the courts.

¹⁸ The current sample was comprised of heterosexual parents, though some did enter into homosexual relationships following divorce. A few of the parent subjects had married twice, two had married more than twice, and several had never remarried.

Table 1: Subject demographics

Subjects	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Religion	Education	Region
Child Subjects: 7 total	Female - 4 Male - 3	20-25= 2 26-30=1 31-35=1 36-41=3	Asian=1 White=6	Agnostic=4 Jewish=1 Spiritual=2	Some College= 1 BA/BS= 3 MA/MFA= 2 PhD=1	Suburban = 3 Urban = 4
Parent Subjects: 7 total	Female - 3 Male - 4	55-60=2 61-65= 2 66-72=3	White=7	Agnostic=1 Agnostic/Eastern =1 Catholic/Spiritual =1 Jewish=1 Pagan=1 Pagan/Quaker= 1 Spiritual=1	MA/MS/MFA = 6 PhD=1	Rural=2 Suburban=4 Urban=1

Table 2: Child subject age at time of parental separation and at time of interview

Child subject	Age at parental separation	Age at interview
1	~10	41
2	11	37
3	3	26
4	3	20
5	6	25
6	11	41
7	9	32

Data Collection

Two qualitative semi-structured interviews were designed for the purposes of this research one designed for child subjects, the other for parent subjects. The Child Interview (see Appendix A) centered around themes of separation and reunion, blended family adjustment, sense of belonging/fittedness in respective homes, and parental conflict/civility/cooperation. The Parent Interview (see Appendix B) probed the same themes, while encouraging reflection on children's experience to assess parental empathy, awareness, and accuracy of attunement.

Interviews ranged from 1 ½ to 2 ½ hours duration. Interviews employed open-ended questions to allow for the emergence of unexpected, subject-driven themes. Each subject was interviewed individually, without any overlap between family member's interviews and there was no information shared regarding the content of others' responses. I assumed a non-judgmental, empathically inquiring stance during interviews and at times conversations felt quite clinical; given the intimate, emotionally evocative nature of material discussed, respondents were informed that therapeutic referrals would be provided if they felt in need of support or consultation following interviews.

A Standardized Open-Ended Interview format (Patton, 1990) was employed; each interviewee was asked a selection of pre-designed questions, but subjects were allowed space for self-directed elaboration and for interviewer-driven clarifying questions to expand upon the material and to pursue salient themes. In this way, I was flexible with the traditional standardized format to allow for the exploration of subject matter not anticipated when the interview was initially designed.

Interviewees were informed upon initial contact of matters pertaining to confidentiality. Each family member of a participant-triad or participant-dyad was given assurance that his or her material shared would remain confidential, and told explicitly that their perspectives and stories would not be repeated to their participating family members. Subjects were provided information pertaining to informed consent, consent forms were reviewed and signed (see Appendix C) then interviews were conducted in – person or via telephone, tape-recorded and transcribed. Each participant was assigned a code number distinguishing family group and individual membership: (e.g. ‘child,’ ‘mother,’ ‘father,’) linked to their names and their identifying information was kept in a locked file cabinet only accessible by this researcher.

Data Analysis

Interviews were coded using thematic coding centered around the initial hypotheses, then data analysis was broadened to include narrative driven coding of particularly salient or commonplace themes. The approach to data analysis was drawn from the tradition of Grounded Theory, by adopting a “procedure of constant comparison” that aimed to code the data according to its categorical properties while also maintaining an eye towards emergent theoretical notions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach toward “joint coding and analysis” (p. 107) required a perspective of multiplicity in which one piece of data, or a particular excerpt, was often “coded for several categories” (p. 108), toward a hierarchy of concepts, extending from mere illustrations to more overarching theory. Such analysis aimed toward ‘saturation’ of particular concepts (Hannon, et al., 2000); according to Hannon, saturation is considered

achieved when subjects repeat ideas and themes already provided from previous interviews while no new ideas are generated (Morse, 1994). In this research, narrative examples were revisited to provide more intimate consideration of common themes and the material was compiled into four sample case studies (see Appendices C–F) with rich narrative data excerpted at length, to closely examine themes as they were illustrated in the context of actual family and individual dynamics.

Methodology

In addition to the analysis of narrative data, I drew upon existing literature and established theory to analyze and assess material gathered; in addition to co-parenting and divorce literature, I considered theory that has not been traditionally applied to divorce and joint custody, but nevertheless offers important opportunities to broaden understanding of the effects of parental separation and joint custody experience. Additionally, I turned a psychoanalytic eye toward the data to consider manifest content with indicators of conflicting thoughts and feelings, the quality of affective expressions and signal anxiety, and considered coherence of the narrative data to assess degree of reflective ability, and resolution, disavowal, or preoccupation with problematic themes. While material relative to psychoanalytic inquiry can “seem inaccessible to traditional quantitative methods... qualitative methods, on the other hand, are said to provide vivid, dense, and fuller descriptions of phenomena” (Gelso, et al., 1999).

Still, I attempted to identify and bracket my expectations going into the interviews so that I would be better equipped to gather data with a heightened sensitivity to material that might seem surprising, counter-intuitive, but importantly elucidating in terms of the

phenomena being explored; this stance of openness allowed me to ask probing questions about spontaneously emergent ideas that had not been fully anticipated in my original hypotheses or addressed in the semi-structured interview. Patton (1990) stressed that:

The purpose of open-ended interviewing is not to put things in someone's mind (for example, the interviewer's preconceived categories for organizing the world) but to access the perspective of the person being interviewed... Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit (p. 278).

Thus, I set out to gain “knowledge from ‘inside’ ... to capture the worlds of people by describing their situations, thoughts, feelings, and actions and by relying on portraying the research participants’ lives and voices” (Charmez, 1995), but with acknowledgement of my own (owned) biases. These included a tendency toward psychoanalytic conceptualization, the importance of cooperative child-rearing post-divorce, and my trust in the relevance of a bi-cultural’ metaphor to account for a portion of children’s lived experience following divorce.

CHAPTER FOUR - RESULTS¹⁹

Hypothesis 1: Biculturalism, migration, and marginality

The first of my three hypotheses was that the experience of transitioning between homes in joint custody simulates a ‘bi-cultural’ experience, with broad distinctions between parental homes that require similar strategies for adaptation, assimilation and adjustment as that of an immigrant existing between her culture of origin and culture of adoption. Indeed, subjects described pronounced differences in terms of rules, expectations, schedules, ideologies, aesthetics, emotional expression, and overall lifestyles between homes; some subjects referenced living in ‘two different worlds’ and a few compared their experience to speaking two different languages. Strategies for managing these differences were difficult for ‘child’ subjects to identify, but most appeared to adopt strategies that resemble successive ‘acculturation,’ or the adoption of one culture (then the other) given a need for identification and unavailability of the other culture; this appeared to create the sort of ‘split’ custody existence that made fluid identification with both families problematic.

Most parents did not report many efforts at creating consistency in terms of child-rearing or parental lifestyle; some reported such frustration and fatigue that early efforts were ultimately abandoned. Primarily, parents described adopting a parallel parenting strategy, wherein there was autonomy between homes with little effort at compromise beyond custody scheduling and financial arrangements. Parents appeared mostly focused on trying to contribute what they thought useful for the child during their week, at times

¹⁹ The sample case studies in Appendices C-F can be regarded as a supplement to the Results section.

trying to supplement or correct what they imagined the child experienced in the other home.

Overall, issues of belonging and feeling ‘at home’ at both or either parental home emerged as more salient than difficulties adjusting to parental differences; though children did not report comfortable fluidity in the transition, or a sense of broad family comprised of both, children appeared to become acclimated to overt differences. Given this, the notion of ‘bi-cultural’ experience emerged most vividly in terms of a useful metaphor for the experience of occupying two homes and models of acculturation were less usefully applied than initially expected. One exception to this was the transition from the life before divorce to life after divorce; subjects invariably marked parental separation as the beginning of a new era in their own personal histories and the sense that life would forever be changed. The parallel of migrating from an ‘old world’ to a ‘new world’ emerged quite vividly in the interviews. Another feature that intersected quite seamlessly with theories of immigration and bi-culturalism was the distinction between ‘forced migration’ of children vs. ‘chosen migration’ of parents and some subjects’ experiences of ‘marginality’ in the culture of a parent’s new home and family; issues of marginality were felt most prominently in step-family scenarios.

Hypothesis 2: Post-divorce parental conflict

My second hypothesis was that pre-existing parental conflict would tend to continue after divorce in the joint custody environment, would often be acted out through the children or negotiations around their care, sometimes requiring children to mediate, referee, or deliver messages between parents and this would have negative effects on

children's well-being. Among the subjects interviewed, heightened conflict was actually rare due to parental efforts to minimize contact as much as possible, except for 'bare bones' communication, or because parents made strides to shelter children from arguments. A few parents reported making use of counseling or ongoing mediation when decisions could not be arrived at easily. What emerged quite strikingly in the interviews was the presence of more covert parental conflict, via disparaging remarks about the personhood of the other parent or their lifestyle, subtle and not subtle demands for child loyalty as if 'sides' were to be taken, and an absence of kindness, good will, interest in, or appreciation for the other parent. Abiding feelings of bitterness and disappointment about the marriage, or regret that the marriage had ever existed, were often communicated to children, exposing them to their parents' lasting, internal conflict about the ex-spouse and alerting them to parental discord or mutual dislike even when parental clashes were avoided.

While parental fighting was reported as relatively rare post-divorce, most child subjects described co-parenting relationships as strained, enforced, or civil at best. In this climate, little cooperative parenting occurred and children described feeling uncomfortable when parents had to interact, e.g. when children were transferred between parents, and combined familial gatherings such as sporting events, graduations, school plays and the like were described as decidedly awkward for children. Hence, while conflict was minimized via parental efforts to minimize contact, cooperation between parents was also minimal and a primary loss for children in this study was the experience of shared and mutual parenting, despite the parents sharing custody.

Hypothesis 3: Loss of Parental Availability

My third hypothesis was that as parents embarked on ‘new lives’ post-divorce, they might become so pre-occupied with their own concerns and immersed in their own experiences of re-definition that their children’s needs for support and management of grief reactions would be overshadowed. I expected to find that many parents would enter a period of ‘liberation’ that would be in such contrast to the ‘mourning’ of their children, that their capacity for empathic appreciation of their children’s experience would be compromised, and this was largely borne out. (Among those parents who did not identify as particularly liberated by the divorce, but had felt abandoned by their spouse there was a tendency for their own feelings of loss to take precedence over the child’s or to become ‘merged’ with their child’s sense of loss via over-identification).

I set out to assess the degree to which parents seemed to assume a reflective, mentalizing stance of their children by comparing discrepancies between child subjects’ retrospective accounts of their experience and how their parents imagined and imaginistically recalled their child’s experience. With a couple notable exceptions, this proved a very difficult task; quite often parents and children seemed to be talking about different families and different events entirely. Many parents exhibited difficulty reflecting long on their children’s experience, either steering attention back to their own inner processes and outer-world changes, post-divorce, or emphasized their children’s strengths and positive adjustment, minimizing any difficulties to a wishful degree.

The majority of child subjects described parents, or at least one parent, as seemingly unaware of what they were dealing with post-divorce, in terms of transitioning to the new life, in terms of transitioning between homes, or in terms of emotional discomfort. Many subjects described parents as observing that ‘something’ was wrong, but not inquiring, not understanding, or treating adjustment difficulties as disciplinary issues; some subjects did recall being sent to therapy. Some child subjects described shielding their parents from their feelings of loss, their lack of belonging, or discomfort with aspects of change because their parents were going through a lot themselves or, apparently, because they didn’t feel the space to express themselves or thought their needs would go unaddressed. Consistent with this, child subjects described accelerated maturity following divorce: ‘leaving childhood behind,’ feeling they were ‘no longer a kid’ and having to fend for themselves emotionally and in terms of practical self-care.

Analysis of Narratives

The parents in this study divorced and began raising children in joint custody in the 70’s and 80’s when joint custody was still new; there were few, if any, models for joint custodial co-parenting post divorce, leaving parents to rely on their best intentions. Many of these parents were making a conscious attempt to improve the problematic, non-egalitarian system of a single-parent custody system: full physical custody awarded to the mother, requiring only financial involvement from the father. Some were exercising their feminist beliefs that fathers are important in child-rearing and that women are more than full-time caregivers.

I had originally anticipated that the adjustment demands of traveling between two homes would resemble ‘bi-cultural’ experience as the ‘bi-familial’ child tried to adapt to

discrete parental/familial 'cultures' so I began with this as a primary area of focus. My initial focus on the difference between parental homes broadened, however, from an emphasis on lifestyle, aesthetics, and ideological differences between parents to place more emphasis on the interpersonal realm of communication style and emotional expression, features of structure vs. permissiveness and belonging vs. marginality, and the impact of opposition as a dramatic expression of difference. The issue of loyalty binds presented a child, both explicitly/environmentally and intrinsically/intrapsychically, when parents were unable to maintain something of a cohesive dyad via a cooperative co-parenting relationship emerged as more prominent than initially anticipated.

As my research progressed, I became increasingly impressed by the impact of the loss of the parental dyad as manifest in the loss of an overall (primary) sense of belonging, feeling held by both parents versus one then the other, as well as the loss of consistency that the intact dyad and intact household had previously provided. Related to this, I began to focus more attention on the importance of mourning, and the requirement of parental mourning to provide a supportive and facilitating environment for children's mourning to occur, as well as for the institution of a workable, co-parenting relationship. Initially, I was interested in the effects of parental conflict on children's well-being; the issue of parental conflict emerged as more indicative of the issue of failed parental mourning and related issues than problematic in its own right. The first hypothesis, that joint custody simulates a bi-cultural experience was sustained in part, the second hypothesis, that damaging parental conflict will very often persist following divorce, was not a strong feature in the families interviewed, and the third hypothesis, that empathy

and availability can become compromised for divorced parents was borne out. Overall, the need for child centrality in the post-divorce family and increased focus on the child's subjectivity by parents, remained a primary construct.

Parents in the study described awareness, and feelings of regret, of the harm that divorce and bi-residential life might have had on their children - even when they weren't quite sure how their children might have been harmed, or how they might have done things differently to reduce harm. Many of the parents showed moments of exquisite sensitivity to their child's experience, with large pockets of deficiency and misattunement elsewhere. Parents expressed their intentions to provide their children an ongoing relationship with both parents and an ongoing sense of belonging in their lives, but on this second point they often missed the mark.

There was overwhelming sentiment, among the parents and adult children interviewed, that joint custody was the best parenting solution following divorce, since it provided children the opportunity to maintain relationships with both parents. Many of the parents in the study voiced their optimistic belief that opting for joint custody communicated a direct and lasting message to children of their worth to both parents, and that the equal-time design of this arrangement provided children an inherent sense of belonging to both parents. Sadly, this was not borne out. Many child subjects described having felt marginalized in one, or both, parental homes, and this was compounded by the absence of active positive regard between parents – some voiced their sense that their parents might have harbored regret about ever having had children from such a 'regrettable' union, and others described feeling like living reminders of the failed marriage.

When child subjects felt unwelcome, or very conditionally welcomed, in a parent's new home this lessened their desire to be there and undermined their sense of significance in the parent's life. One subject recalled that early into the separation "*I would call my dad a lot, and then I started realizing, like, oh, he kind of wants his time to himself.*" When children witnessed their parents struggling emotionally or financially post-divorce, they were especially susceptible to feeling that their presence was an additional burden on over-taxed parents. One subject felt decidedly unwelcome in her mother's new home and this rejection led to mutual distance and a naive suspicion that she might have contributed to the divorce: "*When I left my mom's, like I felt like as much as I was relieved, she was kind of relieved too, to just kind of, have her time alone. So, I always thought that that's, you know, that that could be a reason why she left [the marriage].*"

Parents maintained their place of prominence in the lives of their children following divorce, but children's sense of importance to parents, and the sense of belonging to a broad and collective system of important others appeared to become shaken. Some child subjects described sensing that their reappearance from one week to another was an inconvenience to one or both parents, an interruption of the life parents' established in their absence, and felt that parents were glad to be rid of them when they were away. As children were uprooted from an intact home and their seat of taken-for-granted centrality within a complex, but clearly defined, set of interacting relationships, their sense of primacy within a family was lessened. One subject recalled: "*I think in some ways, I almost never really felt totally at home in either place. And that was hard, but, I mean, at a lot of times I felt, and I said this before, but I felt like both my parents,*

their lives would have been easier had I not been there, you know, that they definitely gave me that impression.” This sort of loss of one’s sense of worth and belonging, of broad family identity, was not a response to anything spoken aloud, but appeared the result of loyalty competitions between parents, a shift in parents’ primary focus from children’s needs to their own needs, and poor integration of new significant others.

Many of the child subjects in this study demarcated their childhoods in terms of life before and life after separation/divorce. Child subjects often described some knowledge, around the time of parental divorce, of marital tension or occasional outright conflict, but had felt unaware that separation was imminent. A few of the child subjects recalled being introduced to the term ‘separation,’ but had lacked any real clarity about the implication, or permanence, of the term. In some instances, parents apparently felt too guilty, or were enlisting too much denial, to provide an adequate explanation of the separation, and instead became evasive. One subject described his disorientation and protest when told simply that his mom would be leaving for ‘a while:’ *“The idea was conveyed ‘Mom is moving out, um, for a while.’ ‘What do you mean for a while,’ you know? ‘Like a while, you know, and then maybe she’ll move back in.’ And I’m like, I just thought ‘this is weird!’ Like, I’ve never heard of this, what are you talking about?’ Mom’s moving out for a while and moving back in, I never heard of this happening, it hasn’t happened to my friend or my cousin, or someone’s moving out, like what?!’ And I just did not understand, but I believed him, you know. I was like, ‘ok well he said she’s gonna move back in, you know. So that means she’s gonna move back in.’”*

In some cases, children were not given much explanation or were too young to fully gather what ‘separation’ meant. One subject recalled sitting on the stairs as a toddler

and, unbeknownst to her mother, watching her cry at the kitchen table for over an hour. She described thinking to herself, ‘this was the way life would be now.’ Another subject recalled seeing her father weeping and being ‘dragged away’ by her mother and not understanding, why, if he was sad, were they leaving him all alone? One parent described the pain and helplessness he felt when his son expressed feelings of responsibility for the parental split: *“My younger son, a little toddler, really felt that he had caused the divorce, this magical thinking of ‘I make things happen.’ So, that was very heart-breaking to me of course. Trying to help him understand, ‘no, this was something beyond your agency.’”*

Many of the child subjects recalled a sense of distance between parents prior to separation, but little overt conflict - or conflict only toward the end of the marriage/ during the separation stage – which complicated their ability to understand what was happening. In many cases, marriages had been characterized more by strained silence and awkward closeness between parents than expressed aggression and arguments: *“I just remember there was a lot of tension between them. But I wasn’t really aware of overt fighting, ever... just a lot of coldness and tension... there’s no talking, the opposite, not like fighting.”*

In other cases, children seemed more aware than they or their parents might have realized and details they couldn’t make sense of at the time, were re-experienced later: *“I did not have a story [for why they separated]. It was always kind of a mystery, but I had kind of glazed over the fact that it was a mystery... it was more of an unstory. It was like I didn’t know there should be a story. You know, as far as I knew consciously there was no story. When I heard the tale about how and why they split up, and it had to do with my*

mother having an affair, my first thought out of my head was 'I knew it!' [loud, single clap of the hand] and I was like 'what? I knew what?' What am I talking about? What, how did that, what was that, what about that do I know?' You know, I knew my mom had done something horrible, and wrong, you know? How did I know that?"

What is lost in divorce

The losses suffered by children in divorce and joint custody appear numerous and complex. These include the loss of life as previously known with associated 'old-world/new-world' stressors, loss of traditional roles and hierarchy within the family, loss of parental resources and gratification of dependency needs, loss of consistency in terms of rules and routine, and loss of belonging. This next excerpt references the loss of whole-family identity: *"Many times, I envied my friends. A lot of my friends, I maybe had one friend whose parents were divorced, but everyone else [from my neighborhood], they're all still married to this day... I was jealous, I was jealous of having everyone together comfortably at one place, you know, and they were still a family."*

In some cases, existing childhood difficulties, normative developmental struggles and unique stressors seemed to become exacerbated by parental separation, essentially placing vulnerability upon vulnerability, while the pre-existing seat of support, the intact family and intact parental dyad, became characterized by fragility and fracture. The following subject reflected on the transitions that characterized his early life and having to manage loss upon loss: reared in an orphanage overseas, just settled into a new adoptive family, then confronted with parental separation and dual residence.

"[I was adopted] and then less than a year... my parents divorced... And it was very traumatic for me, in the fact that, here I am, again, I was raised in the orphanage,

first taken away from my birth mother who couldn't raise me, then put in an environment where I didn't know all these people, and then I started getting used to all these sisters [nuns in the orphanage] that rotate every three years. So, when someone became like a mother figure to me... that person would disappear. The cycle keeps repeating until finally I'm taken to America, and I'm starting getting adjusted to these two individuals, two adults who are starting to feel like family... to an environment where parents are divorcing, yelling at each other, blaming each other... It was a very difficult transition for me, like I can't relax, and just finally, be happy."

A primary loss for children in the study was the loss of opportunity to draw upon a cohesive, source-of-origin [by birth or adoption] parental dyad that comes to be represented - by adults and children alike - as the marital partnership. When parents abandoned their co-parenting relationship as they abandoned their marriage, children experienced a fundamental disruption of the parental-dyadic representation and this loss became conflated with the end of parental marriage. The loss of the parental dyad, providing a basic sense of origin and contributing to issues of worth and belonging, was experienced as the loss of combined, compensating resources (in the absence of cooperative co-parenting). The loss of the dyadic object, or dyadic experience, wasn't named as such, but emerged indirectly in subjects' narratives: expressed, retrospectively, in the initial painful shock and epiphany of parental separation, referenced in personal-familial 'creation myths' and glorification of their 'original' family or evidenced in the sorry contrast of co-parental contact following divorce. In fantasy, and often in their lived experience, children felt that the parenting dyad was lost in the wreckage of the marriage

and could not exist without it; thus, their loss became attributed to the loss of the marital partnership and became expressed in kind.

One advantage of gathering perspectives of both parents and children of divorce was that discrepancies in consistency of their accounts not only pointed to deficits in parental empathy and highlighted the different perspectives of parents and children in regards to the divorce, but also shed light on the presence of wishful fantasies or defensive denial in reflecting on events. For instance, when asked about family life prior to separation, children made initial references to togetherness and intactness whereas parents often emphasized marital discord and the inevitability of the split. Probably, family life before divorce was some combination of unity and discord. That children emphasize calm and togetherness demonstrates the importance of retaining an internal notion of intactness as an early life stabilizing factor, bolstered at times with idealization of life prior to the break, and of a period of contented ignorance of the problems that became impossible to ignore when people were moving out, changing lives, re-defining themselves. The presence of parental denial of what was lost for children in the end of parental marriage created an inherent problem in terms of support provision. For many parents, divorce was experienced as a sort of re-birth or as a termination of something long ailing and put out of misery. It can be difficult for parents in grateful flight to fully appreciate that for their children, divorce is experienced like an actual and sudden death and that mourning will be required for successful moving-on.

Children's longings for a reinstatement of the co-parental entity were sometimes displaced onto fantasies of parental reunion²⁰, and more often in terms of disparagement

²⁰ Conscious fantasies of parental reconciliation don't appear nearly as prominent as might be imagined in popular thought, at least according to the small sample interviewed here. Subjects were often quick to say

of new parental unions, which made it difficult for parents to validate. Indeed, in some moments, child subjects seemed to need to preserve idealized tales about their parents' coming together and conjured comforting reviews of this long after the show had ended and everyone had left the building. One subject described at great length the romance and serendipity of his parents' first meeting, deviating from an otherwise cynical and sarcastic narrative. Another subject described hindsight recognition that her mother had felt ambivalent about her father, but wistfully recalled what had been told to her as a small child: *"Back then, it was kind of like the fairy tale. They worked together, and fell in love and got married and had kids."*

One subject marveled at his realization, during the interview, of how short-lived his parents' relationship had been, compared to his father's marriage to his step-mother - since in terms of significance, his parents' marriage was much more lasting: *"My dad and step-mom have been married longer than [his parents]. In my mind that's a much smaller unit of time than the time that my parents were married... my mom and dad, that's the main marriage, you know."*

The implication of a dyad previously joined, now operating in near full autonomy, can create for the child of this dyad a sense of 'falling through the cracks.' The absence of collaborative parenting in joint custody marked a deepening of the loss of the parental dyadic object following divorce, and was also experienced as a loss of mutually mindful parenting and the opportunity to be mentalized by the two, together. Parents also felt the loss of co-parental cooperation and togetherness, though it wasn't typically glorified in hindsight as it sometimes was for children. In particular, parent subjects described feeling

that they 'could not even picture' their parents together as a couple and seemed at times unnerved or apathetic to a notion of their parents together in the remote past.

overwhelmed with single-parenthood demands and a less firm parental identity when parenting only part-time. Some parents expressed sadness about having had minimal outer-week contact with their children; an absence of contact between children and parents on ‘off-weeks’ not only undermined a child’s sense of belonging, but also compromised a parent’s sense of ongoing influence and importance in their child’s life: *“It was all on me or, either I had her and I had her 100% of the time, or I didn’t have her. It was either everything or nothing. There wasn’t any more shared.”* Rarely did subjects describe instances of dyadic togetherness in the post-divorce era; as one subject explained, *“my parents didn’t really see each other, except for dropping me off and picking me up.”* Since post-divorce parental contact and broad family gathering was never normalized, when parents did have occasions to speak or to occupy the same space, (e.g. attending a child’s performance or graduation), the experience was a ‘strange’ one for children. They described distracting concern about who would sit where, how to attend to both sets of family members, and how not to neglect one parent or the other. One subject reflected on the anxiety aroused in her when convention required that parental paths cross and learning over time that this was best avoided: *“I think my sister and I avoided a lot of things, just to keep them apart... [we] didn’t want it to feel awkward. My high school graduation was weird because I knew my mom’s family was over there, and I knew my dad’s family was over there... I felt like it was better than them sitting together, you know. I didn’t want any conflict.”*

Expansion of the family

The redefinition of the family constellation that followed the parental split assumed another defining quality of their childhoods. As families were again transformed through parental remarriage and the arrival of ‘step’ or ‘half’ siblings, children and parents were called upon to adapt to additional changes in the ‘culture’ of their family life. For children, blended family issues interacted significantly with issues related to their dual residence and ‘bi-familial’ identity and the integration of new family members often heightened previously existing loyalty strains, questions of belonging, and introduced new challenges in terms of (already) lessened parental resources.

Children’s sense of importance, centrality, and belonging often became compromised when new significant others and new offspring entered the family orbit. Parental remarriage confronted children with the challenge of having to manage their parent-child relationships within an increasingly broad, complex cast of characters and lack of acceptance or warm regard from a step-parent figure compromised feelings of closeness with the parent figure. Typically, the integration of new family members (step-parents, step-siblings, half-siblings) resulted in less, not more, sense of familial resources or membership to a broad family system. Child subjects described feeling very alone, yet surrounded by many others, and depictions of marginality and fragmentation were far more prominent than accounts of belonging and togetherness, especially in large families comprised of multiple parental and sibling figures. Child subjects sometimes described feeling that their needs and wishes were made secondary as parents made room for a new partner – especially when the child recalled feeling ambivalently received or uncomfortable with that partner. Many children described a lukewarm reception in new

parental home(s) and some described feeling there was outright disdain and hostility directed their way; quite common was the experience of just not quite fitting into the new surround. Often, 'blended' families were described as comprised of fragile connections with distant or ambivalent regard between new family members. Child subjects described the experience of feeling like 'visitors' in respective parental homes, and the alienation of residing as both offspring and guest in awkward, simultaneous fashion - identified as their parent's child, but not their step-parent's child.

There was some recognition by parents in the study that their children experienced marginalization, or felt unwelcome, in their 'new' home and this was considered with sadness and regret, but there was little speculation on what could have been done to rectify this. Some described attempts to minimize negative reactions to 'family blending' by lightening expectations for bonding between children and new partners, which might have unwittingly contributed to a climate of 'visitation' and lack of belonging: *"My daughter accepted him, and just knew he was my husband, and I think... he wasn't considered her step-father, his daughter wasn't considered my step-daughter; it was just his children and my daughter. That's all there was."*

In an admirable example of child-centered regard, another parent described that when he became open to meeting a new partner, he located his children's needs as important as his own and recalled that when he had begun dating again, he had 'passed over' a couple potential girlfriends because he thought they might not take to his kids. When he finally invited a new adult into his family, he took care to be sure that she would be a significant parent figure and parenting participant as well as a worthy mate: *"I wanted [in a new spouse] someone who would be a true and honorable lover, friend and*

ally for me, but I also wanted someone who would be a good mother to [my] children.”

According to his account, good step-parenting seemed to dramatically enhance his children’s sense of belonging within the family, not just lessen the risk of marginalization, while his new spouse modeled sound child-rearing and contributed to his ongoing development as a parent. While some child subjects described conflictual relationships with step-parents, and many described benign, but distant, relatedness, this subject’s son described his step-mother as taking an active and loving role in his parenting from the get go. He recalled feeling that his step-mother was entirely invested in him; she became a structuring, loving, regulating presence in his life and made it clear that she was not only forming a family with his father, but with him as well. He marked the arrival of his step-mother onto the family scene as unambiguously positive for him: *“He met [my step-mother] ... that’s when I felt like my life started becoming stable... [She] was my foundation.”*²¹

In some of the families, half-sibling relationships appeared to enhance children’s sense of family identity - some subjects were given their first opportunity to be siblings, or older siblings, and took to this despite other relational strains that existed. It appears that for some children, the genetic/familial link to a new half-sibling and the new opportunity for bonding, can increase their sense of belonging in the household, but this can fade with competing forces of marginalization that emerge over time. In particular, child subjects distinguished what they observed, or imagined, their half-siblings' were

²¹ This very positive step-family scenario depicts a child subject who had been adopted by his parents just a couple years prior to their divorce and a few years prior to his step-mother entering his life. He might have been more open to a new attachment figure, given that he had already, and recently, been in the process of forming novel attachments, (compared with a child poised to encounter a new caregiver as threatening the established representational dyad). It might also be worth considering that his step-mother felt less threatened as well: more open to and facilitative of a bond with this child given that he had been adopted, and adopted recently, so was not quite as much his ‘mother’s son.’

given, compared to what they were given. While this was often described by subjects in material terms, the implication of inequities in a child's worth to parents emerged loudly. At a less manifest level, children referenced the loss of a taken-for-granted sense of belonging to both adults in one household and disparities in treatment or perceived preference between half/step siblings contributed to a decline in sense of importance and a loss of centrality. One subject described that a major feature of not feeling 'at home' – not fully a citizen - in his father's house (despite living there 50% of the time) were the disparities in how he and his sibling compared with their step-siblings were treated, in terms of space set aside for them: “[We] slept in their study, which eventually they kind of turned into a room for us, because we complained. I mean, we wanted to have a real room... [Our step-siblings] had their own room. We had different rules because we were visiting.”

I had wondered whether sibling relationships would offer a factor of consistency during the migrations of joint-custody and the comforting presence of a 'fellow traveler' following parental divorce. Throughout the interviews, it became clear that the fracturing of family extended to sibling networks, as they often assumed 'sides' in parental tug-of-war. In some cases, when one sibling had a particularly close or enmeshed relationship with a parent, the other sibling moved toward the other parent, as if by default. In one example of splitting along parental lines, the relationship between siblings had been traditionally close, but became more and more defined by the loyalty splits that found one sister more explicitly aligned with her father, (even though she found only ambivalent acceptance there), and her sister firmly aligned with her mother, leaving them essentially at odds, and acting out the ongoing parental opposition. Competition for limited parental

availability and meager parental resources further contributed to rivalry between siblings, reinforced loyalty binds, and led to a lack of closeness that marked another significant loss of divorce.

Disruptions of the parent-child hierarchy

Joint custody provided children a particularly good vantage point to observe both parents' adjustment to life after divorce; many children were exposed to parental fragilities that had been more or less compensated for when the other parent was present. Even in those families where parents were relatively (and traditionally) stable, subjects described startling confrontation with parents' problematic loss reactions, isolation, depression, or dramatic displays of sadness and anger. Other subjects described the realization that their parents were not as strong as they had previously assumed, and witnessed their parents 'losing it.'

In those situations where one parent was characteristically more fragile, had a more dramatic response to the marriage ending, or struggled with the demands of single parenthood, lack of ongoing participation from the other parent meant the loss of a 'protective buffer' from such fragilities and led to increased disruptions of the parent/child hierarchy (e.g. providing emotional support to a parent or organizing the parent around daily structure and running a household). Especially when one parent had been traditionally 'propped up' by the other parent, the compensating effect of dual parenting was a significant loss. One child subject described how confrontation with such vulnerabilities shook her confidence in her mother's capacity to provide supportive and containing parenting, and also created pressure to organize her mother in the way her

father traditionally had: “[At my father’s house] it was so clear who was in charge, I just didn’t have to worry about being in charge at all. At my mom’s I was much more... there was probably a lot of group planning around a lot of things, and stress, like probably about shopping, and making sure it all happened, and that anxiety was in the air... To some extent, [my father] had always served as kind of a healthy balance to my mother, kind of a sane alternative to some of the dynamics with my mother.”

Following divorce, as parents struggled with the increased responsibilities of a single parent household, were busy taking care of themselves, (or taking on more than they could manage), their children experienced less parental resources from each individual parent, in addition to the previously suffered loss of the combined parental resources of a two-parent home. As divorced parents embarked on new lives, increasingly defined by individuation and the primacy of adult needs, children experienced an increasing sense of marginality, existing suddenly on the periphery of parental lives. Child subjects described the discomfort of encountering their parents as seeming less competent or less invested as parents following divorce. One subject recalled that his parents seemed to have been ‘winging it,’ in terms of blending families, another speculated that her parents had little sense of how to ‘do’ joint custody. Sometimes, parental fragilities manifested in ‘flight’ reactions, such as remarrying or re-partnering quite soon after divorce because it seemed they ‘need to be married,’ or setting out to ‘find themselves’ in clumsy fashion – either way, resources traditionally spent on their children were now transferred to new significant relationships or toward the self. Children were often left to mobilize their parents to take action and rise to the occasion of

parenthood when their *one world of two parents* shifted to *two worlds of single parents* with less time and energy available.

It is important to recognize the complexity involved in a child's motivation to provide care for a parent and how, when a child moves into a care-taking role with a parent, there is an unconscious attempt on the part of the child to bolster the parent enough that they will not just 'feel better' but become a 'better' parent, sufficiently mobilized to take care of the child. In this way, children can be understood as attending to both the parent's needs and their own self-care needs. Additionally, in the current context, children often stepped in where the other parent had stood, taking care of that parent as well, in terms of providing back-up in their absence. One subject recalled his frustration at his mother's seeming inability to attend to basic needs such as cooking, a chore that had traditionally been done by his father; his frustrations of having to mobilize his mother were combined with his desire to be cared for and 'fed' in traditional ways. Another subject referenced his modest, childlike attempts to make his mother's home livable and his frustration that she would allow things to fall apart again during his time away: *"There were times when I went to my mom's, and I think, cleaned the counter, and the sink, and it was spotless, but then when I did, you know, two weeks later I'd come back and it looked like you didn't do anything."*

For some children, their way of life changed after separation, in terms of 'safety and light-heartedness' beforehand contrasted with pronounced anxiety and/or increased maturity afterwards. Increased practical independence, combined with increased awareness of parental fallibilities/needs, accounted for a significant portion of the adjustment demands facing child subjects following divorce and signified a loss of

normative dependency on parents. One subject described his increased self-reliance as a lonely endeavor: *“I would wake up by myself, have cereal... I didn’t really have that repertoire of really getting to know who my dad was, because he wanted to work really hard and save enough money to get back out and have a new life for himself. And, I commend him for that, but at the same time, it felt like it sacrificed me getting to know my dad.”* One subject recalled with a laugh how he would misinform his father of his arrival by train, quoting an earlier time to ensure that his father would arrive first and not leave him at the station, waiting unattended.

Oftentimes, children were called upon to assume an emotionally caretaking, empathic stance with their parents, reversing the traditional direction of concern and consideration, marking another type of parent/child hierarchy disruption. Many of the child subjects described becoming more attuned - in some cases hyper-attuned - to their parents’ needs and emotional lives and, additionally, having to assume more care-taking duties for themselves, their siblings, and/or their parents post-divorce. The privilege of just ‘being a kid,’ prior to divorce was often replaced by expectations to be ‘on one’s own’ or to assume roles that disrupted the traditional parent-child hierarchy. *“I changed... around seven, eight, and nine, I definitely remember having... being more aware of, like my parents’ feelings... Before that, I was just, you know, whatever, I’m a kid. But, I feel like, once [the separation] happened, I grew up...”*

While child subjects described more heightened attunement to their parents’ struggles, both practically and emotionally, they simultaneously experienced their parents as less attuned and less available to them. Focused on establishing new lives, emotionally reeling from the loss of the marriage, or embroiled in lasting conflict with their ex-

spouse, parents were less mindful of children's struggles and less prepared to help them make sense of familial transformation and joint custodial transition. Toward the end of one interview, a child subject remarked that she appreciated having somebody 'finally ask' what life had been like for her as she traveled between homes and struggled to manage post-divorce life. Another subject stressed that were she ever to raise a child in joint custody, she would strive to provide validation, inquiry, and the space to process feelings: *"I just think it's really important, mostly important for children to be able to have a voice, you know, for the parents to acknowledge that it's going to be hard for them and to give them time, like 'how is it going for you? Like what are you thinking...?'"*

Many child subjects experienced a certain decline in concern, interest, or empathic regard from parents and described them as largely unavailable to assist with understanding and coping with the adjustment demands of divorce and joint custody—representing a significant loss of parental empathy and support. While such misunderstanding can be attributed, in part, to the lack of information/education parents were provided to assist with the expectable struggles, it is more likely related to the primary shift from focus on a child's experience to a parent's own experience. This is mostly related to parents managing their own transitions and adjustment needs, but also to the loss of a *combined* parental focus on children and establishment of an ongoing, co-parental dyad that unites in shared interest of shared children. One subject described her parents' misapprehension of her negative reactions to the separation: *"After my parents separated, I had a lot of kind of symptoms of, like, distress I guess I would say... the things that I was doing, or things that were happening, that I feel were symptoms of my*

trouble dealing with that, were treated like bad behavior... it wasn't things that I was doing intentionally or necessarily really even had control over..."

Children often described feeling burdened with information pertaining to the intricacies of their parents' psychological, relational, or financial struggles. In those scenarios when divorcing parents appeared to suffer profoundly over the loss of the former mate, their children had to manage the confusion of the impression that one parent was deeply and inexplicably harmed the other, or that the suffering parent was desperately weak, with implications for the degree of basic trust in their parents' capacity to care for them. Some children alluded to feelings of guilt for transitioning to the other home because it felt like 'leaving' a parent still reeling from being left by the other parent: *"I knew he really loved her. And, I think it was a big change for him, you know, because his wife left, and then I would leave and I just pictured him here alone. And, I felt sad for him."* One subject described the discomfort she felt for preferring one home over the other and asking for extra time there, so that she could see her friends more often. She alluded to the conflict of wanting to attend to her own needs, but realizing that this might mean injuring her already ailing mother: *"When I would ask to come here for a weekend, then I would feel bad that I made her feel bad, I was worried that, 'oh gosh, I hope she doesn't think that I don't want to be with her, but I want to be here.'"*

At times, parent-child relationships assumed more peer-partner characteristics in the other parent's absence, inflating a child's stature and confusing boundaries in a discomfiting way. Stepping into a supportive or care-taking role was one way that children could ensure an ongoing place of prominence and priority in the lives of their parents. One subject described that witnessing her parents in distress, while feeling

futility, but an inclination to intervene, seemed to have had a ‘lasting’ impression on her personality in terms of her tendency to always be a ‘fixer’ and a ‘pleaser.’ The following excerpt illustrates the hierarchical disruption when one subject was cast as his parent’s confidante and supportive other: *“After my mom left, I don’t think [my dad] had a lot of people to talk to so he talked to me sometimes and he would come and talk to me and just talk and I would just listen, you know, the whole time and you know, [he’d] confide in me about stuff... I was like eleven, twelve, he was telling me all this stuff and I’m like his only person to talk to.”* A second subject described the blurred hierarchy of being enlisted into a privileged peer-ship relationship at her mother’s house, but preferring this in some ways to her father’s home where parent-child hierarchy felt clear, but where she primarily felt like a guest, encroaching on the space of her step-mother’s territory. As a rule, none of the child subjects described feeling flattered or appreciative of an inflation of stature, while, in contrast, some did seem proud of becoming more independent.

How loss in divorce differs for parents and children

While both parents and children were faced with major life transition and associated loss in the event of divorce, the features of this transition, and varieties of loss, were significantly different for parents and children. We might say that the transition from the intact family to the family of divorce marked a first ‘migratory’ experience for children in joint custody and it is useful to enlist the metaphor of ‘biculturalism’ to consider the movement from life prior to parental divorce to life following divorce. When a married couple separates, they undergo a transition from being married to being ‘single,’ no doubt a defining experience that will have significant bearing on inner-world

and outer- world stability. Their children, meanwhile, undergo transition that spans far more territory, with deep reverberations that can upset one's very sense of 'place' in the world. Child subjects described their worlds as having been completely upended, dramatically altered, and having felt void of agency to intervene or affect the forces of change, outside their control.

Despite important differences in the quality of transition, parents also underwent this important migration from the 'old world' to the 'new world.' Since children were powerless bystanders to their parents' divorce, their transition from the intact family to the family of divorce can be considered a 'forced migration,' similar to a refugee who flees a homeland torn asunder by war, oppression, or poverty. Their parents, on the other hand, often described more of a 'chosen migration:' a quest for individuation and independence, following a long period of deliberation and preparation. One child subject described his incomprehension and lack of supportive grounding in the period of transition following his parents' split: *"Well, I guess, it was like you didn't know what was going to happen anymore, you couldn't count on things, you kind of had to let go..."*

Child subjects described difficulty feeling truly 'settled' after their parents divorced, due to the environmental upheaval of back-and-forth movement between homes in joint custody: *"I was feeling comfortable in this small knit community, then I'm pulled into the hustle and bustle of [the city]."* They had to become habituated to the schedule of alternation and to the permanence of temporary residence in each home: *"Going back and forth, I never felt... like I was in one place."*

Despite some limitations in terms of application, I have found the notion of 'biculturalism' a useful way to conceptualize some of the identity issues and challenges

for children reared in joint custody, when homes were more defined by their differences than what was shared – as was the overall norm in the families interviewed for this study. I had anticipated that the bi-residential features of life in joint custody would create strain on a child's sense of self-constancy, leading to a sort of 'bi-residential self' especially when children were confronted with dramatic differences between homes and parental disdain or intolerance of such differences. One feature of the 'bi-cultural' experience for children in joint custody was that similar to newly arrived immigrants who must navigate between the intra-familial culture with its 'old world' remnants and the broad 'new world' culture of school and work, their migration between parents demanded regular and recurrent shedding of the clothing that fit one parental culture or the other and a constant need to recast oneself to fit in; one parent subject remarked that "*[her] kids had to become different people in these different homes*" while another parent reflected on the possible impact of dramatic difference between homes, over time: "*My son has had a history of [what] may have been a situational depression that came from this ratcheting back and forth as a child... As [he's] grown up, it's like he's never sure where he is. And, as a result, now that he's got his own home, he's always kind of camped out.*" Some parents stressed the importance of retaining the original family home, in order to provide children a familiar, consistent environment. Indeed, some child subjects described their original family home as a refuge, providing the comfort of features of life from before, and expressed appreciation that parents were sensitive in this regard. Other subjects, however, derived little comfort from the home or the gesture and described the original home as feeling 'haunted' or 'empty' after divorce. While retention of the original family home provided some degree of familiarity, if not comfort, child subjects typically

described their initial visits to new parental residences – or residences shared by new parental partners – as disorienting, strange, and off-putting.

In addition to the confusions of moving from identification with one (intact) family to identification with two (fragmented) families, many subjects recalled feeling that they had to discard dependable assumptions about life as they knew it as they were introduced to new locales, in terms of normativity, rules, and the roles they had traditionally assumed in the family. One subject recalled his disbelief and disdain when he first arrived at his mother's new residence and his tone of anger and protest highlighted how a child's first exposure to a parent's new residence can bring another painful revelation that life has indeed changed, that separation has really occurred, and that 'going home' will never be the same.²² In terms of transitioning between homes, inconvenience loomed large in the narratives of both children and parents, the 'inconveniences' to children were more numerous and had far-reaching implications for children's sense of stability. The process of traveling between homes appeared more stressful for children during their younger years and stood out strongly in their

²² In the lengthy excerpt below, a subject's depiction of his mother's apartment, and a piece of furniture brought along from the family home, might be understood as a metaphor for the dramatic change and environmental upheaval that characterized this period of time from life as known to life unknown; we hear the affront of having that which is taken for granted, taken away and the difficult task of settling into a world that is suddenly foreign: *"It was horrible. It was a basement apartment in this, like, apartment building. Which, an apartment building, was something foreign to me 'cause we lived outside of a small town where everyone I knew lived in a house. I had seen apartment buildings like as buildings, but I probably didn't know or think about that people lived in them... It was just kind of part of this overall, like you'd no longer know about the universe kind of discoveries, you know? Your parents can separate?! Now she lives in a weird environment?! And she has this horrible couch and loveseat from the basement [of the old house]... I remember the texture being unpleasant to touch, like large corduroy, but stiff.... So here we had the only familiar thing about her new environment, basically this new world, that had been broken off from the planet I was living on and you know out of her spaceship now, into this boxling thing, the only thing I know and am familiar with is something like frightening and alienating and dangerous which is this white couch that we were formerly not allowed to touch, now 'oh, yeah, get on the couch, no you can keep your shoes on, whatever,' like, now the rules, once again the rules are changing."*

recollections: being ‘shuttled’ between homes, the ‘hand-off’ from one parent to the other, the particular parking lot or restaurant where transfers typically occurred, and the degree to which parents interacted in those moments. Overall, parents expressed minimal awareness of transition difficulties and little recollection of how these occurred, except to note frustrations with a co-parent who was chronically late or would not do their fair share of the commuting. Parents and children both recalled the parent who was always late or wouldn’t be willing to drive as far as the other, but children were additionally burdened by what they needed to remember to bring, what stayed where, what they could play with and couldn’t play with, in the various homes. Nevertheless, parent’s needs were often moved into the foreground – for children as well as parents. Child subjects occasionally offered sensitive speculation on the hassle their parents’ endured in managing custody logistics; the following subject voiced awareness of his parents’ needs and preferences in terms of the custody schedule and minimized his own, much as his parents had done: *“At some point it became two weeks and two weeks, because one week and one week was just too much.... I didn’t mind seeing each parent, but I think from a parent’s perspective, for them to drive... the traffic is horrendous. And to do that every Friday, driving two hours to the midway point, and then driving two hours back, that just caused a lot of stress on my parents’ lives.”*

There was significant contrast in how parent subjects and child subjects described home-to-home transitions and preparation for the journey between homes. Child subjects, for the most part, offered detailed recollections about the migration between homes, a regular and predictable event that was often described as excruciatingly mundane, while at the same time, emotionally significant, as in the following subject’s account: *“My mom*

would make my dad meet at [a department store] and it would be like a drop-off, a switch of luggage and I was embarrassed, at the mall parking lot, like 'oh gosh! I'm switching cars, with, you know, a suitcase...' At that point, I felt like I was the only kid in the world in that situation being, you know, traded off, back and forth."

While child subjects often recalled the minutiae of parking lots where 'drop-offs' were made, the bus rides between hometowns, the suitcase they carried to-and-fro, the restaurant where they met and even what they ate - parents remembered little about such details. One parent who stood out in this regard, recalled the enjoyment he found when 'transporting' his child to his mother's home because this became weekly time reserved for just the two of them; he had remarried and was quite sensitive to his son's feeling of being ill-at-ease with his step-mother and in the home that, according to this parent, reflected more of her than it did of him. Only one parent specifically referenced recollection of conversations about upcoming departures and separation and while a couple of parents interviewed (or depicted) appeared sensitive to planning and regulating the transition between homes as smoothly as possible, other home-to-home transfers were described as dysregulating and chaotic, with kids told to hurry and pack and gather their belongings on a moment's notice – with little if any 'transitional' time leading up to the transition.

The incompatibilities between parents that persisted, and often increased, following divorce presented various challenges for children in joint custody in terms of 'fitting in' to a particular home. Differences between homes were often depicted as dichotomous. The sights and sounds, the décor, the starkness/comfort ratio, the messy vs. the clean, the warm vs. the cold, were often described in opposing, contrasting terms -

emphasizing the contradictions of the two places. Some subjects expressed having felt chronic uncertainty about how to proceed given their parents' significant contrasts: different rules, different expectations, different value systems. One subject felt that she hadn't internalized a clear sense of right and wrong as a child, having been given a feeble internal guide for how to proceed from moment to moment, from home to home. For some, the regular alterations between belief systems and ways of life promoted something of an appreciation of 'gray area' and the subjectivity of preference, but they were still left with the challenge of negotiating such relativism at a young age and having to make sense of contradictory parental expectations.

Ongoing differentiation and increasing differences between parents (e.g. degree of conventionality) also increased child subjects' sense of separation from the family parents had established together. Additionally, children not only faced the task of negotiating these lifestyle differences week to week, but had to cope with parental reactions to such differences. In non-cooperative parenting relationships, when mourning and working-through of unresolved conflict had not been achieved, ill will between parents was kept alive via direct conflict, disparagement, or strained silence; when there were dramatic lifestyle differences between parents, this provided ample opportunity for ideological battles, toxic disparagement, or refusal to speak the same language. When co-parental incompatibilities were emphasized, celebrated, or railed against by parents, they had the additional problematic effect of heightening children's sense of parental division and opposition, re-exacerbating feelings of loss, and interfering with identification with both parents simultaneously.

While parents often recognized that existing differences in parental homes had become more ‘acute’ overtime, especially with remarriage, they didn’t typically regard this as particularly problematic, consider the types of ‘acculturation’ demands placed on their children, or recognize how such differences were, at times, an indication of subterranean parental conflict they had failed to work through. Many parents expressed feeling confident that children had been able to move between parental differences with fluidity and there was often a parental wish expressed that children in joint custody incorporate the best of both parents (such sentiment was present even in relatively estranged or embattled former spouses).

Several parent subjects referenced their decision to focus on what they were providing for their children and exercising respect or tolerance for how the other parent parented, though parents occasionally expressed recognition of their limited ability to ‘compensate’ for what was lacking in the other home. This ‘tolerance for differences’ approach was typically cast as a strategy for conflict-avoidance, to support a ‘civil’ parenting approach and was ostensibly done for the children - despite the fact that this actually deprived their children of important features of consistency between homes, communicated a ‘hands-off’ attitude that was experienced by children as parental apathy, and succeeded in reifying for children the message of parental separation and division. This sort of civil-autonomous approach to post-divorce co-parenting was another example of how parents sometimes gratified their desires for convenience and space from their ex-spouse, while assuring themselves that they were acting on behalf of the children (i.e. minimizing exposure to conflict).

When parental homes operated with an emphasis on autonomy, parents had limited knowledge, if any, of the way of life at the other home – and even less influence. Occasionally parents referenced, directly or more subtly, their sense that good-parenting accomplishments were ‘undone’ in the other home, by the other parent as they relinquished all control to their co-parent every-other-week. One parent recalled with exasperation: *“you build the structure up and three quarters of it gets destroyed by the time the kids come back to you.”* Another parent acknowledged, in hindsight, that despite attempts to provide a compensating environment, her children’s experience between homes was that of moving between extremes: *“I’m very willing to say, ‘ok, we’re very rigidly organized over here and [he] is just totally chaotic over here.’”*

Some of the parents saw fit to express gratitude for strengths (e.g. structure, affection) of the other home, or other parent, but then breezed over the fact that such strengths failed to exist in their home or in their parenting style. Indeed, there often appeared to be a wish on the parts of parents that strengths at one home would ‘carry over’ to the other or that such strengths would still exist, sort of suspended in time, for the children to draw upon. Parents justified co-parental distance and lack of consensus-building by assuring themselves that there indeed existed this sort of compensating factor between strengths and weaknesses of respective homes. Strengths in one home did not appear to ‘carry over’ very much from one home to the other, demonstrating that internalization of factors such as provision of emotional support, sense of belonging, and temporal routine require more consistency than the successive immersions of joint custody, without concerted efforts toward cooperation and coordination by both co-parents. According to child subjects, rather than having a cumulative effect, as in adding

multiple tools to one's traveling toolbox, there seemed to be a sense of having to 'trade-off' one strength, or protective factor, often for a complementary weakness in the other home. In those scenarios where, for instance, children transitioned between one emotionally supportive home and a less emotionally supportive home, there did not appear to be a strong 'compensating' effect anymore than when a child received structuring routine in one home, but not the other. In some cases, parents appeared to 'over-compensate' for their co-parent's perceived withholding or indulgence, creating increased division and exaggerating differences. *"Yeah, [my dad's house] was kinda rigid and rule-bound and we bucked against it, but on the other hand, I remember being resentful of my mother, that she set no boundaries... It was more like, her thing was 'my house no rules' so 'you want to stay out all night? Whatever.'"* One parent recalled this sort push-pull that was a chronic feature of the poor co-parental functioning between her and her ex-spouse: *"I remember him saying to me 'you give [the children] nothing.' I said to him, 'you give too much, there are no limits.' And he says 'that's because I'm balancing, because you give nothing.'"*

There was a typical pattern amongst the families represented in this study wherein one home permitted open emotional expression and the other provided clearly articulated expectations for responsible behavior, but this did not translate to the development of a well-rounded child, confident about how to behave and express themselves in both homes.

One subject recalled that after his father moved out, he initially enjoyed the new freedom of getting to have dinners in front of the TV each night. He was also becoming accustomed to sitting down for regularly scheduled meals at his father's house, however,

with an emphasis on ritual and ‘checking in.’ Over time, he described feeling increasingly ill at ease with the loose boundaries of mealtime at his mother’s, took the matter of establishing consistent routine into his own hands, and insisted that he and his mother eat at the dinner table.

In many accounts, all semblances of predictable ritual and routine fell to the wayside in the post-divorce family culture – and only rarely was there consistency in terms of privileges, consequences, curfews, mealtimes, and the like. Some parents seemed to abandon structure altogether, meals no longer eaten at the table, housekeeping in disarray, bedtimes arranged by whim and exhaustion. Other parents, remarrying and creating new family ‘cultures,’ increased the degree of household order with strong emphasis on behavior, adherence to rules, and stricter consequences and such extreme structure and perceived rigidity was experienced as a lack of warmth, a sense of being controlled rather than contained, and hampered comfortable settling in. There was a different quality to those accounts where child subjects felt structure was imposed for their own good, compared with structure that seemed to have an arbitrary or even malicious quality. Child subjects did generally express appreciation for a home that provided the scaffolding effects of structure, but many expressed more gratitude for the home that accommodated self-expression and emotional communication, despite its weaknesses, because they felt permission to feel their feelings and speak their minds.

Co-parenting Continuum: Conflict, Civility, Cooperation

Post-divorce co-parenting can be conceptualized as occurring along a continuum, from conflict, to civility, to cooperation. In the majority of families in this study, the type

of post-divorce, joint custodial parenting the parents established can be characterized as ‘civil’ co-parenting,²³ with an emphasis on autonomy between parental households; for some, early attempts at cooperation were ultimately abandoned. Civil, autonomous co-parenting was defined by little consistency building, but tolerance for different parenting styles, in the interest of conflict avoidance. Many parents represented in the study made strides to minimize their child’s exposure to parental conflict and were proud of these efforts; when conflict avoidance became a higher priority than mutual, collaborative consideration of the child’s ongoing needs, however, this was no longer in the child’s best interest. In terms of co-parenting patterns, occasions of ‘cooperative’ parenting were rare, but for a few of the families interviewed. When parent subjects were asked what they might do similarly or differently if they had joint custody to do over again, their answers echoed an established emphasis on the importance of equal time and conflict avoidance. That their children’s sense of belonging might be reinstated by a cooperative parenting relationship was not an intuitive notion for parents. Failure to establish a workable co-parenting relationship had numerous deleterious consequences and led to a neglect of overall systemic communication between parents and between parents and children. Children were given little opportunity to process their feelings to the divorce, parents were not establishing a united effort to address children’s needs and reactions and children were left to manage post-divorce life with little support.

²³ Civil parenting largely fits the profile of what had been termed ‘parallel parenting,’ with a primary emphasis on equal time between homes, in an attempt to simulate a two-parent household, and is the design regarded favorably by courts and many mediators (Wallerstein, 2000).

Civility

The majority of subjects in this study described overwhelming autonomy between parents post-divorce, with minimal interaction. Many parents expressed appreciation that they no longer had to interact with their ex-spouse on a regular basis, stressed the importance of having their ‘own lives,’ and only communicated on an ‘as needed’ basis. Thus, most of the parents represented here rested on an ideal of achieved civility, functioned with polite rapport, avoidance of conflict, within an overall culture of minimal contact. Parents often expended great effort to minimize opportunities for conflict by minimizing contact, which interfered with the facilitation of mindful, informed child-rearing and cooperative decision making. A few parents were particularly attuned to the limitations of ‘split’ parenting and despite regular frustrations, they exerted concerted effort to maintain communication with their child’s other parent and achieved periods, or moments, of a relatively conflict-free co-parenting relationship with clear channels of communication, based in their shared commitment to their child – but this was certainly not typical.

The primary feature of ‘civil’ co-parenting was conflict avoidance, and typically led to co-parenting avoidance, more self-serving in terms of parental needs for autonomy than about child-centered needs; while conflict-laden interactions were difficult for children to endure, cool indifference between parents was painful as well. Indeed, it appeared that many of the detrimental effects of enduring conflict were not primarily located in the presence of conflict itself, but in the communication of parental division and lack of good will on behalf of the children. When parents sacrificed regular contact to achieve conflict-free functioning, their problems were not worked through, but laid to rest

– until contact was absolutely required. Parent subjects often described strained civility with ex-spouses, tension brewing below the surface, a fragile truce. One child subject described how, as a teenager, she requested her parents revisit her custody schedule: she was traveling independently and desired more flexibility in her schedule so she could commit more time to friendships. Her parents ultimately denied this request after their attempts at communication deteriorated to a battle of wills, as unresolved conflict was given a new outlet for expression. Within such climate of loaded avoidance, when parental cooperation became essential, conflict typically ensued or children's needs were overlooked – as one parent was able to acknowledge her regret for this, in hindsight: *“I feel that because of, because of our lack of communication, and cooperation, certain things happened to the girls that could have been avoided.”*

Child subjects described feeling wary of expressing any sentiment, positive or negative, about their other parent and sometimes described feeling that the other parent's very existence was an off-limits topic. This sort of 'culture of silence' established in households, with overall autonomy between parents, shifted into the parent-child relationship, wherein parents were with their children full-time, then out of contact altogether. Many subjects recalled feeling discouraged, if not barred, from establishing contact with one parent while at another parent's home so they functioned as a citizen of one then the other family with little sense of continuity with either parent. One subject explained the unspoken bar against contacting his father while at his mother's home: *“I think we had rules about calling, I don't think we could just call him, we had to wait until we saw him.”* A major problem of such separate, relay parenting was that it created an

‘out of sight, out of mind’ phenomenon – many child subjects received little affirmation that they were thought about when away from a parent’s home.

A few parents did make efforts to stay in touch with their children on off weeks, permitted contact between their children and the co-parent, and some provided children the space to process expectable frustrations about the other parent without behaving victoriously or engaging in attacks: *“Whenever I would complain to my dad, you know, I may have just... I probably may have called [mom] a bitch, and that would be the line for him. He would be like, ‘no, no, no, you can’t insult your mother’, you know. ‘You can complain, you can say, express your feelings, but you can’t insult her, and you can’t disrespect her.’”* This subject’s parent described an understanding of the important boundary of validating his child’s disappointment in her other parent while, at the same time, refraining from voicing his own critique: *“I try not to say things against her mother... but if she did say something about her mother and I knew it was true, I would certainly confirm it in her. ‘The emotion is real in you...’ ‘Yes, it did happen, yes, you should be angry’.”*

Conflict

Given the extensive literature citing the damage of ongoing post-divorce conflict, I was gratified, initially, to find relatively little in way of outright fighting, verbal abuse, and only minimal custody disputes in the families interviewed. More passive manifestations of conflict, however, were a major remnant of life prior to divorce, and for many of these families, a primary feature of post-divorce parental contact, at times. Ending a ‘bad’ marriage did not put an end to parents’ personality clashes and difficulties

relating harmoniously. Following separation, the majority of contact between parents occurred in the presence of children (or via telephone with children privy to one side of the conversation), so children were exposed to instances of conflict that might have traditionally occurred out of earshot, when the parents were still (precariously) intact and having conversations in private. In some cases, children were relieved from the quantity of conflict they had been exposed to during the marriage, but intensity of parental conflict grew in post-divorce the family culture and children were enlisted to participate to an increased degree.

Typically, it was during the separation period that children witnessed the most pronounced, and memorable, conflict between parents – this tearing away was often characterized by dramatic displays of emotional unrest and exposure to parental fragilities, (perceived) cruelty, bizarre regressions that children had not previously seen. One child subject recalled his father’s alarming behavior: *“I remember my dad being, you know, passive aggressive, the way he would say things, and some of the acts that he did, for example, he laid in front of the van. And I looked out the window, saying ‘Dad, what are you doing?’ And, my parents were in an argument, and he didn’t want my mom to leave without getting the situation resolved. So, he would refuse to move. It was really weird.”*

Many children reared in a primarily ‘civil’ co-parenting environment witnessed little parental interaction compared to before, but a much greater percentage of conflict in the time that was spent together. Suppressed anger sometimes emerged more openly following separation – ex-spouses could now say what they ‘really’ felt, they were now able to leave the scene after venting, and fresh anger was generated by the obligation to

stay in contact with an ex-spouse, because of the children. Some parents did attempt to ‘shield’ their children from toxic communications, with mixed success. When children were ‘shielded’ via an established culture of parental avoidance, distance, and strained separation, emotional reactions often became expressed indirectly, via disparagement or inability to tolerate the merest of contact with a co-parent. In such scenarios, children still ‘felt’ the discord or incomplete mourning and at times felt subtly, (or not so subtly), called upon to help manage the conflict. Children sometimes described being enlisted to mediate conflict (e.g. ‘tell your mother this’) or to help maintain the boundary of autonomy between parents (e.g. ‘don’t tell your father about this’). Other times, conflict took the form of undermining one’s co-parent (e.g. increasing permissiveness or lightening up on structure in attempts to emerge as the favored parent); some parents appeared to act out conflict by refusing a more unified, consensus -building approach to parenting, as observed by the following child subject: *“I would imagine [my mom] saying to my dad, you know, ‘I need your support in terms of disciplining’... to my mom, it would seem like he would take my side. I’m sure she would talk to him about that. And like, ‘he’s too easy on us.’ I would think that would be one of their conflicts.”*

At times, conflict was worked out in front of the children, via criticism and ridicule of the other parent. Disparagement between parents occurred both directly and indirectly, but always alerted a child to unresolved conflict between parents. Sometimes parents assumed a pathologizing stance of their ex-spouse, becoming interpretive, demonizing, emphasizing limitations – this subtler form of disparagement often occurred under the guise of offering a child empathic support. Less overt, but arguably as damaging as open conflict and disdain, was the more passive, indirect disparagement

children witnessed, in a parent's globally critical regard for the other parent, in the ambivalent reception they received upon returning from time at the other's home, or in denouncement of the parental relationship: *"One time at mom's, I called my dad, and was saying, you know, please come pick me up, just pick me up. I was probably 12, 13. And, she got on the phone, saying, you know, 'don't you come pick her up. She's with me right now.' And, he was like, well, I don't know what to do. My daughter wants me. And then she was like, I remember, she said, 'I regret having kids with you,' right there on the phone in front of me. I was like Mom! You know. That stuck, because I felt like she did regret, like she meant it."*

At times, children heard the insinuation that aspects of their personalities that emerged from contact with the 'other' parent were aspects that were unacceptable and unlovable. A few subjects expressed painful awareness that they served as unfortunate, living reminders of a parent's ex-spouse, one subject recalled being told in anger that she carried her other parent's 'negative qualities.' When disparagement was quite prominent between parents it appeared to directly interfere with permissible identification with the other parent. In those families where parents were relatively successful in avoiding disparaging communication about each other, the sort of splitting and loyalty pressures some children experience appeared to have been minimized.

Parental conflict commonly emerged via complex loyalty binds, disparaging commentary between parents, disparaging commentary about a co-parent made to children, but negotiations around children's care often became the centermost battlefield where some parents came to meet. Finances remained one area where collaboration was consistently required between co-parents, even those functioning with as little contact as

possible, and negotiations around money provided opportunities to express abiding anger, longing, or entitlement and easily led to conflict. Exposure to negotiations about their financial care was problematic for children, given the emphasis on ‘logistics’ and the ‘inconvenient’ aspects of sharing children, post-divorce in terms of their sense of importance and belonging in the family. The financial strife of one parent, compared to the relative wealth of the other, created feelings of guilt and resentment in children, because they felt they were getting more than that parent half the time; they were also given the impression that one parent was being further ‘injured’ by the choices of the other and this created inherent loyalty binds.

The area of financial responsibility to children was not only a battleground for parental conflict, but often became an area of contention between parents and new spouses, as well; as with parental conflict, it was not just conflict itself that was harmful to children, but the loud and clear message that they were a financial burden. Children became alerted to the subject of how much money should be spent/ set aside for children from the ‘old’ family vs. children from the ‘new’ family, especially when there was pronounced disparity in wealth between formerly married partners. One subject commented sadly: *“it wasn’t my fault my mother didn’t have much money,”* and described her discomfort with the tension between her father and step-mother regarding the material care of her and her half-siblings, and the injury she felt when she learned her step-mother demanded that less be set aside for her education. This situation increased this daughter’s sense of marginal belonging in her father’s family and also aroused rivalries between her and her half-siblings – contributing still more fracture to her family life.

In many cases, children were presented the difficult challenge of trying to maintain harmonious relationships with two parents, themselves at odds. Those from the most conflictual co-parenting environments, recalled feeling unable to achieve any balance in terms of getting along well with both parents simultaneously. Instead, these subjects described finding themselves allied with one or the other parent, sometimes in labile succession. Child subjects described internal pressure to not bond with certain family members, because bonding with one family member felt like harming or depriving another - as if there were limited attachment to go around. At times, children felt explicit pressure from a parent to disavow identificatory strivings for the other parent. A parent's demands for allegiance highlighted and placed stress upon loyalty binds that were, to some degree, already a given in the bi-familial custody arrangement.

Awareness of mutual parental disdain interfered with a sense of belonging to both parents, at the same time, and child subjects described that they had often felt systemic pressure to choose one parent over the other; in this climate, even normative momentary preference for one parent was experienced as an intense slight to the other. One child subject described the pressure she felt to validate her mother's negative opinion of her father, how any complaint against him was interpreted in this way, and how this paradoxically reinforced her allegiance to her father: *"My mom was always fishing for me to complain about my dad... like if I would slip or something, she would be like, 'Oh, your father would always do something like that....' I wouldn't bite. It was like, 'no mom, we're not going to talk about dad.' I remember saying that a couple of times... I felt like she hurt him enough and I didn't want to betray him in terms of talking about him to her."*

Another subject recalled how, when she would tell her father something about her mother that had bothered her or made her angry, he offered supportive words that felt false, he seemed to pleasure in a negative review of her parenting, as if vindicated. This particular subject had been quite young when her parents divorced and while she couldn't make sense of her father's reaction exactly, she learned to restrain herself from soliciting support and, like the majority of subjects in this study, she exerted effort to keep the parental relationships separate. She described feeling she could only love one parent 'at a time' and while her allegiance has shifted over the years, she has struggled to establish sound relationships with both parents.

Some subjects described resistance to welcoming their parents' new partners, because of how this brought home, again, the reality of parental separation: *"It was a real blow for my father to confirm [he had a girlfriend] ... I just think it was realizing that, kind of concretizing the fact, that he was with somebody else who wasn't my mother, and that it was serious."* In other instances, child subjects appeared to have been acting out parents' internal conflict/ incomplete mourning. One subject's loyalty to her father, (and loyalty to his loyalty to her mother), manifested in a stern refusal to greet her mother's boyfriends with mere civility or openness. For her to have welcomed a new man into her mother's life would have felt like a rejection of her father given her awareness that he regretted the loss of the marriage and her belief that 'he had never fallen out of love' with her mother. Her mother recalled the resistant stance her daughter had taken to spending time with her new boyfriend. She was able to acknowledge the conflict her daughter must have felt when asked to welcome this new person into her life, given the pressure she felt from her father to remain true to the 'original' family, but her frustration still rang

through: *“My daughter would have nothing to do [with him], and she was really rude, embarrassingly rude... out of loyalty to her father. I was probably forcing issues that, you know, trying to force things on her. And she was not taking it, she was not buying it. ‘Oh, this is not my father!’”*

Some parents encouraged their children to reject their other partner’s mate as a statement of loyalty to them; this varied in degree of insinuation vs. explicit expectation, but messages were received loud and clear. Sometimes parents displayed contempt for their ex’s new spouse with an expectation of agreement from their children, others voiced instructions that children ‘remember’ who was their ‘real’ mother/father, and other parents communicated their desire for loyalty by mourning the end of the marriage so openly, with such protest, that children understood that to accept a step-parent (and the other parents moving-on process) would be a rejection of their parent or, at least, a disregard for their feelings of loss.

The ongoing contact required between parents sharing custody can certainly keep conflict active. The absence of parental cooperation, in a climate of outright conflict or more subtle disparagement, heightened child subjects’ sense of either/or allegiance with parents, undoing any vestige of the dyadic holding space. There was a tremendous burden placed on children when they felt pressure to maintain alliances with both parents who were, themselves, functionally estranged. Alternatively, however, shared custody can provide a facilitative environment for the establishment of a cooperative co-parenting relationship, if parents are willing to work through conflict in the interest of child-rearing. In this study there was a limited capacity for mentalization of one’s co-parent, however, and even outright resistance toward recognition of one’s ex’s experience, with just a few

exceptions: recognition of an ex-spouse's feelings of loss of spouse and/or institution of marriage, psychological understanding of the other's fragilities that interfered with the provision of best care for children, and – in moments - an ability to identify and even applaud positive qualities or well-meaning attempts at parenting. As parents evolve from a defensive or vigilant stance in regards to their ex-spouse, they will become increasingly capable of mentalization, as they engage in the ongoing, developmental task of moving from a paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position (Klein, 1945). As the marital relationship is mourned, remaining anger worked through, ownership taken of one's contribution to problematic relational patterns and such, capacities for mentalization will increase and parents will become increasingly able to regard their ex-spouse with openness, understanding, and appreciation for their importance as a co-parent in the ongoing, mutual endeavor of attending to their children.

Cooperation

Cooperative parenting represents a step beyond civility; it requires that parents not simply tolerate each other from a distance, but engage in dialogue, strain to see the redeeming aspects of each other, work together to reach consensus and compromise, and continue to work through issues that plagued the marriage and might plague the (parental) partnership. One parent described the toil and sacrifice that came with cooperative co-parenting, but emphasized the reward of seeing his children benefit from his efforts: “[My spouse and I] were held hostage to my [ex-wife’s] moods... we had to place as secondary, our relationship and our world as adults, on behalf, in subservience to parenting these children and giving them the consistency that they deserved... And we just became inured to it, but also just deeply dedicated to it. We loved our kids and

wanted them to emerge from the household at the age of 18 or so as close to whole human beings, and we succeeded.”

In only this one case in the study did parents continue to share parenting duties as a coordinated effort and the involvement of the ‘off-week’ parent in the other parents life was important for relieving the children of some care-taking duties and doubtlessly communicated their importance to their parents, even outside of ‘their week.’ In this family, there was a relatively consistent stream of communication and awareness of the child’s life at the other home, but this meant that parents were confronted with mounting frustration and forced to intervene, at times. In such a scenario, however, frustrations were largely absorbed and dealt with by parents, lightening the load on children to manage disparate environments or a troubled parent, compared to those with minimal communication or home-to-home coordination: *“more than once, [my wife] and I, as well as my step-kids, as well as my sons, have gone over and moved her, physically moved her because of her incapacities to organize her own life... 6:00pm and her whole house still filled with furniture... My wife and I could not help but ventilate our frustration. But, I would say, we never did it in a way that said, ‘well Goddamn fucking woman is fucking...’ you know, something like that. We might say that, while standing, bumping our heads... We never bumped our heads physically; we always kept frustrations with her behavior in our own bedroom, and in our own counseling chambers.”*

One aspect of parental cooperation that many parents in the study did seem to recognize was the importance of staying in semi-regular contact with the co-parent, to

relieve children from the task of delivering messages. As with so many features of post-divorce life with joint custody, the maintenance of the parent-child hierarchy was supported in important ways by an ongoing, cooperative co-parenting relationship. One father who described efforts to free his children from assuming care-taking or messenger duties as much as possible, stated simply: *“I think we maintained the correct generational boundaries, and [to do this] it became incumbent on me to have the relationship with [their mother].”*

A commitment to maintaining cooperative co-parenting with an ex-spouse required parents to privilege their children’s needs over their own preferences, ongoing contact and communication, but also required the establishment of clear limits, within a differently defined sort of family. One family that showed attempts at cooperation and consensus-building between parents, using mediation at times to assist with co-parenting plans and parameters, did achieve something more than civility, but with a great deal of “wall-pounding, in another room from the children” and necessitated the establishment and reestablishment of boundaries with his ex-spouse. Some parents will feel forced to maintain stern boundaries with ex-spouses, lest they feel overwhelmed by practical demands or interpersonal needs of their ex in the enduring relationship. One parent, for instance, was determined to stay in active contact with his ex-spouse to create uniformity between parental homes and a more broad sense of family connectedness for his kids; he experienced his ex-spouse as so relationally dependent and needy, however, that over time they settled on structured meetings and the assistance of a mediator. In the following excerpt, he stresses the important point that striving to remain friendly with an ex-spouse in the interest of optimal co-parenting is not the same as having to remain friends; the

parental relationship, unlike the marital relationship, is based most often in shared obligation rather than a desire to be together: *“We made it abundantly clear to her, that we were not going to have overlap in any social mode whatsoever, up to and including the fact that if she had friendships with individuals or couples, no matter how harmonious those people might seem to us, we would not have friendships with them. And, we needed to do that in order to preserve ourselves, frankly.”*

In another scenario, one subject’s parents were successfully able to relate to each other as sort of ‘extended family’ following divorce, and rigid boundaries were not needed to reinforce the marital-parental distinction. Both parents shared enduring warm regard for the other, appeared temperamentally inclined toward low emotional intensity, and clearly recognized that they both comprised their son’s family in an ongoing way. They also maintained ongoing contact with former in-laws, which appears to have normalized contact and facilitated the marital-parental distinction in terms of reference points for more broad designation of family membership that existed beyond the marriage. Notably, their son’s account was of a relatively easy transition to life post-divorce, and in joint custody; he compared his experience favorably to peers whose parents went through bitter divorce battles and to what he saw on ‘the after school specials.’ It appeared that he was able to continue internalizing a sense of himself as existing within a co-parental mutuality, aware of a shared parental regard for him, and he benefited from some opportunities to relate to parents simultaneously – rather than relating to them in rapid succession. Nevertheless, this subject described feeling awkward when graduations or other gatherings brought his parents together, because such occasions occurred quite rarely. Given encouragement and/or guidance, his parents might

have functioned quite well as collaborating, problem-solving co-parents, and might have willingly provided their son more co-parental time, but it doesn't appear it was clear to them how useful this might have been.

When parents successfully engage in cooperative parenting, characterized by more camaraderie and less combat, tensions will gradually lessen, loyalty competitions will be less severe, and opportunities to complement an ex-spouse might even arise. One subject described the appreciation and admiration he felt for his father, because he managed to retain a favorable view of his mother (and former in-laws) following divorce: *“When my grandmother died, my mother’s mother, I was sitting in the living room with my dad and step-mom, and he said, ‘your grandmother was one of the smartest people I ever knew.’ And I said, ‘well, who is the smartest person you ever knew’? He said, ‘your mother.’ He said it quite matter-of-factly, and that was at least ten years after the divorce.”* Another subject recalled how important it was to her that her mother was able to set aside differences with her father to affirm their father-daughter relationship: *“She’s always said that he’s been a great father. Always, always. She’s told me I’m lucky to have a father like him.”*

When parents did reunite around a children’s struggles, marriages, births, or participated in holidays together this promoted feelings of comfort, relief, and a sense of increased familial unity for their children. Some subjects described how parents had shown up for the other parent in times of crisis (e.g. when they were hospitalized following surgery); they described this as evidence of their parents’ abiding connection and good will - even when it was recognized as a gesture on their behalf, they seemed moved and reassured that their parents were not completely opposed.

When asked how they might arrange custody, were they ever to divorce from a partnership with children, child subjects indeed imagined they would opt for joint custody, but did not emphasize equal time, autonomy, or conflict avoidance as the features of the arrangement that they'd most strive to achieve. They cited the importance of flexibility in the custody schedule, sensitive to a given child's needs, and proximity between parents to retain important chumships. Most importantly, they stressed the crucial ingredients of cooperation between parents, time spent all together, and "friendliness" between parents to communicate a sense ongoing belonging and priority in parental lives. One subject explained: *"You know, just like kind of give that child or children a sense that, you know, it wasn't like they came from this thing that was like an embarrassment to both parents, or, you know what I mean, that they were wrong, or that they didn't have a family, you know, that yeah, they were ok."*

Many subjects described that as children became adults and moved away from parental homes, forming autonomous lives or new families of their own, there was sometimes a collective redefinition of family: more cohesion, defined less by repetitive separations and more by efforts toward participation. One parent reflected on the shift that occurred over the years between her and her ex-spouse, from resentment-tinged distance to tolerating, and finally embracing, shared celebration: *"I would see him sometimes picking [our daughter] up, and I'd go up to him and say hello, and he'd be civil. And then again it would be on and off, sometimes. I never knew if he'd say hello to me or not. At her graduation, he sat at one table and I stayed at the other end of the campus. Things haven't really gotten okay with him, until [our daughter's] wedding. [At the] wedding, we actually came together. We hugged, we kissed... Time, you know,*

happiness. I finally, I saw him, I hugged him... And I gave a very nice speech where I thanked him publicly for all that he had done for the girls, and he came up and kissed me at that time. And then we danced at the wedding, one of the last dances. And then, of course, with [their grandchild] now, we've been in touch."

Parental mourning and the Marital/Parental Distinction

Loss was an overarching feature of the experiences of divorce and joint custody for children, and was evident, though often disguised, for parents as well. The issue of parental mourning and working through of unresolved parental conflict emerged as particularly significant in terms of parental availability to their children. Strong, abiding animosity between parents interfered with the fashioning of a cooperative, communicative co-parenting relationship, and many settled for distant 'civility,' with minimal contact and little collaboration around parenting. In the throes of complicated loss reaction, some parents tended to over-identify with their child's sense of loss, confused their own disappointments and relational needs with that of their child, and failed to recognize experiences that were unique to their child and foreign from their own. Some parents appeared, toward the beginning of the interview, quite sensitive to their child's experience of loss or marginality following divorce, but their accounts came to reference, often in a veiled way, their own feelings of loss or resentment toward their ex-spouse and more grounded in identification-with than empathy-for their child. At times, there was considerable consistency between children's depictions of events and their parent's recollection, demonstrating that parents were often mindful, at least in hindsight, of what their children experienced. In other comparison's, child subjects

seemed to be speaking the 'party line,' telling a story from their parent's perspective as though they had heard a version of events several times over - this was most prevalent when depicting one parent as oppressor or abandoner of the other.

One parent who struggled to let go of his former spouse (and an ideal of the intact family), regarded the notion of 'blended' family warily and appeared to have sabotaged attempts at broad family definition at times; this manifested in the promotion of loyalty competitions and attempts to undermine his co-parent's parenting. Ironically, this parent prided himself on reverence for the original family, a nuclear family ideal, and just as he was unable, or unwilling, to relinquish the marital relationship to make room for a co-parental relationship, he was unable to relinquish the nuclear family for the more broadly defined family. This refusal to let go psychologically and move on was cast as loyalty to the original family but had the unfortunate effect of undermining establishment of a broad, redefined family and prevented his children an opportunity to mourn and move on. Other variations of internal conflict, besides resistance to grief and refusal to relinquish the marital bond, interfered with maintenance of contact and attempts at cooperation. One parent subject avoided contact with his ex after the separation, because contact inspired guilt for having left. Another described his uncomfortable identification with his own father who had initiated divorce from his mother; he was furthered inspired to distance from his ex-spouse by her tendency to regularly remind him of this painful parallel. For many parents, recollection of marital discord and personal slights muted their perception of the failed marriage so negatively that they tended to discount, or minimize, what had been lost - for their children as well as for them. In addition to feelings of genuine disappointment and animosity for a former spouse and relief that marriage had ended, we

can speculate that another barrier to honoring what was lost, and often simultaneously in play, was an avoidance of the pain of accessing experiences of former togetherness, or desires for togetherness, long ago abandoned.

When there was a lack of consensus in ending a marriage, this created complications for parental mourning and opportunities to work through abiding conflict; this was especially problematic in those scenarios where one partner exerted pressure, or made pleas, to reunite. Often, this led the (pursued) partner to sever a parenting relationship almost completely to maintain a clear boundary. One parent acknowledged that, upon reflection, he realized he had rushed into a second marriage as a desperate attempt to solidify the break from his first wife. A few parent subjects described ex-spouses who had not wanted to divorce and who would repeatedly communicate their wish to reconcile or engage in vicious attacks; in these families, such unresolved longing often resulted in emotional intensity followed by veritable silence between parental partners. When parents failed to establish a united front in terms of transitioning from the marital/parental partnership to a co-parental partnership and re-defined family, children were set up for strained relationships to at least one of their parents: *“I kind of blamed my dad, because he was the one who moved out. I don’t even know the details, but he was the one who left. So to me, he kind of left me too, because this was my house, my family, my life.”*

One parent described that she had felt compelled to leave, against her husband’s wishes, and voiced regret that this set a precedent of little consensus: *“My thought was ‘well, I’ve got to get out of this marriage. I’ve got to separate.’ I wasn’t thinking of divorce, just ‘get away. And once I’m ok, once I’m on my own, the girls will be ok. I’ll be*

able to... but it never really worked out that way. Because... and I think it's because it wasn't done together as a team."

Most parents in this study described unsatisfying marriages: they felt estranged from their spouse, grew apart, fell out of love. While parents rarely spoke of palpable joy at the end of their marriages, they often spoke of feeling free, relieved, and unencumbered by an identity or lifestyle that felt contrived or outgrown. In many cases, there had been one partner who gave into forces of individuation while the other partner tried to retain the relationship, being more oriented toward convention; often, the partner more oriented toward convention set out to quickly find marital stability with a new partner while their ex-partner tended toward serial relationships or led a more solitary lifestyle. Few parents in the present study were able to reflect on a 'failed' marriage as having been a worthy endeavor, way back when, but those who were more empathically attuned to what had been lost for their children when their marriage ended seemed most open to acknowledging that it held worth for their children. One child subject recalled: "*I saw on TV that people get divorced and I said to my mom, 'are you and dad ever gonna get divorced, or split up like that', and she said 'no, we will never do that, I promise' and I remember thinking about that years later, I remember thinking 'you promised me, you broke that promise.'*" In this excerpt, we hear the sense of betrayal that children can feel when their family experiences the fracture of divorce, but it begs us to consider what promise, precisely, parents make when they bring children into a marriage. Certainly, they might set out to provide the security of an enduring marital partnership and the support of a singular, intact family, which must be relinquished in the event of divorce. The promise to maintain a parenting partnership for their children, however, need not be

broken when the marital partnership ends. The parent subjects that made the most concerted efforts toward ongoing cooperation and child-centered family life appeared able to make this important distinction between the marital pact and the parental pact, but were still faced with significant challenges – such as when one former spouse desired a more involved or intimate relationship than the other.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important for me to note with strong emphasis and appreciation that the participants in this study gave generously of themselves, shared intimate details of their lives, and offered their contributions with openness, candor, and genuine reflection. For the most part, the families in this study achieved little more than increased distance between parenting partners over the years. The families that did achieve some semblance of cooperative functioning had little guidance about what was required to ease the challenges of this endeavor and results were mixed. While I have assumed a critical stance of many of the ways joint custody has been implemented in the lives of children, this is not to suggest that parents who opt for this solution do so casually, with apathy or thoughtlessness. Indeed, it is a solution that was sought in the best interest of the children and the findings herein should not be understood as a critique of the parents, or their best intentions, but with the institution of joint custody as it has been typically designed.

CHAPTER FIVE – DISCUSSION

In this study, I aimed to better understand the experience of children weathering parental divorce and the challenges of joint custody, and to identify particular ways that parents might provide increased support along the way. Via close examination of retrospective accounts of adults reared in joint custody, supplemented with the accounts of their parents, I hoped to shed light on the types of emotional and practical struggles that are commonly found and might go insufficiently addressed. The impact of parental separation and ongoing parental division on children's overall well-being was an overarching concern and as the project evolved, I became increasingly convinced that the creation of a cooperative, collaborative co-parenting relationship post-divorce might ease loss reactions in children and provide them with an ongoing sense of belonging within their refashioned family.

The original research hypotheses were reflected to varying degrees in the narrative data, proved worthy of exploration, and helped to illuminate some aspects of children's struggle to settle into post-divorce life, but as the research progressed, two more primary questions emerged: How could parents establish children's needs, and children's subjectivity, as a primary concern in the post-divorce family and what were the particular barriers to parents providing support and empathic understanding for their children and moving toward more cooperative co-parenting relatedness w/ an ex-partner. Throughout this project, my focus centered around children's subjectivity – and the fact that such emphasis often wanes in the post-divorce family, with children's needs and becoming relegated to a position secondary to those of their parents. As I interviewed parent subjects, I became increasingly aware of the adjustment demands they encountered

post-divorce, in terms of assuming single parenting responsibilities and managing loyalty to children and loyalty to new family members, for instance, and how this took an added toll on the difficulty, often observed, in their capacities to set aside their own experience, momentarily, to consider their children from an empathic stance. I realized that it was futile to argue for increased co-parental relatedness on the basis of the advantages to children without closely examining the challenges parents confront, in terms of their own loss reactions, lasting anger, and difficulty transitioning into a new form of relatedness. Nevertheless, staying true to my original focus, I will first address the losses incurred by children in divorce and the plight of (ongoing) transition in joint custody.

Parents are often regarded as a parenting ‘team’ prior to divorce, a useful metaphor for a united, cooperative dyad. One might say that after divorce, parents are confronted with the option of either leaving the field altogether (functioning with the merest of contact), becoming separate teams in competitive opposition (keeping conflict alive through or around the children), or fashioning themselves as a re-defined ‘team,’ (still committed to work together, as a co-parenting dyad). Following separation, there is often a ‘parental split’ that occurs alongside the ‘marital split’ wherein children encounter their parents one at a time, but never together. In those scenarios when parents are essentially estranged post-divorce, or maintain a conflictual or disparaging relationship, the loss for children will be more pronounced as they are thrust into a sort of ‘split-custodial’ arrangement wherein they are deprived of combined and coordinated parenting.

Loss of dyad

In the literature review, I proposed the ‘parental dyadic object’ as a joint mother-father representation, functioning intrapsychically as a singular representation, a deeply cathected object of attachment that becomes quite compromised in divorce and quite compromised in divorce. Though divorce isn’t a death in the literal use of the term, it can represent such significant loss as to trigger the kind of mourning seen in ‘actual bereavement’ (Steiner, 1993). The child subjects in my study didn’t reference dyadic loss explicitly; the loss of the dyadic relationship appears to manifest largely in the loss of intactness and family definition, combined with a precarious sense of belonging that characterizes many children’s experience in joint custody.²⁴ While the marital-parental dyad must be mourned and laid to rest – by both divorcing parents and their children – the parental dyad need not be lost completely and the shared design of joint custody provides opportunity for an ongoing cooperative co-parenting relationship to emerge that can help to preserve children’s sense of belonging to a more broad, redefined family. To the degree that the marital-parental dyad can be re-constituted as a co-parenting dyad in the new-fashioned family, with cooperation, communication, and consensus building, children will benefit. They will benefit in practical, environmental terms, but will also be able to re-internalize a sense of the parental dyad as intact, though transformed.

²⁴ Many of the child subjects did describe their regret that their parents didn’t get along after they separated; when asked to reflect on what they might emphasize were they ever to raise children in joint custody, child subjects invariably stressed the importance of a sound relationship with a co-parent and some asserted that they would hope to befriend their ex and provide their children reassurance that they weren’t the product of something purely disastrous.

'Bi-cultural' experience of divorce

One of the primary 'bi-cultural' features of the bi-residential arrangement of joint custody can be understood in terms of the conflicting expectations, inconsistency in rules, roles, and routines that can abound in families with two homes, combined with the typical 'split' custodial design that ensures contact with only one parent at a time, with little off-week contact between parents and children, few conversations between parents, and minimal, if any, contact between children and both parents. Originally, I had conceived of the 'bi-cultural' experience of divorce and joint custody in reference to children's regular travels between parental homes; in hindsight, I might have enlisted the experience of a nomad or displaced person as a more apt metaphor than that of an immigrant. While certainly the navigation of stark differences between homes created added stress on children already reeling from dramatic change and, as anticipated, parent subjects in my study didn't reflect long on the features of transition and often minimized the demands on children to adjust, then readjust, then readjust again to such disparate environments.

What emerged most vividly in terms of 'bi-cultural' migration was the movement from the intact family to the family of divorce, a world upended. Child subjects delineated their early lives in terms of before and after parental separation/divorce – even those who were quite young when their parents parted identified with the notion of 'everything' changing, including themselves. The limitations that emerge when comparing the transition of a post-divorce family to the transition of an immigrant family highlight some of the particularly trying features for children of divorce. Parents and children have such distinct perspectives on the migration from 'old world' of intactness to the 'new world' of fragmentation, with such disparity in terms of agency, that it

became useful to consider the parallels of chosen and forced migration and to understand the experiential gap between a stance of mourning versus liberation that helps account for one aspect of the empathic deficits seen in parents' capacity to grasp their children's perspective and provide support.

To compare, children from an immigrant family often adjust more quickly to a country of adoption - learning the language and encountering foreign customs with more openness than older adult relatives. In contrast, the experience of a child of divorce might be more accurately likened to an old world elder, insofar as they both are often the keepers of memories, the family members most inclined toward nostalgia and longing for the way things once were. Second, in the case of a family emigrating from a country of origin, parents and children would probably confront the uncertainties of the new country together, as a more clearly defined family unit (even if other family members transitioned at a later date) and probably derive strength from their collective identity. While each immigrant family member would have their own individual reactions, face particular obstacles, and develop unique strategies for coping, parents would be naturally attuned to the significance of the transition for their children given that they were engaged in the same transition themselves and, therefore, would be more sensitive and relatively equipped to provide support and validation. In contrast, the event of divorce presents parents and children with significantly different types of transitions to endure (besides children's solo migrations of moving between 'mom's house' and 'dad's house') and this provides one explanation for why children's experiences of loss and need for mourning after divorce are often obscured for parents.

Parental empathy

As I conducted interviews, my hypothesis that even previously sensitive, empathic parents would falter in this regard after divorce was largely borne out. Tendencies toward defensive minimization of children's experience and over-identification with children's experience on the part of parents, appeared indicative of parents' privileging their own loss reactions and/or the need to move on as more pressing than the need to provide consistent, attuned parenting. Such defensive non-mentalizing regard for their children, was also understood as related to feelings of guilt, reluctance to sit with the pain their children were experiencing, and uncertainty about how to ease their suffering. It would appear that once parents undergo their own mourning process, they will become more capable of apprehending their child's experience. Indeed, it has been observed that Klein's notion of the depressive position is "at least analogous to the notion of the acquisition of [reflective function], which necessarily entails the recognition of hurt and suffering in the other as well as that of one's own role in the process" (Fonagy, et al., 2002, p. 28). Slade (2008) explains, "the more that human beings are able to *mentalize*, or envision mental states in the self or other, the more likely they are to engage in productive, intimate, and sustaining relationships, to feel connected to others at a subjective level, but also to feel autonomous and of separate minds" (italics hers, pp. 313-314). Emphasizing the primacy - and separateness - of the child in this regard, as opposed to conflicts between parenting partners, is another way of emphasizing the crucial shift from shared marital identity to shared parental identity and to what is not lost in divorce: children's need of mutual parenting and ongoing provision of their dyadic needs.

What is called for in ‘mentalized parenting’ is apprehension of a child’s experience, communication that parents ‘get’ what their children are going through, and assistance in processing and expressing this experience – much of what is often missing in misattuned post-divorce parenting. Only when there is a parental “shift from a physical to a reflective stance, from nonmentalizing to mentalizing narratives, and from cycles of nonmentalizing interactions to cycles of mentalizing interactions... can the parent begin to respond to the child’s internal experience rather than to her own projections” (Slade, 2008, pp. 320-321). One major implication of the decrease in empathic capacities in divorcing/divorced parents is a disruption in parent/child hierarchy in terms of a collective shift from concern for children’s needs to preoccupation with parents’ needs. Many researchers have observed accelerated maturation in children of divorce, reversal of care-taking from parent-child to child-parent (Wallerstein, 1983,2005; Garnezy & Rutter, 1983; Reinhard, 1977; Kurdek & Siesky, 1979; Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morrell, 2001, Byng-Hall, 2002) and some have argued that older children are more susceptible to frailties/emotional needs of parents (Walczak & Burns, 1984); in my study, even child subjects who were very young at the time of divorce recalled pronounced sensitivity to their parents’ emotional experience and stepped into care-taking roles in some regard.

The (internal and systemic) conflict that accompanies separation and divorce can also significantly inhibit a parent’s capacity to assume a mentalizing stance with an ex-spouse. As Slade (2008) explains, “mentalizing is most compromised in moments of high intensity negative affective arousal” which can “set in motion cycles of nonmentalizing interaction, which are typified by mutual efforts of control and coercion, rather than cooperation and mutual recognition” (pp. 317-318). It is argued here that parental

mourning will facilitate mentalization of their ex-spouse so that parents can assume a stance of cooperative parental reflective function to more *cooperatively* aid the child in making sense of, and giving voice to, feelings of grief – (re) creating a cooperative dyad that will continue to function as a mentalizing agency for the child. Not only will children be provided more than they can receive from the two individual parents, many of the loss reactions and adjustment problems associated with divorce can be mitigated by the presence of a ‘substitute’ parental object where the marital-parental object once stood.

Parental mourning

The optimal facilitating environment for a child’s grief reaction to be adequately understood and worked through can be understood as a cooperative endeavor, requiring a joint mentalized stance in reference to the child and an offering of this ongoing dyadic entity. Attempts at heightening what might be termed joint mentalization of children might be compromised when parents have opposed perspectives on their child or by the likely scenario that one parent will demonstrate more capacity for mentalization than the other; this highlights the important need for parents to work through unresolved conflict, toward cooperation, for the benefit of their children. When parents can learn to function as an ongoing, combined dyadic entity, there will be additional parental resources for children to draw upon.

Facilitation of a child’s mourning process after divorce is multi-faceted; it requires that opportunities be made available for children to give voice to feelings of loss and requires parental validation that something has indeed been lost. This empathic recognition of a child’s need to grieve requires prerequisite parental mourning to ensure that their child’s loss experience is not defensively avoided, and, given the unique

features of loss for children compared with their parents, it is crucial that parents step outside of their own experience sufficiently to assume a stance of curiosity and interest in what their child is going through. When parents are unable to recognize the immense loss suffered by children in the midst of such dramatic change, it signals they have yet to count their own losses and truly move on; “the psychological tasks of separation include accepting the fact that the marriage has failed and processing the loss” (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006, p. 66).

Indeed, a major finding in this study was that in order for divorcing parents to facilitate mourning and optimal transition for their children, parents must themselves undertake the complicated, painful process of mourning – which includes the working through of residual anger, disappointment, and any variety of hurt feelings. In order for children to relinquish their attachment to the marital-parental relationship, they must witness their parents willing to reconcile themselves to the loss and work through remaining resentment toward the creation of a new fashioned parental relationship and facilitation of a substitute ‘co-parenting dyad.’ Until parental mourning has taken place, parents can remain embattled, emotionally embroiled, and unable to achieve true individuation from marital dynamics, necessary for deliberate and lucid cooperation in the interest of their children. When parents are finally able to reflect on their own array of emotional reactions to the divorce - without denial, flight, or an over-identification with their child’s experience - and when they are able to acknowledge that there was indeed something worth being mourned, they can begin the important process of ‘consummating the divorce,’ (Downey, 1988) and transition into a new form of parental partnership. As parents become better equipped to manage their own emotional reactions, recognize a

broader array of emotional experience, and inhibit action, we can expect them to refrain, more often, from problematic interactions with their ex, withstand contact more effectively, and be more sensitive to their child's emotional experience - and also their ex's emotional experience.

Related to parental mourning is the concept of 'mentalized affectivity,' marking "an adult capacity for affect regulation in which one is conscious of one's affects, while remaining within the affective state. Such affectivity denotes the capacity to fathom the meaning(s) of one's own affect state" (Fonagy, et al., 2002, p. 96). The development of a mentalized affective stance on the part of divorced, co-parenting parents can contribute to more positive outcomes in terms of the creation of a harmonious co-parental partnership: there will be more inhibition of the impulse to act on strong feelings, increased capacity to encounter another's emotional experience with openness and curiosity, less defensive resistance to experiencing 'difficult' feelings, and more recognition of the complexity of affective experience— that we often feel multiple things at once. Hence, strong feelings of anger are less likely to be seized upon and expressed in conflict promoting ways, because coinciding feelings will also be felt and empathy for the other will temper strong, potentially destructive, reactions. When we see a delay, or avoidance, of mourning in parents we can expect deficits in mentalized affectivity, ongoing conflict, or strained civility between co-parents resulting in less parental availability to attend to children's needs.

*Marital/Parental distinction*²⁵

As parents work through abiding conflict, succumb to mourning, and become more available to support their children in their grief, they must also recognize what precisely has been lost, for themselves and for their children, and how these losses differ significantly. Whereas parents are most impacted by the end of the marital era, children grieve primarily for the parental dyad, not the marital-parental dyad. Divorcing parents must make this distinction between the marital and parental dimensions of their relationship in order to transition from their integrated marital-parental relationship into a relationship based primarily around parenting. In an intact home, there is less of a distinction and less need for distinction, because the marital relationship is not truly autonomous from the parental relationship, but a marital-parental relationship w/ its internal correlate, the marital-parental dyad. However ex-spouses take leave from their marriage - be it with gusto or resigned defeat - it is the marital dyad, difficult to distinguish, but ultimately discrete from the parental dyad, from which they flee. A re-constituted dyad, de-romanticized and re-configured, sufficient to satisfy the needs of the children without compromising the parents' own letting-go process, requires that parents submit to the significant transition, from primary identification as a marital dyad to a parental dyad.

²⁵ Several authors (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006; Clingempeel & Reppucci, 1982; Cohen and Weissman, 1984; Downey, 1988; Losso, 2003; Lowery, 1985; Madden-Derdich, et al., 1999) have referenced the need for this sort of distinction between marital partnership and parental partnership in order to relinquish outmoded ways of relating and promote the relationship that endures.

Children will typically ‘fuse’ the marital and parental dimensions of the relationship, just as their parents have, and will not realize this distinction clearly, either. This helps to explain the tendency in some children to keep hope alive for parental reunion or to glorify the former marriage, no matter how bad as it was. Parents will feel understandably reluctant to validate children’s feelings of loss for the idealized marriage, but might rest assured that children are not in actuality grieving for the marital relationship, but for the parental relationship. It is not the union between parents that becomes glorified in hindsight, but the notion of intactness, the notion of more unified family. Fantasies of parental reunion might be misunderstood to represent a wish for the restoration of the marriage, when children actually wish for the return of the cooperative parental entity that provided a sense of collective, cumulative, and ‘combined’ parental regard.

Given the complications of distinguishing the marital and parental aspects of their partnership, and how a lack of clear distinction can enable enduring conflict, there is a tendency for cooperative parenting to greatly diminish with the end of marriage – even in a shared custody scenario. The task of maintaining ongoing collaborative contact with one’s ex is most challenging when parents fail to embrace this marital/parental distinction and this appears an important (and ultimately avoidable) contributing factor to minimal parental contact or outright avoidance. Once parents make the important distinction between the marital and parental relationship, they will be better equipped to honor and validate feelings of loss in their children, but will also be better prepared to relieve their children of some part of this loss. While the marital-parental relationship is laid to rest, the parental relationship can re-emerge, in a new fashioned way. Until this occurs, the

inevitable proximity and maintenance of contact demanded by the joint custody arrangement, can stir up remaining ambivalence, resulting in attacks or avoidance, neither of which foster a functioning environment for shared parenting to occur. When parents can manage to remain (or become) committed to dialogue, collaboration, and active participation in co-parenting, address the marital dimensions of their relationship separately from the parental dimensions and provide children a sense of centrality in their 'new' families, many of the problems associated with 'children of divorce' would fade significantly.

We might further understand the marital-parental distinction as related to the distinction between adult-centered aspects of separation and child-centered aspects, with their various needs and demands. Oftentimes, parents' post-divorce needs and children's post-divorce needs can appear to exist in competition. For instance, a primary need/demand for divorcing adults is to move apart and take space from the former spouse so that they can step outside the shared marital identity and free themselves of whatever aspects of relatedness that drove them away. A primary need/demand of their children, however, is ongoing identification within a family and the experience of being held in the shared mutual regard of their parents. Many parents in the present study described having grown apart from their ex-spouse or developing in increasingly different directions. While 'growing apart' or suffering the strains of incompatibility can justify ending a marital partnership, such explanations are insufficient to justify a simultaneous severance of the parental relationship, as so often occurs, given that one area of lasting compatibility would be a shared interest in child-rearing. Thus, it is crucial that parents recognize the importance of children's ongoing relationship to the parental dyad,

distinguish marital relatedness and co-parental relatedness for themselves, and then redefine themselves as partners in parenting so that they don't abandon both in the relinquishment of the former.

Joint custody

The major appeal of joint custody is that in this design, children are guaranteed regular contact with each of their parents. An opportunity typically overlooked is that the inherently cooperative design of a joint custody arrangement is a positive beginning toward creation of a reliable, ongoing parental dyad in which children are assured of contact with both of their parents, together, in the redefined post-divorce family. While parents will typically recognize that the 'intact' family has been irrevocably disrupted, altering their lives and their children's lives, in a lasting and dramatic fashion, a joint custody arrangement might tempt parents to imagine that the presence of two parents, in succession, provides children an adequate substitute for the intact family, (especially compared to those less 'egalitarian' divorces where one parent becomes sole custodian). This misconception has been noted by Wallerstein and her colleagues: "A father in one home and a mother in another home does not represent a marriage, however well they communicate. Separate may be equal but it is not together" (2000, p. 33). Still, the institution of joint custody can act as a protective factor, decreasing risks associated the adverse effects of parental separation, but only if parents are able to provide *joint* parenting in an ongoing way.

There are numerous risks factors associated with joint custody worthy to consider. These include the absence of dual parental resources, an emphasis on parental needs for convenience in schedule design over children's developmental needs, pressure on

children to manage parental conflict and estrangement, and the need for children to negotiate features of ‘bi-cultural’ life that emerge with distinct (and autonomous) parental homes. Additionally, issues pertaining to parent-child hierarchy disruption can arise frequently, especially given the absence of a ‘protective buffering’ (Cohen & Etazady, 1983) parent, while loyalty competitions will have ample territory to play out. Mullis & Otwell (1998) have cautioned that “the benefits to children of maintaining close relationships with both parents may be offset by the negative aspects of trying to please two different adults in different homes with correspondingly different rules and expectations” (p. 104). Oftentimes, children parented in joint custody are essentially living in single parent homes, visited in quick succession; while joint custody offers an opportunity for children to maintain relationships with *each* of their parents, there is significant loss of the experience of being in relationship with *both* parents, simultaneously, which the shared custody situation fails to simulate. In addition to the loss of cooperative parenting and combined parental regard, children living in single parent homes in succession might be prone to experience the same adverse effects associated with single family homes, but these risks might even be *multiplied* by virtue of residing in more than one single-family residence.

Joint custody has become a popular cultural trend that will likely continue to increase and while there are significant challenges presented, there are also opportunities for improved co-parenting. Indeed, joint custody is an institution that can be far superior to a single-parent custody arrangement – when implemented with awareness of the importance of shared child-rearing practices, consistency of primary values, and hard-won mutual respect between parents in the ongoing, though significantly transformed, co-

parental relationship. While parents might not want to budge in their desire (and sense of entitlement) to have their child 50% of the time, and while courts and mediators might view this as the most 'fair' design, "joint custody depends on parents giving priority to the child's changing capacity and need for uniform routines" (Wallerstein, 2000, p. 216). The changing needs of children might require periodic reassessment of the custody schedule in consideration of individual and developmental needs; this represents yet another feature of shared custody that calls for a cooperative, compromising, and child-centered approach to co-parenting. When proximity allows, flexibility in scheduling, according to children's developmental and immediate needs, can be just as important as predictability in scheduling. While the custody schedule might not be constant over the years, flexibility in terms of schedule ensures the primacy of children's needs as constant.

In terms of the most advantageous custody arrangement scenario, (and in reference to the ubiquitous question 'to-divorce or not-to-divorce?'), I would conclude that in the best possible scenario, children will have two fundamental needs met: they will be provided a sense of belonging and centrality in a mutually invested, supportive, well-wishing co-parental environment, and they will be offered sound models of adult relatedness, worthy of internalization and emulation. Obviously, an intact marriage is no guarantee that such needs will be met- a distressed marriage is often no place for a child and couples who decide to 'stay together' for their children are not necessarily doing them a favor, over time. A well designed, shared custody family arrangement can provide children with a taken-for granted sense of belonging and centrality, and offer models of positive adult relationships – in the form of parental remarriages as well as the re-constituted co-parental partnership.

Co-parenting continuum – Conflict, Civility, Cooperation

Throughout this study I use both the terms ‘collaborative’ and ‘cooperative’ to reference efforts by parents to lessen the divide between homes. To be clear, I am not enlisting these terms interchangeably; from my point of view, ‘collaboration’ refers to the practical coordination and consensus building that occurs in a well-functioning co-parental relationship while ‘cooperation’ refers to the spirit of goodwill, dedication to actively addressing disagreements, commitment to setting aside marital disputes that will intensify loyalty binds and hinder collaboration possible. While collaboration can occur in a civil co-parenting environment, such attempts can create additional strain on an already taxed system and are prone to rapid deterioration in moments of parental discord. The most effective means to enhancing children’s positive adjustment will be a combined effort toward promoting practical (collaborative) and emotional (cooperative) harmony within the new family.

As introduced elsewhere, Maccoby and colleagues (1990) have delineated four co-parenting patterns recognized in post-divorce families.²⁶ While some parents will appear to reside exclusively within a certain mode of relating, I find it useful to conceive of co-parenting as existing along continuum, from conflict, to civility, to cooperation, with parenting partners moving along this continuum over time and given stressors that will arise. Many parents who strive for a cooperative parenting arrangement in joint custody will still have moments of mere civility and toward the beginning of the post-divorce co-parenting relationship; in particular, they might need to take leave, take space, and function with limited contact. Early on, time spent collectively might arouse conflict

²⁶ These include ‘disengaged,’ ‘conflicted,’ ‘preoccupied,’ and ‘mixed’ co-parenting patterns and are presented at length in the Literature Review section.

and have to be parceled out sparingly, given the potential tension between parents that would be uncomfortable for all to bear. Settling with this sort of distance, however, will be problematic for children and their parents and while collaborative/cooperative co-parenting is no easy task, it something worth working toward. For instance, gathering together, even in a gradual way, will provide children the important presence of the dyad and lessen the intensity of disruption and fragmentation of family that so often occurs. When parents resign themselves to ongoing parental contact and collaboration, recognizing the ongoing relational demand as something akin to functioning as ‘in-laws’ by virtue of their shared primacy to their children, and make appropriate strides for interactions based on tolerance and good-will, everyone can benefit.

The quality of nurturing, attentive, structuring parenting has been shown to be most significant factor in children’s adjustment following divorce (Clarke-Stewart & Brentano, 2006) and co-parenting characterized by respect and collaboration, has been shown to be the most protective factor for children of divorce (Hetherington, 1999) - even when there are ongoing disagreements that require working through (Camara & Resnick, 1989) or when clear boundaries need to be established and upheld as another cooperative endeavor (Madden-Derdich, et al., 1999). Childless couples who part in divorce can simply take flight. In time, they might become mere blips on each other’s relational map. Once couples have children together, they are forever bound, for better or worse; despite the decision to sever the marital relationship, they will remain connected by virtue of their shared status as parents to their children. To this point, Wallerstein (2000) writes: “as much as divorced couples may want to wipe the slate clean as parents, they cannot. Children are a permanent legacy of the marriage” (2000, p.46). The type of

relationship parenting partners establish will have deep significance for their children who continue to reside in the shared custodial arrangement, though no longer in a shared parental home. Divorcing couples need space to work through pre-existing conflict in the interest of effective co-parenting and functional co-existence, and this needs to occur via direct communication, away from their children.

Cooperative, collaborative co-parenting can provide a number of protective factors, and reparative factors, to minimize some of the negative, expectable adjustment effects of divorce and joint custody. The benefits of ‘cooperative parenting activities’ are well documented [for example, Wallerstein 2000] and include the types of child-centered interactions that typically occur between parents in an intact home: dialogue about the children, collaborative efforts and consensus-building to create continuity, consistency, reliable routine, and clear parameters around children’s roles and behavior. What I am referencing as cooperative, collaborative parenting not only requires consensus building and regular communication, but also requires that parents exercise restraint in terms of power struggles and disparagement, develop an open and empathic stance toward the ex-partner, and actively work through areas of disagreement.

In terms of the inevitable conflict that will at times emerge between ex-spouses committed to co-parenting, it is important to note that anger, in and of itself, is not harmful and feelings of anger are expectable in divorcing and divorced couples; the way anger comes to be expressed in the post-divorce environment, however, can be extremely harmful to children, ex-spouses, and families as a whole. In their studies on marital interaction and the likelihood of couples to remain married or divorce, Gottman and colleagues (1998) observed an important distinction related to this: “We found no

evidence in the study of newlyweds to support the model of anger as the destructive emotions in marriages. Instead, we found evidence that replicated the Gottman findings that contempt, belligerence, and defensiveness were the destructive patterns during conflict resolution” (p.17).

My hypothesis that parental conflict would persist after divorce, with detrimental consequences, was only partly borne out. In the families interviewed for this study, it appeared that overt parental conflict typically subsided after divorce, but this was achieved largely via a strategy of contact avoidance, which ushered in a variety of other stressors. Notably, while arguments and direct expressions of anger were more absent, more passive expressions of anger via disparagement of the other parent or disapproval of a child’s affection for/identification with the other parent emerged prominently. According to child subjects’ accounts, it was not unusual for parents to seize upon children’s normative conflict with the other parent to validate their negative or pathologizing character assessment. Increased parental recognition that good parent/ bad parent dynamics are a normative factor of *every* family can relax reactions that might shame, inhibit, or alienate a child who is struggling to manage internal identity shifts and external relational transitions. In contrast, a climate of cooperative parenting promotes feelings of belonging to a broad family system and minimizes problematic loyalty binds by allowing multiple attachments with fewer competing identifications.

In addition to a co-parental relationship (ideally constructed around cooperation, collaboration, and communication and grounded in the recognition that a parental partnership has emerged from the marital partnership), the post-divorce family might also accommodate multiple care-givers as parents re-partner. While this will present a host of

other challenges to address in the reconstructed family, step-family members can provide increased support and belonging (as seen to differing degrees in a few families in my study). In terms of the blended-family challenges, and similar to subtle parental disparagement, children will be highly receptive to parental ambivalence about the other parent's new partner and potential role rivalries that can emerge. While divorced parents (and step-families) cannot simulate an intact family dynamic, they can certainly make strides to lessen the loyalty burdens on children. Wallerstein (2000) has advised that "a good parent doesn't criticize the other parent. Quite the opposite. They go out of their way to protect the child from feeling he needs to take sides or that there are sides..." (p. 44). Otherwise, we can anticipate "a climate where children feel a need to hide loving feelings about the other parent" (Kenny, 2000, p. 232), feel barred from publicly 'missing' the other parent, contacting a parent on the other parent's time, or welcoming new (step) members into the family. Anna Freud (1972) has written pointedly: "Unlike adults, who are capable of maintaining positive emotional ties with a number of different individuals, unrelated or even hostile to each other, children are constitutionally unable to do so. They will freely love more than one adult only if the individuals in question feel positively to one another. Failing this, they become prey to severe and crippling *loyalty conflicts*" (italics hers, p. 624)."

When children move between two parental homes with little contact and collaboration between parents, it results in a sort of 'split' custody that can leave a child feeling like half-mom's and half-dad's, with a diminished experience of self-integrity between homes and little opportunity for whole-family identification and relatedness. In those post-divorce families that function with autonomy and enlist contact avoidance to

decrease parental conflict, parents can have little notion of their child's life in the other home – indeed, 'mom's house' or 'dad's house' can be regarded as an off-limit subject or a subject so upsetting/arousing to parents that children will avoid it at all costs, at times even having to put off solicitations to say more. With parents largely unaware of their children's rhythm and routine half the time, there will be minimal understanding of the challenges their children face and little hope of providing appropriate support and opportunities to process reactions. Availability of contact with parents during off-week time, and permission not only to speak *of* the other parent, but also to speak *with* the other parent can lessen the sense of split existence that can characterize parental homes that function with strict autonomy.

The establishment of greater consistency between parental homes will directly address one of the traditional stressors of joint custody – namely, having to change week-to-week to accommodate different rules, expectations, and routines. It is important to stress how the provision of external structure is taken in and becomes internally structuring. The importance of household routine and structure cannot be overemphasized in degree of importance in the post-divorce family culture, when so many predictable features of life seem to have fallen apart and can be crucial in providing a sense of internal calm during repeated the repeated transitions of joint custody. Ideally, co-parents would collaborate around such things as bedtime, curfew, homework time, rules and consequences, toward the attainment of predictable features of life that transcend a particular address. When joint custody arrangements included little cooperative parenting, child subjects described dramatic change in terms of routines, rules,

expectations, and degree of household organization, which interfered with more fluid home-to-home adjustment.

It is argued here that creation of more fluid identification with both parental ‘cultures’ necessitates the concerted, coordinated effort of co-parents to minimize some of the risks associated with joint custody, via the establishment of a cooperative parental relationship. Increased consistency between households, in terms of routine (e.g. bedtime and mealtimes), rules and expectations (e.g. screen-time and homework), is essential to lessen the strain of frequent transition between homes. Consensus-building in such areas is an important aspect of optimal co-parenting functioning, but until parents can talk to each other peaceably, make inquiries and disclosures (non-defensively) about the child’s life in the respective homes, this will be impossible to achieve. Wallerstein and her colleagues (2000) have advised parents to establish open communication with children once divorce is decided upon and, in particular reference to joint custody, to create open dialogue about the challenges of lost consistency that can make post-divorce life feel particularly unsettled, and unsettling: “Tell them again about plans for parents and children – where you and they will live, changes in parents’ schedules, changes in theirs. Make sure you talk about your concern for continuity in their interests in teams, after-school activities, staying close to best friends. Be honest about disruptions and moves” (p. 49).

More problematic, arguably, than the absence of consistency and consensus building in joint custody, was how features of dual residence contributed to children’s sense of precarious belonging within the broad family, and in a given home, at a given time; while negotiating differences, subtle or extreme, certainly compromised children’s

ability to feel settled and confident about how to behave, it was overall less problematic than negotiating the sort of marginalization that resulted from feeling like a parent's child only part of the time. Parental communication and collaboration can create a 'holding space,' a 'container' of temporal continuity because there is less jarring alteration of exclusivity between parent-child relationships. The coming-together of parents in a constructive way means a significant increase in parental resources and opportunities for child-centered dialogue – before a steady decline in academics, behavioral issues, or deficits in emotional well-being force parents to come together. When parents can separate marital resentment from their shared interest in providing children a sufficient co-parental environment, joint custodial family life will become less disruptive, and more beneficial, for all involved. When parents reconvene after a period of distance, or flight, they might at first long to be spared from contact and struggle to adapt, but in time parents will most likely appreciate opportunities for increased influence on the child's life at the other home, the useful contributions of a second parent, and witness the improved functioning of their children.

Collaboration and cooperation in parenting provide children with the benefits of consistency, routine, and other structuring benefits of parental activity, but has other important implications for children's emotional well-being. Beyond the anxiety-reducing effects of structuring and consensus-building approaches to co-parenting, when parents decide to set aside adult differences and maintain a family alliance in terms of caring for their children, children are reassured of their importance and the priority they represent to their parents in the setting aside of differences on their behalf. Collaborative parenting, simply as a gesture, restores – to some degree - the comforting presence of a parenting

dyad for children; it also sends a direct message to children that their parents are willing to come together and form a united front for their sake, that they are still held in the collective spirit of the dyad, of a lasting family. Children are given explicit communication of belonging to both parents in an ongoing way - with the permission to love both parents simultaneously, exposure to more peaceful, productive parental interaction, and the comfort of feeling loved by both parents simultaneously. Cooperative co-parenting provides an opportunity to reinstate for children a sense of parental togetherness post-divorce and to promote identification with a more broad family system, while ensuring children's place of centrality within the family.

The argument for cooperative co-parenting and consensus building is not aimed to discourage or minimize parental self-expression or pursuance of one's preferred kind of family life. It is argued, though, that becoming knowledgeable about children's lives in the other parental home, establishing some consistency in terms of expectations, routine, rules, and schedule, and promotion of dialogue between parents is crucial in lessening a child's sense of 'dual citizenship' and toward the promotion of more fluid transition and identification as a member of one broad family - even if comprised by diverse elements. When parental homes are drastically different, in terms of expectations, routine, and rules, children can feel disoriented by the transition between and have difficulty establishing a sense of temporal continuity and continuous identity. In the shared custody arrangement, a child might be expected to adopt very different roles from one house to the other, upsetting whatever attempts he or she is making to 'fit in' to the new life. The shifting roles, competing loyalties and identifications, the ways of being accepted and encouraged in one locale, but discouraged or disparaged in another.

Many parent subjects in this study expressed awareness of differences between parental homes, and voiced optimism that strengths in one home could compensate for weaknesses in the other, but child subjects appeared more impacted by the deficits of a particular home and didn't allude to any 'compensating effect.' Parental homes will inevitably show areas of relative strength and weakness, but consensus building and communication around child-rearing beliefs can protect against the parental differences from becoming quite so stark and prevent areas of relative weakness from becoming so prevalent. Parental efforts to come together and create more constancy amidst transition is a crucial step toward providing *two* homes where, for example, children are given *both* predictable structure and opportunities for self-expression, rather than having to trade one area of strength for another, depending on where they reside.²⁷

²⁷ In a well-intentioned, but off-the-mark intervention recalled by one parent subject, a family therapist assured co-parents that achieving consensus in child-rearing was not necessary, as long as children felt lovingly regarded by both parents: "*When the rearing styles are as different as the two different rearing styles that were going on, our therapist kept saying 'look, it doesn't matter, just as long as there's some love and some respect going on, whichever the style.'*"

Clinical implications

Post-divorce individual therapy, co-parenting therapy, and/or family therapy can provide crucial assistance to parents as they attempt to firm up mentalizing capacities and provide a reflective and regulating presence for children – especially given the uncertainty and helplessness parents might experience as they embark on their new lives. Lowery (1985) argues that “it may be necessary for a therapist or practitioner to educate parents on the importance of a cooperative post-divorce parenting relationship and to facilitate its occurrence (p. 248).”²⁸ Typically, parents who opt for joint custody believe that children’s well-being is bolstered by ongoing relationships with both their mother and their father (Cote, 2000; Maccoby & Mnooking, 1992). In order to increase the incident of truly cooperative post-divorce co-parenting, (in contradistinction to ‘split-custody’ or ‘parallel parenting’) parents need to be alerted, as well, to the benefits of mutually engaged, co-parental efforts for their children.

Family therapy, aside from individual and co-parenting treatments, can be useful to address difficulties managing home-to-home alterations, adjusting to expansions of the family system that occur with remarriages and additional offspring, to identify and address the sorts of loyalty binds and rivalries that are common in joint custody and the blended family, or for exploring/ negotiating a child’s needs or desires for a reevaluation of the custody schedule. While much of the present discussion stresses the internal, representational experience of children in divorce and joint custody and the emotional processes of them and their parents, this is not meant to neglect a more systemic point of

²⁸ In the present study, the family that achieved the most success in staying somewhat intact, in terms of parental collaboration/cooperation, relied upon outside mediation and therapy to work through difficulties that inevitably arose.

view. issues pertaining to the individual are inherently bound/ interrelated with systemic issues, just as the child's 'inner representational world' co-exists interactively with their 'outer environmental world' though focus may settle on one or the other at a given time. While discussion (and subjective experience) might emphasize either one or another 'location,' of selfhood in a given moment, it is understood that people reside both individually and systemically, in both their inner worlds and outer worlds, simultaneously and together.

Winnicott (1953) has written that in terms of 'good enough' mothering, "success in infant-care depends on the fact of devotion, not on cleverness or intellectual enlightenment" (p. 94). Devotion, however, might not always prove sufficient and awareness can indeed be increased with 'clever' clinical intervention. Simply alerting parents to a child's potential array of internal experience and emotional needs following divorce, for instance, can rouse parents from preoccupied slumber, indicating a good start. For example, one researcher (J.B. Kelly in Cohen & Etazady, 1983) observed a problematic pattern of increasing absence among fathers assigned visitation post-divorce, but was able to intervene quite easily by articulating aloud the important benefit of their ongoing presence on their children's lives: "children seeing the father perhaps only two days out of two weeks [had led] to the father's increasing lack of involvement," but "a very significant preventative measure was simply to make the fathers aware of the importance of their involvement with children and the indispensable role they continue to play in the life of their children after the divorce" (p. 258). Significantly, this proved effective even when parents were embroiled in their own complex emotional/adjustment reactions; these fathers were able to show up more consistently once they were sensitized

to their children's needs, even though their decreased participation prior to this had been attributed to many of the fathers feeling "depressed and [having] had experienced the separation as painful loss [and] at times found their visits with their children too upsetting" (p. 253).

The importance of identifying strategies for co-parenting effectiveness should not be understated, but a primary focus of post-divorce therapy for parents, at least initially, can involve the tasks of mourning and moving on: working through feelings of anger and disappointment, so that these don't come to be played out through and around the children or interfere with valiant co-parenting efforts. The significance of divorce loss on adults is intense and might revive strong affective associations to previous losses that can become displaced onto the current situation, delaying mourning further – another reason for divorcing adults to seek support/ treatment in the interest of their own ongoing development, distinct from their role as parents. Successful parental mourning is stressed here mostly in terms of its benefits for more sensitive, available, and cooperative parenting to children post-divorce; it is important to stress that when parents work through conflict left over from their marriage, mourn the loss of the other, (and of the intact dyad comprised of two together), it will benefit them beyond their role as parent, facilitating growth that will extend beyond their capacity to be available for their children or in a cooperative parenting dyad with the ex-spouse.

Related to this, one author (Rosbrow-Reich, 1988) has described how divorce can provide a favorable opportunity when powerful transference to a partner, combined with separation from a (former) partner, promotes "regression that enables personality reorganization" and has observed how, in her treatment of divorcing women, "the

protracted mourning that occurred facilitated further growth through new processes of internalization” (p. 420). The work parents do to separate and overcome conflict associated with their former marriage will often make way for new partnerships, result in less emotional ‘baggage’ carried into these subsequent relationships, and allow more access to pleasure and enjoyment. In Wolfenstein’s words: “Painful as it is to endure, mourning serves an invaluable adaptive function, since by this process the mourner frees major amounts of libido which were bound to the lost object, which he can utilize for other relations and sublimated activities in the world of the living” (1966, p. 94).

While it will often be important for parents to engage in individual treatment that focuses primarily on their individual, intrapsychic concerns, it is also important that their self-as-parent is given attention (aside from co-parental interventions). Without an active therapeutic emphasis, explicit consideration of the child’s mind might not find much space in a parent’s own treatment; engaging their own process of healing, for instance, can promote such focus on one’s own adjustment as to overshadow the importance of children’s needs. Indeed, individual (and couple) treatment with divorcing parents might, at times, need an increased focus on their role as parents of children in the midst of upheaval and change. Wallerstein was summarized as observing (in 1980) that “in all the varieties and modalities of treatments, including psychoanalysis, which were provided for the parents of the children of her study, no consideration was given to the plight of the child unless the therapist was trained in child work;” she concluded that this was “likely to be a universal finding across the country and [had] important training implications” (cited in Cohen & Etazady, 1983, p. 258).

In terms of more directly focused co-parenting therapy, when competitive feelings, feelings of impatience or frustration are encountered between parents, these will need to be addressed, but ought not shift attention, for long anyway, from the mind of the child. Slade (2008) has written of the role of normative conflict in work with intact parents and the need to remain focused on the mind of the child; her points are arguably even more relevant in work with divorced co-parents:

While a couple's dynamics may become an issue when working with a mother and father together, one is generally trying to use one parent's understanding of the child to inform the other's, rather than focus upon discrepancies in their views, and the conflicts that result from these discrepancies. While a couple's conflicts will of course be an issue in certain circumstances, they can hopefully be addressed in such a way that the child's mind – as it exists in dynamic relation to the minds of his parents – can remain the focus of the work (329-330).

Often, it will be important for clinicians to work with parents, to increase their capacity for 'parental reflective function.' Given what some call a 'relational shift' in psychoanalysis and the emergent research on attachment and reflective function, "it is no longer possible to think of the child's internal world as *distinct and separate from his ongoing relational* experiences, and because psychoanalytic clinicians now see the child's sense of his own mind and his self-experience as dyadically and triadically created" (Slade, 2008, p. 311, italics included), many child clinicians are increasingly focused – explicitly or not – on "enhancing parents' mentalizing capacities."²⁹ That is,

²⁹ An increased engagement with parents as an extension of child work can be seen as preceding the 'relational shift,' with the promotion of the Child Guidance Model by Anna Freud, in challenge to the perspective of Melanie Klein and others who cautioned against parental involvement in child treatment (Slade, 2008).

they are working to help the parent contemplate and make sense of the child's internal experience, and to grow to appreciate the multiple links between the child's behavior and his and her mental states" (Slade p. 312).

Limitations

A primary limitation of this study was the small sample size: fourteen participants representing seven families. Many more families would need to be interviewed in order to generalize findings to a broad population. A second limitation was related to the study design; once an initial family member subject was recruited, I relied upon intra-family referral to solidify participation from other family members and found it difficult in some cases to gain access or secure participation from as many family members as I had initially hoped. One respondent initially expressed optimism that her family members would be willing to participate, but became somewhat evasive and resistant to facilitating contact. This might have been due, in part, to how emotionally evocative the research could be, highlighting a third limitation. Some potential subjects initially indicated that they planned to participate, but then never followed up or responded to further inquiries. One parent, the mother of a child subject, first agreed to participate, then demurred, explaining she couldn't 'bear to revisit' this period of her life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the importance of a cooperative 'team approach' to parenting, in the interest of the children, post-divorce cannot be over stressed. Maccoby (1990) has made the important point that even intact couples will not agree on everything, but will present something of a 'united front' [p. 142] to their children. To the degree that this can be achieved in the post-divorce family, children will be less burdened by problematic

emphasis on separation and division between parents. Through the creation of an ‘intact co-parenting dyad,’ conceived of as both a cooperative parental relationship and the establishment of structural consistencies between homes, several important things are accomplished: First, there is offered up a worthy substitute object to satisfy children’s attachment needs. Secondly, there is provision of a secure support system so that children can engage the mourning process, less hindered by parental splitting and denial. Once parents have themselves submitted to the mourning process, it both normalizes feelings of grief, allowing acknowledgment that something has indeed passed, and prepares parents to better support their children through their loss reactions. When parents are no longer disavowing their own loss and/or minimizing the significance of the familial loss, they will be less internally resistant to recognizing the significant loss for the children. Another important outcome of parents’ mourning process is that parents will be less emotionally conflicted, more open to new adult relationships and therefore less likely to rely on their children to meet their emotional needs. Unlike parents who opt for a sole-custodial solution, parents who agree to share custody can provide children with a dyadic parental experience that involves shared parental contact, communication, consensus-building, and cooperation.

The loss of parents as a cooperative entity can affect children in a number of significant ways, but the overarching impact involves two distinct, but interacting losses: a lessening in the amount of combined parental support and a diminishment of the internal experience of the parents as a combined entity. In order for parents to be able to come together as parenting partners, it appears that two steps needed to be taken: first, parents need to mourn, come to terms, or resolve ongoing conflict, in order to be able to

communicate about their children and support each other as parents. Parents' unresolved feelings: idealized adoration, aching guilt, seething disdain – interfere with effective, child-centered co-parenting. In order for parents to arrive at a (good enough) familial relationship, beyond civility and way beyond conflict, they will have to do the difficult work of relinquishing the marital vow as well as the marital discord, processing the anger and mourning the loss; this is no small task, but appears essential for the formation of truly cooperative parenting.

Once the parameters between marital functioning and parental functioning are more clearly defined and internalized, over time, parents will be better equipped to identify conflict related to their ill-fated marriage and address this separately, if they see fit to do so, and achieve more common ground in relation to their children. As they come to regard their co-parent with more emphasis on their role as parent than their limitations as a partner or the 'type of person' they happen to be, they will be better able to recognize the other's positive and admirable qualities as a parent, more inclined toward empathic commiseration about the challenges of parenthood with offerings of practical support, and more likely to work together to refine a shared approach to parenting based on mutually identified rules, expectations, and strategies for supporting and guiding their children.

In terms of practical recommendations for easing children's adjustment to post-divorce life, parents might refrain from communicating too loudly the message that 'we are no longer together,' as a couple and a family, but instead emphasize aspects of familial togetherness that *will* persist, while affirming a notion of broad family identity. In joint custody in particular, it can be communicated that the family continue to exist,

as together in ‘a new sort of way.’ Interventions parents might make to ease the transitions of joint custody and shore up children’s sense of belonging in parental homes might include: opportunities for children to name household pets, permission for children to decorate their rooms (or portions of their shared rooms) to make the space ‘their own’, permission - perhaps even encouragement - for children to maintain contact with the other parent during ‘off-weeks,’ and parental efforts to shield children from adult conversations (e.g. financial discussions) that might expose them to conflict or compromise children’s sense of worth.³⁰

³⁰ Financial negotiations are a premiere example of how children can become like ‘pawns’ (Nordhaus, 1991) in a parental contest of ongoing conflict and disdain. As the ‘product’ of parental union, children can feel particularly devalued if co-parenting disintegrates into a business relationship based on equity and exchange, with more emphasis on pragmatism than sensitive parenting.

APPENDIX A

Semi-structured Interview for Children of Divorce and Joint Custody

1. Please describe your interest in participating in this study.
2. Tell me about life prior to your parents' separation.
3. Tell me about life following the separation.
4. What was the joint custody arrangement?
5. Choose 3 words to describe your mother's home and 3 words to describe your father's home.
6. How did your parents change following the separation? How did they stay the same?
7. How would you say you changed/stayed the same following the separation?
8. How would you say you changed/ stayed the same from home to home?
9. Describe your relationship with your parents before and after the separation.
10. How flexible was the joint custody arrangement in terms of time spent in each home?
11. How were holidays negotiated?
12. Describes consistencies and inconsistencies you experienced between households.
13. What sort of consistency was there in terms of sitters/daycare/ nannies?
14. Describe the process of moving between parental homes.
15. What sort of support did your parents provide to ease this transition?
16. How did your parents communicate about co-parenting?
17. What were the spoken or unspoken 'rules' about talking about the other parent/ parental home?
18. How much did your parents know about your life at the other parent's home?
19. What were the spoken or unspoken 'rules' about bringing belongings from home to home?
20. Any one item you recall always bringing back and forth?
21. How did your friendships change with the joint custody arrangement?
22. How did you relationships with extended family change with the joint custody arrangement?
23. How were new family members (e.g. step-parents, step-siblings) introduced and integrated into the households?
24. How did the presence of new family members impact your relationship with your parents?
25. To what degree did you feel 'at home' in each household?
26. Describe your sibling relationships prior to and following your parents' separation.
27. Describe your sibling relationships from home to home.
28. How aware were your parents of the various challenges of moving between homes?
29. If you were to ever raise children in joint custody, what might you do the same? Differently?

APPENDIX B

Semi-structured Interview for Parents of Divorce and Joint Custody

1. Please describe your interest in participating in this study.
2. What was the joint custody arrangement and how did you arrive at this?
3. How would you say your children changed/ stayed the same following the separation?
4. How did you change/stay the same following the separation? What might your children say?
5. How would you say your ex-spouse changed/stayed the same? What might your children say?
6. Describe your relationship with your children prior to and following the separation.
7. How did you and your ex-spouse communicate about co-parenting? How much did you feel you were 'on the same page' in terms of parenting style?
8. How flexible was the joint custody arrangement in terms of time spent in each home?
9. How were holidays negotiated?
10. What sorts of consistencies/inconsistencies do you imagine your children experienced between homes?
11. What sort of consistencies in terms of sitters/nannies/daycare?
12. What sort of space was provided in your home for your children? (e.g. did they have their own room? Could they decorate?)
13. What were the rules/expectations about your children bringing belongings between homes? Any one item you recall them always bringing back and forth?
14. What were some agreements/disagreements about rules, expectations, or other aspects of child-rearing between you and your ex-spouse?
15. How did you and your ex-spouse support your children's transition between homes?
16. How did your children's friendships change with the joint custody arrangement?
17. How did your children's relationships with extended family change with the joint custody arrangement?
18. How were new family members (e.g. step-parents/ step-siblings) introduced and integrated into your household?
19. How did the presence of new family members impact your relationship with your children?
20. How similar/different was this household compared to the household you shared with your ex-spouse?
21. How informed did you feel about your children's life in the other parental home?
22. Describe some advantages and complications of joint custody.
23. What advantages and complications do you imagine your children might mention?
24. If you were to do it over, what might you do the same/differently?

APPENDIX C

Sample Case Study: Brian and Anna

Brian's story

Several important themes were illustrated in the interview with Brian. Difficulties in establishing an effective co-parenting relationship are quite pronounced in his story, related to a lack of consensus in ending the marriage and incomplete parental mourning following divorce. Another theme prominent in his story is the challenge of maintaining competing loyalties and a sense of belonging when new significant others and new offspring enter the family orbit. Finally, we hear in Brian's story profound sensitivity to a child's loss experience following divorce and how a parents' own loss experience can become intermingled with their empathic regard for their child; conversely, we recognize how a parent's minimization of the significance of a failed marital dyadic experience or parent-child relationship can impair their recognition of the importance it holds for a child.

Brian has three children, from three different marriages, each of which ended in divorce and some variety of shared custody. He expressed appreciation that research was being conducted about this topic, given that "*divorce and custody is so rampant, and such a problem and so many people experience it;*" he described his own experience as a father of [divorce and joint custody] as "*traumatic.*" He elaborated, "*you've got a sort of ideals of what you would like for your children, and for yourself. And when this doesn't happen, it's just, it's very difficult.*"

Brian engaged the interview with a remarkable amount of openness and emotional expressiveness, becoming tearful several times throughout. While Brian was quite

disclosing about his array of feelings and explained with impressive insight the internal conflicts that led to choices he had made related to marriage and divorce, he spoke only of his eldest son and first two marriages during our interview and it wasn't until his daughter, product of his second marriage, was interviewed that the fact emerged that he had a third marriage, resulting in a third child, a son, and that his present marriage, (which he described as rewarding and successful), is, in fact, his fourth. Given his degree of personal disclosure throughout the interview, it is remarkable that he didn't discuss his youngest two children or the management of divorce and custody with their mothers.

There are alternative ways to think about Brian's impressive openness on one hand and remarkable concealment on the other. His first marriage, that he focused on primarily, producing his son Eric, was relatively long lasting compared with his next two marriages, which each spanned but a few years, and he reflected on it as overall happy and rewarding. His second marriage was discussed in solely disparaging terms, and his third didn't earn mention. Given his ability to reflect on his first marriage as a worthy endeavor, it seems he is likewise able to understand what was lost for his son when the marriage ended while his minimization or disparagement of the worth his two subsequent marriages is extended to the progeny of these. During the interview he remarked that it might have been easier for Eric had his parents separated when he was only a toddler because he wouldn't have known them together for very long; this suggests that he regards the loss for his younger children as less severe because they hadn't yet internalized a sense of their parents as a cohesive unit, that they didn't have 'as much' to lose. We might also consider that the amount of loss processed during the interview, in

regards to this first marriage and his first child, is already more than most might be equipped to tolerate and delving into subsequent losses might have felt overwhelming.

It is important to note, however, that while it is clear that Brian's experience of knowing Eric daily, for his first 12 years, distinguished this from his latter two parenting experiences, one does not gather the sense, in the interview with Anna, that his role in her development was less important, less intimate, less rife with identification than her mother's role, even though she was living with him far less of the time. That Brian left out Anna and Alex from his interview reflects, most likely, his sense of having been largely left out of their lives for the majority of time; the implied minimization of his importance on their lives and development (especially that he wasn't entirely absent, and did see them in regular and predictable intervals) suggests some denial in him, perhaps motivated by unacknowledged guilt and regret.

During the interview Brian had made brief mention of having had a daughter, but never mentioned Anna by name and never reflected on her experience except to mention that, as with his Eric, he felt like a *'visitor'* in her life. Remarkably, he got in contact the day following our interview to say that he had talked about the interview over lunch with his daughter and that she was eager to be interviewed. When asked about her interest in participating she explained, with some irony given Brian's nominal mention of her, *"I'm just interested in following up with your interview with my dad. I think it's beneficial to have other parts of the same story."* Eric was unavailable to be interviewed for this study despite initially expressing his willingness; each time he was contacted he explained he was busy with work and postponed. Finally, his inability to settle on a date and time was understood as reluctance and it was not pursued further.

Need to leave marriage to individuate

Brian's story of divorcing Eric's mom involves a theme heard elsewhere in this collection of case studies, that of a quest for individuation and differentiation that leads one from what is experienced as the confines of the marital dyad. As he reflected on his decision to leave the marriage, he described that he had met and married Eric's mom when they were quite young, in college, and that as they grew older, they grew apart: "*in the process of growing up, and figuring out who we are, then trying to individuate – in a sense separate from each other in figuring that out.*" He explained that while he felt they were "*really a unit,*" they had also become "*really enmeshed with each other.*" He described this 'enmeshment' as a stifling factor on his ability to differentiate within the relationship and in his illustration one can recognize the dynamic of one partner venturing out into the world and the other rushing to stay close by, and in the desire to ensure connection, inadvertently pushing that partner further away. Brian explained:

"There was little room to do things on my own, and that's where the problems came. It's like, if I decided to go, I went to school to become a nurse and she went to school and became a nurse. And I worked on a psychiatric floor in a unit in a hospital, and then she worked in the same psychiatric unit. And then I decided I wanted to learn Spanish, and she decided to take a Spanish class. That was, it was, and then after a while, I felt like I was just trying to find anything that would be my own. And yet, when we were together, and that wasn't a big issue, we were great. We had a lot of fun. It was really a very together, fun relationship."

Brian described his desire to make a complete severance from his first wife, who exerted pressure for him to return, by rushing into a second marriage: "*In my desire to*

make a clean rupture between her and me, I got remarried almost right away, which was a disaster... She was so intent on getting me back, that she wouldn't leave me alone. And to me, it felt like a continuation of what was going on in the marriage. And in retrospect, while I didn't see it at the time, but in retrospect, I think I got married just to put more distance between us. And, it was really a rebound marriage." He described that in hindsight, he feels his need to put distance between himself and his first wife overshadowed consideration of Eric's needs:

"If I could do it over again, I would not, I wouldn't remarry, I wouldn't have remarried until he had left home... I'm really glad that [his mom] didn't, you know, and I think that was, in the whole picture of everything that was most painful, I think my remarrying and starting another family was probably more painful to Eric than anything. You know, I think that gave him the message of displacement and not being wanted. We didn't talk about it at the time, but as adults we've talked about it."

Recognition of child's experience of loss and projection of one's own loss reaction

Brian spoke with tremendous empathy, and guilt, for the pain the divorce caused for his son Eric, and throughout his account we hear his own feelings of loss interwoven, and perhaps some projective processes, within his depiction of Eric's loss:

"I think I carry, the guilt I carry about hurting Eric, I think that's the big thing, that, he's doing better now than he ever has, but he's had a real struggle with just, just finding his place in the world. And, I think that's the big thing that I end up having a lot of emotion about, a lot of feeling about, is feeling like I've hurt him. Not so much that I'm to blame for the separation, but that I hurt him by leaving... I don't think I was sensitive to how devastating that would be to him. You know, when I was a kid, my parents didn't

get along well. What was painful to me was seeing them fight all the time. They didn't get divorced until I left home. And so, I kind of felt like, well I'm not going to put my son through that, the discomfort that I experienced. And so, I thought it would be so much more preferable to, to leave, so that he didn't have to live with the tension that I lived with. And it sure didn't turn out that way."

Brian imagined Eric's confusion when he was told his parents would be separating, because they had shared a relatively conflict-free marriage: *"I mean, literally for him, it was going from, you know, one day, us being a seemingly completely happy together unit and then all of a sudden, this rupture was there;"* he recalled sadly that the announcement was made the morning after they all three gone to see the movie 'Stand By Me' together. He described, tearfully, his attempts to maintain some semblance of normality, and routine, by continuing to do Eric's paper route with him, after he moved temporarily into a friend's apartment nearby, but that this effort to maintain normality had something of an artificial and enforced quality: *"I mean, it was something that I did with him when we lived together, and then doing it afterwards, I just remember it being more strained. Like, I was continuing to do it, and yet, it was just, it had sort of a bizarre feel to it, like I was doing this, and you know there was his, he was, there was more distance, and it felt a little bit bizarre."*

Maintaining a primary role in Eric's life was something that he continued to struggle to maintain, but he described increased distance, both physically and emotionally. Initially, he and Eric's mother established a 50/50 custody arrangement, but he had moved to a town an hour away and *"in high school he was more involved in social things... and coming to Dad's house wasn't as big a priority"* so his son spent most of

his time at his mother's home, (she had continued to reside in their original home), and spent each weekend, then every other weekend, with Brian.

He described that Eric changed after the divorce, crediting this in part to normative development, but also to the "trauma" of the divorce on his subsequent adjustment: *"It was a really bad time, you know I think, you know, he was 12, almost 13, and so I think that's a really hard time for kids anyway. So, he was always very open, loving, warm, 'huggy' kid, and, you know, he didn't really lose that, but definitely became more withdrawn and, and I think angry underneath that."* Brian depicts this anger as lasting, and directed largely toward him, as part of their particular dynamic: *"a dance: that I felt really guilty, and he felt really angry."* For example, *"when he was little, holidays were really important, and we spent holidays at his mom's family's house... I don't remember ever having Christmas, any kind of Christmas holiday with him again until, until he was, out of college, and then he would come to my house really drunk on Christmas. And it was kind of a statement, I think, it was a kind of 'fuck you Dad, I'm here, it's Christmas time, do you like it?'"*

Brian described profound regret that he was unable to maintain the close relationship with Eric he had previously had, when he was married to Eric's mother, crediting this to Eric's feelings of anger, to the amended custody schedule with less regular contact, and to his remarriage and formation of a new family. In interviews with children of divorce, feelings of displacement and loss of a sense of familial belonging are often quite prominent; in Brian's story, we hear how this can characterize a parent's experience, following divorce, as well. This emerged largely in his expressions of envy that Eric's mother got to be a more regular and consistent figure for his son: *"I was more*

aware of rivalry at important events, like his graduation from high school, or that kind of thing where I was definitely the outsider. And so, I felt like an outsider around being able to be there for the basketball games and that kind of thing... I felt like a sort of reject.... Like, when I would go to sports games, there was just kind of this struggle to figure out, ok, so these are his friends, and I remember, I really liked his friends and I wished that I could get to know them, or, and some of that I think is, is true of all parents, whether you're living in a united family or not, that in adolescence, you know, kids don't want their parents around. But, it was sort of like those few moments when I was involved were really juicy for me. But I remember going to sports events, like track events, and, feeling like, if [his mom] was there, she knew the other parents and I didn't. And so, when she wasn't there, kind of trying to sit with them and get to know them, but still feeling like an outsider, and I always have."

Brian's sense of displacement and loss wasn't limited to the nuclear family, but in extended family relationships and friendship networks as well. *"My mother, who lived in Vermont, was really close to [my ex-wife] and really loved [her]. And, when she came down to Eric's high school graduation, she stayed at Cynthia's house instead of my house, which was bizarre to me... And Cynthia's parents, who had become family to me, refused to talk to me. And so, that was, that was hard too. So, you know, all of this got in the way of having us being able to communicate about Eric."* In regards to their social circle, Brian described feelings of loss in terms of increased isolation and even betrayal: *"I pretty much relinquished it all except for one close friend...it was kind of weird because he, my best friend and I, had another best friend who ended up being the person that Cynthia got married to later. And so, that was, soon after the divorce, it became*

clear that this person who was a friend of mine was interested in Cynthia ... I felt quite betrayed by him. He was a, he was also somebody I considered to be a close friend, who was also in a therapy group with me, and so was privy to my talking about my feelings about the relationship and so it was, that was actually pretty infuriating.”

Lack of consensus in ending marriage and implications on co-parenting

Brian was clearly identified as the responsible party in the divorce from Eric’s mom, suffering her anger and his own sense of guilt. He described how he struggled to come to terms with this and his capacity in moments to appreciate that it was not solely his fault: *“The friend who I lived with after [the separation] was really helpful in that, you know, and pretty consistently gave me the message, like ‘hey, this isn’t all your fault. This is something that happened and that both of you are responsible for.’ I think what made it difficult for me to accept was, because I did make the decision... [I can] see the gray area now, and understand it as something that as couples, as people, we were both responsible... What I felt at the time was, if she hadn’t been so clingy, then I would have been able to back off from that stance of having to leave. And so, I think it was a combination, even at the time, of blaming her and feeling like I was the bad guy.”*

He described his pained identification with his own father, who was the instigator in ending his parents’ marriage, during his first marriage to Eric’s mom: *“I was given that message about him too. So it was kind of pre-embedded in there.”* He described how this was reinforced when Eric’s mom called to alert him to a bizarre coincidence: *“Like about a year after we separated, [my ex] told me that she went back and read journals from when my parents separated and that my father left my mother on exactly the same date that she and I had separated... Even in telling me that there was, because I was*

always angry at my dad for divorcing, there was kind of this message that, like, I'm as bad as my father."

Brian's (ex)wife's fury about his leaving, and her persistent demands that he return, made maintaining contact in the interest of co-parenting Eric quite problematic. He recalled fielding calls from her, regularly, and her pleas of *"wanting to get back together, and wanting me to tell her that I love her, and you know, and it didn't really seem to matter how much time went by. And so, I felt like I had to put up this big brick wall in order for that to stop... And that was really hard because I, you know, I've always loved her, I still love her, but I couldn't, you know, you know, what she wanted was, she wanted to get back together again, and, I didn't want to get back into that enmeshed relationship. And so, in order to do that, I had to be really hard... So, you know, we had to talk about parenting stuff. And yet, I think there was a lot we weren't able to talk about and negotiate that would have been good to. So, I wouldn't hear about things unless they got really bad...But, short of those kinds of things, you know, we didn't, we didn't talk a whole lot... [it was] six years after we separated before we were able to really even talk to each other."*

Brian described feeling largely unaware of Eric's life at his mother's home, powerless in terms of his concerns, and uncertain how to intercede: *"I remember being concerned about what things were like there. [Eric's mom] has really struggled with depression over the years. And I remember just being concerned that, and I remember going to pick him up, and seeing that the lawn was un-mowed, there were beer cans on the porch, and I remember thinking, you know, God, what is going on there? You know,*

what's, yeah, so there was that feeling kind of clueless about what that was like and being worried about what his life was like there."

As is often the situation when parental communication deteriorates post-divorce, there was minimal parent-child communication about Eric's life at his other home, creating a climate of 'split' custody wherein Eric had to manage life between two homes without much parental awareness of his experience, opportunities for support, or a continuity of contact with one parent while at the other's home: *"It was pretty separate, yeah. I mean, I was really conscious about not wanting to say anything negative about his mom, and didn't. So, he, I think it was kept pretty separate... You know, Eric really kept those boundaries really separate, and he really didn't talk about her, and I doubt he said anything much to his mom about me; I don't know, really, but he didn't say much about his relationship with his mom, or what that was like, or what was going on to me... [and we] didn't have a whole lot of contact between visits, not much at all."*

Brian recalled that he tried to compensate for his lack of involvement in Eric's life, and to dispel his feelings of guilt about this, through increased permissiveness, *"I'd bend over backwards to do whatever for him."* Brian suspects that this is one area where he and Eric's mother were on the same page, but that their attempts to soothe and make amends to Eric, with a kinder and gentler approach to parenting might have done more harm than good. *"I think that because of my guilt"* and her *"feelings of protection of him"* there were less *"expectations of him to clean his room, or do chores around the house,"* and little *"direction in terms of negotiat[ing] the adult world... how to keep your house clean, or balance your check book, or do the things that adults are supposed to do. I don't think Eric got a whole lot of that kind of parenting."*

Challenges of the blended family – competing loyalties and lack of belonging

Brian's second marriage lasted a mere four years. He described this as a marriage largely embarked upon to solidify his separation from Eric's mother. He characterized his second wife as "*completely different*" from his first wife, (another means of distancing from her), but also completely at odds with him: "*She was a conservative, Christian republican, and, I mean, I was a liberal, leftist, hippie person. And it was just bizarre.*" While it might seem bizarre to Brian in hindsight, his needs for autonomy in relationship and his fear of enmeshment serve as a plausible reason for choosing someone who represented such little threat in terms of over-identifying with him.

Brian's relationship with Eric suffered with the advent of this new marriage in a number of ways. He did not take to his dad's new spouse: "*Eric despised her, and really couldn't understand why I married this woman. And then, after a while I really couldn't understand why I did either. And, that was just four years of hell.*" Brian described his inability to foster a true 'blending' of family, how he himself felt "*torn between, you know, my then current wife and him... before I got remarried, we continued to spend a lot of time together, and go on hikes and do the sort of usual thing. And once I got remarried and had another child, I think there, life was very different.*" He speculated sadly that Eric felt a lack of "*welcomeness in [our] house. I don't think he ever felt like he belonged there... it was pretty much his mom's home was his home and this was a place for him to visit.*" Brian pointed out that "*at his mom's house, he was still the only kid. And, at my house he was sharing the house with a baby and his step-mom and he had to share time... And, he didn't really like his step-mom didn't want to spend time with her, but wanted to share time with me.*" He described that Eric didn't seem to connect to his half-sister as a

sibling and probably viewed her as a rival, in that *“this kids was going to have what he never had. I mean, there was this feeling that his sister was going to have a mom and dad.”*

Another factor that increased his sense of distance from Eric when he remarried was that the differences between his home and his ex-wife’s home *“became more acute... at his mom’s house he had his own room, and he was free to decorate, which he did liberally and creatively. And at my house, he had a room, and it had to be kept clean. And, and that came from his step-mom.”* Another crucial piece that most likely contributed to Eric’s difficulty feeling ‘at home’ and part of this new family was some awareness of his father’s lack of feeling truly settled. Brian describes a climate of *“tension in my house because [Eric’s step-mom] and I weren’t getting along”* and admitted *“I didn’t feel like I belonged there either.”*

Brian reflected with an edgy tone that he might have made better choices in terms of remarrying so soon: *“The day before I got married, I knew that I was making a big mistake, and went through with it anyway... After the reception, I got very drunk. This was the night before getting married, and went out for a walk, and told my bride-to-be, that I wasn’t sure what I was doing. So there was that. Yeah, I was a mess. So, my conversation with myself was, this is really screwed up, but I don’t have, you know, I can’t call this off... And then I was determined I was going to make it work.”* While he recalled this marriage *“always felt difficult and hard,”* he stayed as long as he did because *“part of me thought like, ‘well you should be able to be married to anybody. We can work these things out.’ And so, I was back in individual therapy and couples’*

therapy, and group therapy, and doing yoga, doing whatever I could to make that work, but it didn't. And again, I left."

As Eric moved into adolescence and friendships assumed more centrality in his life, he spent less time at his father's home, an hour away from where he lived with his mother and attended school. Brian admits, *"it was a mixed thing. There was part of me that who really felt like when he wasn't there, it was kind of a relief because I wasn't faced with the conflicts between my then current wife and him... That was uncomfortable. So, there was some relief about not having to be faced with that."* Brian was able to reflect fondly on the car trips when he would 'transport' Eric to or from his mom's home, a space for just the two of them: *"It was kind of fun. You know, for me Eric has always been a really fun person to hang around. And so, what I remember of those car rides, was I just remember enjoying like just hanging out with him... Like we were away from the step-mother, and yeah, we had time together."*

Unsettled reflections on custody arrangements

There is a strong tone of regret when Brian reflected on the custody arrangement he and Eric's mother established following their divorce. Brian catalogued his attempts to stay a consistent presence in his son's life, but described feeling left on the periphery, and wondered sadly if it might have been easier had he separated more dramatically. He considered that the shared custody arrangement *"kept it as an open wound for Eric, and for me, and [Eric's mom]. And so, I think if it was more of a complete rupture, that he was with me for bigger periods of time during the summer, that, I mean, I imagine that that would [have been] better... I don't think there were any advantages [to shared custody]. I think it was a, and I don't think there's any easy way to do it, you know. You*

know, in some ways I think, I imagine that if, if I could do it over again, it would have been preferable if I had moved [across the country] and had visitation during the summer, or something that he would be with me for two months, so he could feel like what it was like to live with his dad.”

As throughout the interview, his remarks here have traces of confusing his own feelings of loss, and relational needs, with those of Eric; for instance, it is hard to imagine that summers away would not have felt very disruptive to Eric, and it is significant that Brian doesn't consider this, especially given repeated mention of the importance of peer relationships on Eric's adolescent development, and the role these played in reducing the custody arrangement from a 50/50 design. Indeed, as Brian continued talking, we hear his deep regret at not having been able to enjoy a primary role in Eric's (or his daughter's) life:

“I think that was, the hard thing was, I was always a visitor, you know, in his life, as soon as I left. It just felt like I was, you know, they talk about visitation, and that's what it feels like. It feels like you're, you're a visitor. And that's definitely my relationship with my daughter after her mom and I divorced, we didn't have 50/50. I was every other weekend. I had every other weekend visitation with her, and that was, was similar, I mean in that, and even more so, in that it just felt like an enforced visit with this person that, you know, and with Eric, he was older, and we knew each other well enough that it wasn't quite so bad as it was with my daughter, but I still felt like I was relegated to being a visitor.”

His desire to imagine a scenario where (neither he nor) Eric felt such a sense of removal from the family, led him to consider the custody scenario called “*the nesting*,

where you keep the home and both parents have an apartment... I think that's a really fantastic idea. And, that would, if I imagine anything, with Eric, the option of either my being completely ruptured, and just having summers with him somewhere else, or having that kind of custody arrangement, where we keep the home intact, in that he's not being brought and forth to different places would be better... If I imagine us keeping the house, and Cynthia and I going back and forth to it, it seemed like it would have felt a little bit more natural to Eric and to both of us. I mean, as it was, when one parent leaves, then that parent, I mean from my perspective, that parent is, is the bad parent who's, yeah, so I mean, if we both, if we could have both come to a mutual agreement about separating and both of us had a separate place and came back and forth to Eric, and still were involved with helping him with his homework, and, so I think that was the difficulty for me, was to feel like I didn't have a role with him anymore, you know, as a parent. Helping him with his homework and being involved with what was going on at school, and friends, and sports... ”

In an aside that seemed an unconscious, or unspoken, reference to his other children, both toddlers when their parents split, Brian considered that his first idea, of living far away and visiting less frequently but for longer periods, “*wouldn't be so difficult if we had separated when he was two or three years old, he never really knew us being together, that maybe would feel different. But with Eric, separating when he was 12, yeah, I think what would have worked best for him, would have been if we could have done that nesting kind of arrangement. ... And, he wouldn't be the one suffering for it. [As it was], you know, I feel like asking him to shuffle stuff back and forth and not having*

contact with his friends on weekends, and, you know, all of that. That was the stuff that was difficult for him, I think.”

While the ‘nesting’ arrangement has objective advantages in terms of the maintenance of stability and constancy for a child, it is often quite implausible. When parents are not able to establish a civil and cooperative co-parenting relationship the stressors of sharing a home, even part-time, could create countless opportunities for conflict. Maintaining half-time residence in the child’s home, the ‘nest’ as it were, would severely complicate a parent’s creation of a new family; it is notable that in Brian’s fantasy of maintaining intactness for Eric he did not consider aloud the implication this would have had on his subsequent marriages and is consistent with his minimization of these families throughout the interview.

It appeared difficult for Brian to conceive of a scenario somewhere between the ‘nesting’ arrangement and the geographically removed scenario, with periods of concentrated time. Given the lack of consensus in divorcing, the emotional intensity then veritable silence that characterized his relationship with Eric’s mother, it is not surprising that he had little positive to say about shared custody. Another apparent factor that looms large in Brian’s difficulty conceiving of a more cooperative parenting relationship with Eric’s mother post-divorce, (besides the idealized and largely implausible ‘*nesting*’) are his own unresolved feelings about the ending of their marriage. This came through, first, when Brian described his feelings of confusion of how to support Eric in making sense of the divorce, in that it seemed hard for Brian himself to completely make sense of it: *“I don’t think I could ever really explain to him in any way that he could understand why we separated, because to him we were always happy. And so, why would we separate? And,*

how do you explain individuation? I mean, that sounds pretty lame to a kid who wants his parents together.”

More powerful was Brian’s account of a fantasy he shared with Eric, shortly after leaving the marriage; he told him that while he was studying in the library, he started wishing that Eric and his mother would show up. *“I think that’s what I shared with him, that I wished that they, you know that...I mean, for me, it was just kind of a...I mean, internally for me, it was just feeling like, you know, I really miss that togetherness, and I shared that with him... and him saying, ‘well, what the hell dad, why don’t you just come back?’ You know, like, what are you doing, you know, why are you doing this? So, you know at age 13, 14, he was...yeah, I think it was hard for him because he was close with both of his parents. So, yeah, I think it was confusing. I think it...I don’t think he understood it at all... And I felt like, you know, that I probably shouldn’t have shared that with him, because it was confusing for him.”*

In Eric’s challenge of his father, it seems that Eric might have picked up on some of his father’s doubt, his own unconscious wish for reunion. Indeed, Brian reflected on his first marriage wistfully, with lasting regret: *“You know, if we had stayed together, if I had understood myself in the world, I probably wouldn’t have gotten divorced... When I look back on that relationship, I think it was a good relationship, that when we had problems it seemed like the end of the world to me, and it seemed like, that we wouldn’t be able to solve those things. But, when I look, after experiencing a really bad marriage, I realize how good it was.”*

Brian reported that in recent years he and Eric’s mother have finally been able to offer Eric something of the civil, cooperative parental dyad that was so difficult to

achieve in the years just following their divorce. He explained that he and his current wife, Eric, and Eric's mother have begun spending Thanksgiving together. He described that from what he has gathered, Eric *"loves it. I think it's really healing... [It's] become a kind of family tradition. We get together. And I think that's what we lost with the divorce, was the sort of ritual, and having any kind of togetherness. So, I imagine he sees it as being a, a really healing thing."*

Brian's individual relationship with Eric has improved significantly, as well. He has seized unique opportunities to be more primary in Eric's life and communicate his feelings of love and commitment to his son. When Eric's mother moved across the country temporarily, after Eric had left for college, Brian moved back into the family home that they had shared together so that Eric could spend his summers there, capturing some of the sentiment of the *'nesting'* arrangement he admired so much. Brian described this as a strange returning, and as an opportunity to repair some of what he felt had been broken in the divorce:

"It was kind of haunting, but it felt like a little bit of atonement. It was kind of interesting for me living there, because I spent a lot of time fixing it up and getting it ready for Eric. And, there was kind of, poignant things about, there was, when we were, when we were having problems and having fights, there was one time when I kicked a door, and there's still the hole where I kicked the door, when I was angry. So, when I was there that year, I patched up that hole. It was like that kind of thing that was kind of poignant in a way to be there."

Anna's Story

Anna is twenty years old, the middle child of Brian, who was also interviewed for this study. Her experience is useful for exploring themes that emerge in child's experience of moving between the homes of dramatically different parents, in active opposition, and incapable of forging civil discourse or cooperation for the child's benefit. Anna was quite young when her parents separated, so she was not able to internalize much in the way of dyadic unity or familial intactness, and despite being part of a large family with multiple parental and sibling figures, it appears to be characterized more by marginality and fragmentation than belonging and togetherness.

Anna was just a toddler when her parents separated and is not able to draw upon memories of life together as an intact family, but she does have memories of the marriage ending: *"Prior to the separation, honestly, I don't remember, actually I don't remember anything up until the day that they did separate."* While her recollection of details of that period may be imperfect, the emotional quality of her memory speaks to an experience of sudden upheaval and disorientation:

"What I remember, which I've since been told is entirely inaccurate, but I was three, so who knows. What I remember was, when we came home, they just sort of talked, and they didn't talk to me about anything for a few days. And, one day I came home from daycare, and my dad had packed all his stuff onto a moving truck, and left and said, 'I'll see you soon, and we'll talk.' But my, my memory of that was just one of extreme confusion, because how do you tell a three-year-old exactly what's going on. And how does a three-year-old understand that... When I told [my mom] my memory is that one day I come home and dad is packing up and leaving and I didn't really understand what

was going on, her correction to that was that it had been explained to me before that, a day or two before that, and that it wasn't really like he just packed up all of his stuff and just walked off, but maybe it was a more gradual process. And, it could have just been the last time that he was there that's what I remember, and that's what stands out."

What is without dispute in her recollection of her childhood, is the strong and abiding animosity that existed between her parents and their inability to fashion a civil, communicative co-parenting relationship. *"[My parents spoke] very, very rarely, and normally they would just get very mad at each other, so that situation was avoided at all costs. When my dad would pick me up for the weekend, he would just wait in the car, and my mom would wait at the door, and they wouldn't, I don't think they ever really acknowledged their presence. And, if they did have to talk it would be over the phone when I wasn't around. And the few times that I overheard those conversations, my mother was extremely upset and very angry."*

In Anna's story we hear how failure to establish a workable co-parenting relationship can lead to a neglect of systemic communication overall, inhibiting opportunities to help a child process their feelings and reactions, as described in the following excerpt: *"I think [the joint custody arrangement] was just very cut and dried. The emotional side was never really covered. And logistics were like, 'here, this is what's happening.' And, nothing was really expanded upon. I think they really have always avoided talking to or about each other as much as possible over the years."*

Within this climate of avoidance, when parental cooperation became essential, conflict ensued. Anna described how as a teenager, she wanted to live with her father 50% of the time, but parental communication deteriorated to a battle of wills, her needs

were relegated to the background, and emotional concerns were again overshadowed by ‘logistics.’

“I decided I wanted to live at my dad’s house, that was the one time that they decided that they wanted to change the custody schedule legally, because of issues with my little brother; my dad had a lot of trouble with [my former step-mother] as far as being able to work out a custody schedule that wasn’t necessarily under the visitation contract. And, that was really the first time that they ever started to communicate with each other directly about me... one would sue the other, and then the other would countersue. I mean, it was ridiculous, and a lot of it had to do with child support. And, it was really infuriating, because I had, I think I was 16 at the time and I really, I just, I wanted to live with my dad some before I went to college... And, it ended up creating more trouble, and in the end what happened was, the legal, it just turned into a mess, and we ended up just dropping it, and I went back to living with my mom. It was - it was really a mess.”

Anna described, with cynical resignation, that avoidance is still a strategy her parents employ when attending shows, graduations, or other events that require they gather on her behalf:

“[At events] they’ll pretty much just sit on opposite ends of the room and not talk to each other... It’s fine, I’m used to it by now. And, I actually, I totally understand why they do it, because if I was my dad, I would not ever want to get into a conversation with my mother, especially after having been married to her. And, I think my mother is just of the belief that my dad is going to burn in hell, and it’s not worth her time to talk to him.

And, maybe not quite that extreme, but I know that she really hates him and just doesn't really feel that it's worth her time."

Effects of a parent's disparagement of the other parent

While Anna witnessed little in the way of face-to-face interaction between her parents, she was well aware of the negative sentiment they held for each other as she grew up, as they basically fought *through* her, often via direct disparagement: *"They would just start talking about how manipulative, or how awful and mean, and horrible the other one was... the word manipulative came up on my mom's side a lot, her using it against my dad."* Less overt, but arguably as damaging, was the more passive, indirect disparagement she witnessed, in her mother's critical regard for her father. What stood out for her in particular was the ambivalent reception she received from her mother, upon returning from time at her father's home: *"When I would come back [from dad's house], my mother would always complain that I was acting differently than when I left. She would say a week after I got back, I wasn't myself, or I wasn't acting how I used to, or how I was supposed to..."*

Anna described her discomfort of this indirect disparagement of her father and also described how disparagement of her father was experienced as disparagement of her, and vice-versa: *"I never looked forward to coming home and having my mother tell me that I was acting differently, or coming home and having my mother complain that my hair was un-brushed... I felt like [these comments] were directed toward me. And, in retrospect, I think they were directed at my father also. Using me as a means to insult my father, was just as, insults [toward] my father was just as insulting to me, if not more so."*

In her mother's complaints, we hear the inherent criticism of Anna's father, of his lifestyle and his influence, as if there were a sort of 'contagion' effect of being at his home; more important is the insinuation that aspects of Anna's personality that emerged from contact with him were aspects her mother could not accept as part of her. A complicated fact of divorce when children are involved is that children can serve as unfortunate, living reminders of an ex-spouse: *"My mother has definitely told me that I am, that I carry my father's negative qualities."*

While her mother's criticisms and observations of similarities might have been attempts, in part, to extinguish or discourage Anna's adoption of personality and lifestyle features she related to her father, this might have backfired. Anna admits that feeling aligned and strongly related with her father, while at once natural and normative, might also have been a means of countering her mother: *"I feel a lot more of my father in myself, which, I've had people tell me, is typical; it's 'a daddy's girl' thing. And, on the other hand, it might be a little bit of rebellion against my mother, or maybe a lot of rebellion against my mother! But, as far as, just personality types, I, I have taken a lot from my dad. He wanted to be an artist and that's the road that I've pursued. And, even to this day, I argue with my mother, and we're always butting heads, and with my dad it's a wonderful and awesome relationship."* Conversely, her positive feelings toward her father, almost glorifying at times, might have been in part a reward to him, a statement of appreciation for not burdening her with his criticisms of her mother: *"My dad... was very good about not saying anything negative about my mother, [a skill] which my mother still has not mastered."*

Anna exhibited insight into the effects of her mother's disparagement of her father, and the influence of such negative communications generally: *"Well, at some point [in therapy] I think it was pointed out to me that I cannot judge my dad based on the things my mother says. And, I know that the way that they talk about each other heavily influenced my like or dislike for the other."*

When a parent can practice restraint, and keep negative sentiment to themselves, they become more available to listen and offer support to their child in managing the expectable difficulties with the other parent; they must also avoid casting such communications from their child as a 'victory' for their 'side, or statement of allegiance. When a child seeks counsel from one parent about the other, or simply needs to 'vent' about the other parent, they must be able to trust that the parent can maintain a stance of neutrality, an equidistance between the parts of the child that feels angry or disappointed, but also loving and attached to the other parent. *"I would talk about difficulties with my dad to my mom, but it was always, it was kind of useless because then she would just be like, 'see, see, see, he's a bad person. That's why you should stay here' and that sort of stuff. It really wasn't until high school that I started to turn into a daddy's girl, and I started talking to my dad about my frustrations with my mother, which when I did, he was very supportive and would give me advice, or just listen and not say anything, which I think was the case when he agreed."*

Anna admitted that occasionally her father would communicate frustration or disapproval of her mother, but this was relatively rare and was bearable, given his general restraint. In contrast, when her father's spouse voiced criticisms of her mother, her loyalty to her mother became very aroused: *"[Disparaging remarks] didn't bother me*

much until it was my step-mother who was saying them about my mother for some reason. And, I think at that point it was in high school and I had, I hadn't, I actually surprisingly did not have a very good relationship with my mother, but for some reason it still bothered me to hear her saying them about my mother. And, it might have just been because I felt like she didn't know my mother. She'd been with my dad for two or three years, so it didn't really justify saying... I think I did feel a bit protective... I think I really just didn't like my step-mother, and to hear her saying something negative [about my mom], that I felt like she had no place to be saying, made me dislike her even more."

Anna's comment that her step-mother 'had no place' to criticize her mother is significant in that it can be understood to reference her step-mother's 'place' in the family, the inherent rivalry of that relationship, and that benign regard for her mother couldn't be taken for granted, or assumed. Given that her step-mother did not have a pre-existing relationship with her mother, and served as a symbol of the dyadic separation of her parents, her critical words couldn't be experienced as supportive, even if they echoed Anna's critical opinion.

We might consider, alternatively, how acknowledgement of her mother's challenging qualities by her step-father, and intervention on her behalf, was felt as an affirmation of her experience, because he wasn't losing sight of his 'place' in the family structure and because Anna could trust that even when he disapproved of her behavior was simultaneously able to appreciate her positive aspects: "I like [my step-father], and I think that he is the voice of sanity in that household. Like when we would butt heads, my mother and I, he would always step in and be like, 'you need to stop this,' and pull her aside, and make her take a few minutes to just breathe and get over it. So, I do like him

and I appreciate him. I'm very thankful that she found somebody who can sort of counteract her insanity.”

Either/Or experience of parents and parental homes

Anna's story demonstrates how an absence of parental cooperation and a climate of disparagement can heighten a sense of either/or allegiance and identification with one's parents, essentially undoing any remnants of a dyadic holding space, wherein both parents can be experienced as a mutual, combined entity.

Throughout the interview, Anna located aspects of herself as either 'like' her mother, or 'like' her father and described the difficulty in reconciling their unique influences. Similarly, it seems that Anna has struggled to achieve a balance in terms of getting along with them both, simultaneously, and instead casts herself as either allied with one parent or the other. She described the difficult challenge of trying to create harmonious relationships with both parents when they are decidedly at odds:

“I have always felt like [my mom] is abhorrent to the idea of me having any sort of relationship with my dad. It's always been interesting to me looking back, when I was little, until I was probably six, I didn't get along with my dad at all. And my mother decided 'let's try and fix this...' So, I went to see [a psychologist] to see if there were feelings I could work out between me and my dad. It was just me that would go to see him. And it was interesting, because after talking with him some, I started to develop a relationship with my dad. And, my dad and I became really friendly. And, when that happened, my mother and I immediately started butting heads. It was just, it was kind of hysterical because if I spent time with my mom and I didn't see my dad, it would revert back to my dad and I wouldn't get along very well, but my mom and I would get along

alright. And then, I would go back to having a relationship with my dad and it would just start all over again.”

Throughout the interview Anna depicts her parents as sharing little, if any common ground and most often speaks of them as existing in absolute opposition. Below we will consider Anna’s descriptions of her parents, her experience of moving between their homes, and how their very distinct personalities reinforced her sense of the either/or parental split: *“While they balanced each other out, they definitely, the difference was incredibly dramatic.... the environment in my dad’s house was entirely different from my mother’s house.”* First, it is useful to mention that Anna struggled to even imagine the two of them co-existing together as a couple: *“They’re in every way, shape, and form, polar opposites... [it’s] extremely amusing to me to think about the two of them being together, just because they are so different. And I can’t see how it would ever possibly work.”* Elsewhere, she again settled on humor when trying to conceive of her parents as a couple, but also summoned empathy for her mother’s marital predicament and for her ongoing disdain for Anna’s father: *“I cannot understand why they got married. It really is comical to me. And, if I were my mother and married somebody like my dad, I would definitely end up getting divorced and I would be mad about it.”* Anna attempted to ‘justify’ their union, positing that when they first met her mother was less conventional, and her father, less content: *“I think my, my mom was a little bit more liberal when she was younger, and when they started dating, she was doing karate, and she was, I think more socially liberal than she is now, or started to become. And, I think my dad was maybe more depressed at the time, I think there was just so many, and that’s how maybe I would justify it now.”*

Anna identified multiple dimensions of contrast and incompatibility between her parents that contributed to her experience of existing between two very disparate, ‘either/or’ atmospheres. In terms of parental ‘exteriors’, she depicted her father’s home as a place for play and self-expression and her mother’s home as a place for work and self-discipline:

“My dad has always been very relaxed, and he’s, he’s very, he’s a very easy going person, and we would always go hiking, or hang out and do things, and we would cook meals together. My favorite thing to do was make soup with him, just by throwing stuff in a pot and it would become soup, even if it didn’t taste very good at all. But, time at my mom’s house was always very structured, and I would wake up and brush my teeth and practice my piano, and do my homework, and maybe practice my piano some more. And, there was not really any room for creativity. And there wasn’t really any room for spontaneity, which is the basis of my father’s existence...I loved my dad’s house. I thought my dad’s house was one of the coolest places ever. And, I’ve always disliked my mother’s house... And it’s always been so sterile. That’s just really best word to describe it... it’s all white, and it’s always clean... And, my dad’s house was a place where everything was really bright and colorful and every room was very interesting and very unique.”

The ‘either/or’ contrasts between her parents were illustrated in terms of their personality features and ‘interiors’ as well, depicted here in terms of ideology: *“[After they separated] I think they both just, they increased in how opposite they were from each other. They went from sort of middle of the road to, my mother has become very conservative republican, very religious, and my dad is on the other part of the spectrum.*

You talk to him and he's very liberal. He's a democrat, he's, he's spiritual, he's not religious, [and] he's not Christian at all..." And here we see the contrast in terms of disposition and management of emotional experience: "My dad gets depressed the way that I do, which is to just sort of become very lethargic and apathetic about everything. Whereas, when my mom gets depressed and upset, she just starts crying uncontrollably, which is fine, but with my dad, it's like constant."

Despite the challenges Anna faced in managing parental differences, she was unequivocal in stating her regret that the shared custody arrangement between her parents hadn't been a more 50/50 variety. She stressed, in particular, her feelings that both she and her father lost out on having a more regular, closer relationship:

"My mother and father decided to separate when I was, I was three and a half, I believe. My dad moved out, and the arrangement was that I would live with my mom and spend every other weekend with my dad, and we would have lunch together every Tuesday, or every other Tuesday... The [visits with my dad] were a lot of fun for me, especially as a younger kid... Later on, and looking back at it, it was a little disappointing for me, because he was not as big a part of my life as I would have wanted him to be... It's ridiculous, the thought that four days a month, four days out of the month to spend with one parent, or for a parent to spend with a child, the thought that that is sufficient is ridiculous. It's not enough, it's not enough to get to even know each other, let alone spend quality time with each other. And, with your child who's growing constantly, and developing, always moving forward, you're not going to be able to keep up. And, and that, I mean, I know that that really hurt my dad over the years, because he wanted to have a bigger role in my life. But, that was just the way that the visitation schedule had

been assigned, essentially... One week here, one week there, or even two weeks here, two weeks there, [would have been] a better schedule. I mean, two weeks, just because it, it, you don't have to pick up and move so often. I just, no matter what the schedule would be, it would have to be something other than every other weekend..."

Anna described her motivation for requesting, as a teenager, to shift to a 50/50 arrangement: *"I wanted to because, I wanted to have a relationship with my dad. Not just, hey, he's my dad, there we go, but actually have a quality relationship with him. And, it is really hard to do that when you only see somebody every other weekend. So, the, the motivation for me was a) to spend more time with my dad, and b) to spend less time with my mother, that's always a great thing. And, and it's also, I wanted the experience of knowing what it was like to live, to live with my father. I wanted to know what his routine was like, what his life was like, to know what it was like to live in the same household, which I thought was really cool. And, and I really, I think I just wanted to spend more time with my dad."* It seems plausible, that had Anna spent equal time with her father there might have been a less intense experience of him as the 'good parent' and her mother as the 'bad parent,' that she would be able to hold a more nuanced view of both parents, with less either/or designation, and that her relationship with her mother as well as her father would have improved.

Blended family/fragmented family

Anna has had what might be called a 'blended' family experience, comprised of marriages, divorces, remarriages, step-parents, step-siblings and half-siblings. While she often described herself in relation to the maternal and paternal 'poles,' it is useful to consider that she has always been called upon to manage these relationships within a

much more broad and complex cast of characters. As she described the constellation of her family it sounded far more ‘fragmented’ than ‘blended’ and seemed significant, for instance, that she had to estimate two of her half-siblings’ ages, (a feature we might not expect in an intact system of ‘full’ siblings): *“On my mother’s side, there’s my mother and my step-father, and I have a seven-year-old half sister. On my dad’s side, is my dad, my step-mom, my little half-brother who is 13, I believe. I have a 20-year-old step-brother, and an older half-brother, who is, I’m guessing, late 20’s, early 30’s. I don’t actually remember his exact age.”*

As a child, Anna recalled feeling confusion when asked to define herself according to traditional sibling definitions: *“In third or fourth grade, they would split us up in gym class by who was an only child and who wasn’t. And, by then I had a little brother [as well as an older brother]. And I would come home and I would be really confused, because I didn’t live with my brother, but I had a brother. So, I was always confused as to which side to go to. I never questioned, I never questioned if there was a way that families were supposed to be, maybe just the way that mine was and that others were different.”*

Anna’s eldest sibling is Eric, her father’s first son from his first marriage, and fourteen years her senior. *“[Eric] and I weren’t very close [when I was little]... Over the years we’ve gotten pretty close. I think he has a lot of respect for our dad, and they get along very well, which, I think seeing that has helped me appreciate my father more.”*

Anna describes growth in the relationship with her elder brother and through her admiration of his relationship with their father we hear a sense of a triadic unity, between the three of them. We hear this too, in the following excerpt about her sibling relationship

on her maternal side; whereas it seems that Eric has modeled *connection* in relationship for his younger sister, Anna described modeling *differentiation* in relationship for hers, younger by about 13 years: *“Part of my relationship with my mother is because I want to have a relationship with my sister, which I can’t do if I don’t have a relationship with my mother. I think, I think it’s, I don’t know how it affects my sister, but as she’s growing up, I’m just moving out and going to college, and living out on my own. And I think that that maybe helps her separate a little bit more, the strain in the relationship between my mother and myself.”*

Anna described a more remote relationship with Alex, her father’s youngest son from his third marriage; while he visits their father for extended periods over school breaks, he resides primarily with his mother, out of state: *“I think I was about seven years old when Alex was born. And, I thought it was really cool, although I was not spending very much time with my dad. So, it was sort of, I was very far removed from everything. So, suddenly I had a little brother, cool... My little brother and I shared a room, which, most of that time, my brother was living in, well, my brother is still living in Florida with his mother. But, when he would come up and visit, we would share the room together, and so because of that, it was never truly my space. It was just a room with two beds and it was half my stuff and half his.”* We hear traces of rivalry in this excerpt, in terms of having to share space, probably fueled, too, by Alex’s full-time residence at her father’s house, (until that divorce). It is striking that Alex’s sister on his maternal side, Anna’s step-sister for a period of less than three years and not mentioned in her ‘who’s who’ of the family tree, seems to loom large in her childhood recollection, and represented, ironically perhaps, the most viable opportunity for something of a ‘traditional’ sibling

relationship, given proximity in age. She spoke of this step-sister, Amy, and of Amy's mother, with a tone of loss: *"[My first step-mother] I really liked... That was when I, they got married, he remarried for the first time when I was six. And, I think it was just sort of fun for me, she had a daughter who was my age. She was about a month younger than me, and she was a lot of fun. And, I think to me it was really more fun than anything else. And, I really liked... yeah. It was really just hanging out, and the fact that I was in a household where there was another girl who was my age. And, it felt weird to be so close with, I mean, not emotionally, but just to have so much in common with a sibling. I was very mad when he divorced, when he and Jo divorced. I really liked her... I liked Amy, and it made me very mad to think that she was not going to be my sister anymore... Our next-door neighbors thought that we were twins, because we both looked the same."*

When Anna described her father's decision to marry again, to her current step-mother, we hear what might be considered the effects of transition upon transition, loss upon loss: *"So, I was really weary, and I didn't really understand the whole 'my dad is getting married' thing."*

Anna regarded her present-day step-parents, and a step-brother, with distant or ambivalent regard and a lack of closeness, reinforcing the sense of her overall family experience as comprised of fragile connections: *"I do like [my step-father], but we definitely don't spend any time together. It's not like there's a significant relationship. And, I guess I would sort of say the same about my step-mother. I like her and I don't really go out of my way to spend time with her. Although, when I do, it's nice and it's fun. She's overbearing, maybe not overbearing, she's just a very powerful woman, that, its, it's hard to, it's overwhelming to spend a lot of time with her ... My dad's aware [of this]."*

He used to talk to me about it, and talk to her about it. And, I know that it really upset him for a really long time. And, I really, I would like to say at this point [she] and I really do get along. We've made peace with each other... [My step-mother] has one son, who's a year older than me. We're pretty much polar opposites. He's really into sports; he's always butting heads with his mother. And I'm more into art, and I don't know, I've never really had a friendship with him... He was doing one week [at my dad's] and then one week with his dad... He hated my father, because he liked the guy that his mom was dating before my dad. So, for the longest time after they got married, he was just so upset that my dad was there."

APPENDIX D

Sample Case Study: Lucy and Paul

The Story of Paul and Lucy

In Lucy and Paul's story we will consider the conflict of feeling torn between obligation to one's family and obligation to self; a variety of incomplete mourning of a failed marriage; the complications of shared parenting without communication, resulting in 'split' rather than shared custody; and finally, the loyalty binds and complexities children face when parents are split along lines of good parent/ bad parent.

Paul had been a priest prior to meeting Lucy but had left the priesthood in large part because he knew he wanted to have children, *"there was always one thought in my head when I did become a priest. There was a sadness that I would never have children, and that never felt good... I was a spiritual father and now I'm a father. Father has always been part of my life, even as a young guy."*

(Paul): *"I could tell you a dream I had when I fell in love with my wife... I went through my house, and I took down all the crucifixes, so that my wife could come in. That's a nice dream, so that there was nothing between us."*

The two of them met in a language academy, both teachers and colleagues, then friends. Lucy began going to Paul's analyst and recalls being asked leadingly, as she talked about potential suitors, *'what about an Italian, have you ever thought about going with an Italian?'* in direct reference to Paul. They began dating, then married, then had children: two daughters, Rebecca and Beth.

Paul and Lucy founded a school together, worked side by side all day, and were together every night, raising their children, building their school, with little space in

between. Lucy describes a loss of idealization over time for the man she had respected very much, and an unsettled quality, a desire for something different, more, something new, something definitively hers.

Consensus in the custody arrangement

When Lucy and Paul separated they drafted a document together outlining that they would share 50/50 custody, and they never sought the assistance of lawyers. One area of consensus was that they would be equal partners in raising their children, and there is consensus, still, in the way the talk about the arrangement:

(Paul): *“We did not fight. We sat down, I sat down at the computer, and together we wrote up an agreement, a personal agreement that we are both responsible for our children, 100%, according to our means.”*

(Lucy): *“I just took care of certain bills, and then he took care of certain bills. I don’t think there was any dispute about that... It was just divided right down the middle, that Beth would be with me one week, three days a week and with him four days the week, and then the next week... and that’s how we just did it. It was very down the middle.”*

One exception is that Lucy described their arrangement in pragmatic terms: *“There was never anything written. We never had a lawyer. We didn’t want to spend any lawyer fees,”* whereas Paul’s was a more principled position, *“I never thought of the word ‘custody.’ Never... I never thought in those terms... I’m their father.”* Later, when a question referenced the ‘custody’ arrangement, he bristled, and reiterated his strong protest to the word:

(Paul): *“I have difficulty with the language you’re using because I never, because that never occurred to me... See, we’re still a family; you can’t break it. You cannot*

break the relationships... That's why it's very repulsive. 'Custody?' What are they, chattel? No, they're your children, they're human beings, they're persons, you don't own them. I never felt I owned my children. I don't want to feel that. And, when those possessive feelings do come up in me, I bite my tongue."

Lucy added that in her mind, or recollection, Beth wanted it this way, a 50/50 arrangement, and projected a remarkable degree of agency onto her child, merely 6-years-old - perhaps to comfort herself that it was the right decision, perhaps as a wish:

(Lucy): "It was very clear, I think for Beth as well, that she didn't want to show any favoritism. She wanted to have it right down the middle. So, that was decided between her and me, and probably between her and her father. And, she didn't want to be in a position of having to choose between us. So, that was how, it was actually following Beth's lead, I believe, that she wanted it to be equal, even all the way."

Needing to end a marriage to start a life

Lucy was the instigator of the separation and at times strikes a regretful, but overall resigned tone when discussing her need to leave the marriage: *"I guess my thought was 'well, I've got to get out of this marriage. I've got to separate.' I wasn't thinking of divorce, just 'get away. And once I'm ok, once I'm on my own, the girls will be ok. I'll be able to...' but it never really worked out that way. Because, I think it's because it wasn't done together as a team."*

Lucy described going away for a month, to an adult drama camp, exploring autonomy, questioning the life she has fallen into with her husband, and experiencing the epiphany that she wasn't in love with him. Upon returning, *"I felt removed... cut off, from their father."*

Lucy expressed regret that she hadn't managed her quest to separate and individuate with more grace or deliberation:

(Lucy): *"I even, to the point, I remember, I went and stopped using his last name... without saying anything. I just started using [my former last name]. And, I guess there was some, [he and our daughter] had to pick up some photos that had just been developed, I had put [my maiden name] on it, and they went and they were looking for [the family name] ... And, I hadn't said anything. So, so, I, yes, I would say there was not much communication going on. It was just... doing my own thing, and I guess not very responsibly keeping everybody in the loop of my feeling."*

When Lucy reflected on their early life together as couple, she described her admiration of Paul, an inherent power differential, and how she didn't feel met by him as an equal as time passed. Indeed, she described not being able to reach him, and feeling loved by him but not fully known or accepted as she evolved into a more grown woman.

(Lucy): *"I mean there's a big age difference between us, and I think the relationship was more one of mentor/mentee. He had been my boss. He had hired me. So, there was that built into our relationship... So, our relationship was built on my just, I guess, looking up to him, respecting him, and it wasn't really even, equal. And you know, I blame myself for that too. I hadn't found my voice. I hadn't found my place in the relationship."*

She recalled pronounced internal conflict: *"Well, I had to go on, and I had to make a life for myself... Yes, I needed my own space. And, and I do need my own space. I was just very acquiescent, until I couldn't be acquiescent anymore. So, it was like a real split. A real divergence in me."*

As Lucy reflected further, she sounded more sure of her need to leave, and more entitled to her (still present) dissatisfactions: *“What always bothered me about him, was the clutter that he lived with. And I was constantly disturbed by his clutter. And, it was, maybe that was the source of our disagreement. The garage was always, the garage and the stuff that he put in the garage, and then it spread into the house. And, I need a sense of things being in their place, and things being cleared off. You know, my desk may have papers up there, but everything has to be in its place. And otherwise I don’t feel comfortable. So, that was a source of, I got very disturbed by that with him... Maybe that was something that we did argue about, come to think of it. And, yes, he would sit down and watch television, and I never liked the TV programs he watched. He would sit in the living room, reading a book, and I would be taking care of the household, and that would, I’d be seething about that. When do I have time to sit down and read a book? Now that I live on my own, I do make time to read a book. I didn’t have time, so, there, I had my resentments.”*

Lucy described her decision to leave the marriage as seeming a surprise to him, arousing a strong reaction of protest: *“We, since we separated, he was very angry at me. Before we separated, I would say I just, probably did his bidding, and, I never really questioned him. So, my leaving him was like the first split. We never really fought until I left.”*

Lucy described a sort of inevitability in leaving: *“It was already, I was not my old self, I was not myself. There had been a total break, a breakdown; I would say I had a breakdown, of sorts... I think I even dressed differently. I became a little bit more, I don’t know what the word is, a little bit more, dressed with a little bit more flair.”*

Lucy's sense of inevitability was mixed with the discomfiting responsibility of fracturing the family, of feeling like a destructive force: *"Of course I've been filled with guilt, maybe not doubt, but you know, I broke the family.. but thinking I could never live with him."*

Transition year (separating before the formal separation)

During their initial separation, which spanned a year, both Lucy and Paul continued to reside in the family home, and both described this as a very trying period:

(Paul): *"Well, it was over a period of a year. We lived together, separated, for a year, because of economics, etcetera. And what would we do? It was stressful. I found it extremely stressful. But, during that time, we figured out how to buy my wife a new home, a condominium. And tried to keep things as stable as possible."*

(Lucy): *"We were living in the house together, but he and I weren't together, and everybody knew that. It was, I should have left, but I had nowhere to go, and I, there was a year where we were, I don't remember the sleeping arrangements, if he slept downstairs. I don't think we were sleeping together. But it was, I don't know what the girls experienced, but they knew that we were not together, but living in the same roof... And, I think [my oldest daughter] Rebecca sensed it, that I didn't want to be with her father."*

Their oldest daughter had just entered her teens when her mother moved out of the family home after this transition year. She was sent away to boarding school out of state, in an apparent attempt to free her of the impending familial fragmentation. Though they reached agreement about sending her away to school, *"that seemed to be the solution for Rebecca, just to get her out of the picture,"* Lucy recalled she *"was not really*

in agreement with her going to a Southern boarding school, so far away from home, but [referencing her lack of equal voice in the marriage] I seemed to have no say in the matter.”

Beth, [their younger daughter], began traveling back and forth between her home of origin, still inhabited – and actively preserved- by her father, and her mother’s new condo, a place Beth depicted as difficult to settle into and decidedly foreign.

Idealization of marriage/ Holding on/ Failure to mourn

(Paul): *“I didn’t want the divorce. I never did.... No, no, I was willing to work through anything. Oh, no, no, no. I told my wife, ‘if you go.. do what you have to do, just don’t burn bridges behind you. Go, do, get an apartment, live by yourself, buh, buh, buh, buh. Find out who you are, and all of that, and I’ll be waiting.’ No. No, no, no, no. I still love her, so. As far as I’m concerned, I’m not divorced, psychically.”*

Throughout the interview, Paul referenced Lucy as his ‘wife’ in present tense terms and one gathered the sense that just as he had retained the family home, he too, had retained the place they had created together, idealized in his mind, founded on their mutual parentage of their daughters; it appeared that Paul would never be moved.

Just as Paul chafed at the language of ‘custody,’ it seemed he could not tolerate to use the term ‘ex-wife,’ - it would negate something that he needed to preserve as precious and unchanged. It appeared that Paul has held steadfast to this conviction, that once created, something cannot be destroyed. When it was observed that he still spoke of her as his spouse in the present tense, Paul became wistful and protective: *“so, if I go to bed at night, and I go to sleep and there she is, do I know she’s with me? And, I dream of her. So. Is she there? She is there.”*

There were almost religious overtones to how he spoke about Lucy, and his ideal of family. Paul spoke of the eternal nature of the family, once created, as eternal, despite the practicalities of actual marital status, and, arguably, the sad dictates of reality:

(Paul): *“The law can come in and say all that it wants, but it does not change the fact that this man met this woman and we fell in love and we had children, and those relationships are eternal, no matter what she may go do later on, whatever I may do, whatever the kids may do, this is your mother, this is your father, these are the two people, there’s something between them that will not end.”*

In a way, Paul seems to capture something of the wishful ideal that, we posit, children need to preserve, to connect with a notion of a worthy representational dyad, the parents of their creation. Indeed, his daughter’s Beth’s description of how she imagines her parents’ coming together ends with similar echoes:

(Beth): *“They worked together in New York. And, to me, as I look back now, it was like, my dad was fully in love with her; I think he’s still in love with her, and he just, when he first saw her, he, you know, he would always tell, back then, he would always say how he, when he first saw her, he knew she was the one. And I feel like, maybe my mom, just to do the right thing, and settled... that’s what I feel now. But, back then, it was kind of like the fairy tale. They worked together, and fell in love and got married and had kids.”*

(Paul): *“Let’s put it this way. Even if we were together, even two people together, it’s still the same thing. There are conflicts, there are problems, all our lives are filled with conflicts, but, at least the girls know that we loved each other.”*

After Lucy left, Paul retreated back to veritable priesthood, never coupling again: *“I went through a period of being hurt, and all that. But then again, I didn’t get married until I was 37, I was a priest, so I had a whole way of life from my youth, and I kind of just picked that up again.”*

While it might appear that Paul viewed Lucy and their former life together in a totally idealized light, even reverting to religious abstinence in her honor, this impression faded as he honed in on real moments spent together, and reflected on her as a real other, and any capacity to idealize her seemed to break down:

(Paul) *“Well, I thought I knew her, but after the time, after [her decision to leave] happened, I’ve come to the conclusion, I don’t think I did know her, so, I don’t know. I don’t know how she... We have never spoken about it together, nor do I wish to now.”*

We might consider that when Lucy was just coming to know herself in important ways, and when she insisted he see her, know her, meet her more fully, as she began individuating, Paul couldn’t stand it, didn’t want to know her beyond his idealization of her, his idealization of his future notion of her, his identification with her.

Elsewhere Paul recalled: *“Vacations were horrendous, no, they were bad. Their mother would go off, emotionally, on a vacation. I don’t think it was a good experience for them...It’s a bad memory. And I think that’s in their minds. I think that, you’d have to ask them, but I think their memory of all that, is not good.”*

As it turns out, his daughter Beth had reflected on family vacations with fondness, as recollections of togetherness. We might gather from this that it was in actuality Paul that suffered his wife’s distance, (or that he perceived her being distant from their daughters, or both). Either way, it suggests that he might have already been coping with

the beginning of her process of pulling away and simply could not allow himself to fully acknowledge or enter into dialogue about it. The presence of feelings of disappointment in his wife, and dissatisfactions with the marriage, only came through in these brief excerpts, but the following from Lucy's account suggest that Paul did indeed harbor his own ambivalence about their relationship, perhaps more than he can bear to recollect or admit:

(Lucy): *"Well, when we first separated, I said 'let's go into therapy together.' He said no, he said no. He said it wouldn't work... I wasn't thinking of anything reconciliation-wise, I just thought, let's talk this out. He said no." Elsewhere she disclosed: "Actually, maybe a couple of years after we had separated, I had gone back to him and said, 'come on, let's try to... I went back to him twice, asking him to get back together again, and both times, he refused... [I was feeling] guilt, and sorrow, and tearing up the family, and doubt. But, no, I don't feel anything for him anymore."*

In Paul's personal evolution we hear a transferring of his commitment to church to a commitment to family, and throughout the interview we recognize something like religious devotion to his family and to Lucy, that persists, even in her absence. While Lucy also recognizes the 'romance' in his refusal to relinquish their lost love and move on, she has a decidedly different take on this: *"He's an old-school Italian who was wronged. And, he's a lover of Italian Opera. And, Italian operas talk about vendetta, which is, you know, a very strong emotion of revenge, and I feel that's what has been his central, overriding force against me. And that was to shut down and shut me out."*

Introduction of new parental figures: Loyalty binds

As discussed, Paul has never re-partnered since his separation from Lucy. He regarded the idea of a *'blended family'* with straightforward disdain: *"This blended family idea. You know, like, you're married here, you remarry, you remarry, you have kids, you have kids. That's very foreign to me... the kids have one mother and one father."*

When asked to consider, hypothetically, the integration of a new significant other into his and his daughters' lives, Paul portrays it as something to not only keep private, but as a sort of breach of propriety or something to keep under wraps: *"If I did [get involved with somebody new] they wouldn't know about it... No, because I would never bring another woman into this house. That's clear in my head. And, that if I do become romantically involved, that's my private life...now, because I'm older."*

Lucy, on the other hand, has had a few lovers since their separation, and in the last decade was remarried, briefly, to a man that was much older than she, a potential *'protector,'* in what she recognizes as a transparent repetition of her relationship with Paul. Her daughter Beth recalled expressing a strong negative reaction to her mother's remarriage, explaining that she initially refused to participate in the wedding ceremony, but finally succumbed to her mother's pressure, whereas Lucy was less disclosing, or exhibited denial: *"Rebecca and Beth accepted him, and just knew he was my husband, and I think, he wasn't considered their step-father, his daughter wasn't considered my step-daughter; it was just his daughter and my children. That's all there was."*

Lucy was more emotionally disclosing when she recounted her attempts at bringing new significant others into her life, and into Beth's life, when Beth was younger,

and exhibited a vacillation between entitled frustration that Beth was profoundly unwelcoming to someone she was interested in, and self-doubt about whether it had been a mistake to introduce them in the first place.

(Lucy) *“Beth would have nothing to do, and she was really rude, embarrassingly rude. And, we went to dinner, and the waiter thought we were a family and Beth was just, ‘Oh, this is not my father, this is not my sister,’ in the restaurant with the waiter you know, out of loyalty to her father, so, I was probably forcing issues that, you know, trying to, to force things on her. And, she was not taking it; she was not buying it... I think my mistake was, I dated, and I had a couple serious, well, serious men that I was seeing, and they were in my life, and Beth and Rebecca saw them. Maybe, I think that was a mistake. I should have kept that separate.”*

While Lucy had opened herself to the idea of a blended family scenario, Beth’s loyalty to her father manifested in a stern refusal to greet her mother’s boyfriends with civility or openness. We can imagine that for her to have welcomed a new man into her mother’s life would have felt like a simultaneous rejection of her father, especially given her awareness that he maintained a stance of never having fallen out of love with her mother. We might consider, too, the loyalty bind for Beth had she chosen to ‘accompany’ her mother on this journey of self-discovery, with new intimate relationships, in the imagined abandonment of her father – a repetition of her mother leaving. We can imagine that Beth had been inducted, in a sense, into an unspoken pact with Paul that *‘you won’t budge and neither will I, you won’t accept this changed world, neither will I.’*

Indeed, Beth presented as very aligned with her father, and identified with her father throughout the interview, casting him as the ‘good parent’ who provided a ‘haven’

and 'retreat' in the form of the original family home, whereas her mother was depicted as a sort of rogue family member. Lucy demonstrated keen empathic awareness at times of her daughter's difficult position, in terms of managing competing loyalties. For instance, Lucy captured quite poignantly the burden Beth carried, of having to maintain alliances to both parents, especially parents who were functionally estranged: *"Beth was around six [at the separation]. I mean, she was too young. So, I mean, that's basically all she knew. And, I think probably she's been divided ever since, and needed to please both of us. You know I think maybe, and, and, that's been built into her psyche, from a very young age. And, maybe trying to please everybody. I think she's been the one, the peacemaker, the one who's been the one- the only one talking to everybody."*

At the same time, it was difficult for Lucy to recognize the pressure asserted by Paul's particular needs, given that she left and he had stayed behind, assuming the role of martyr, the victim in the marital drama. In the following excerpt, Lucy describes her impatience with her daughter's tendency to be a homebody, (not unlike Paul): *"Beth had her peculiarities, her fears, which I felt, restricted things that we could do together. She didn't like to go out. She didn't want to go out... So, she had these fears. So, and I liked going out. And so, for me I felt very frustrated when she was around, because I felt homebound... She just wanted to be home. And, I think, you know, with her father that was fine. She could just be home. So, there was, I feel there was like, we were rubbing against each other. It was a clash."*

We can hypothesize that Beth's resistance to venture far into the world was partly stylistic, at odds with her mother's style, but also a resistance against joining with her mother's independent spirit that had hurt her father and 'broken' the family.

Significantly, too, ‘home’ emerges as a powerful metaphor in the story of this family given that her father is very home-identified, (arousing Lucy’s wrath when they were married), and for Beth, the family home –in conjunction with her father’s presence – was one important feature of consistency in her early life, after her mother and older sister both took flight. In this way, embracing individuation through an outgoing orientation might have felt as much a loss and repudiation of her father as embracing a new parental figure.

Lack of Communication / Cooperation and an Inability to maintain a ‘team’ parenting approach

In the sections above, we were provided descriptions of an ‘incomplete mourning’ on Paul’s part: a refusal to psychologically let go and move on, in concert with Lucy’s palpable need to create distance and re-define herself apart from an existence that felt stifling and over-determined by her spouse’s presence. Now we will consider how these particular dynamics interfered with the creation of a new fashioned relationship of the ex-spouses, or the facilitation of a substitute ‘co-parenting dyad.’

From the get-go, it seems that Lucy and Paul abandoned a cooperative approach to helping their daughter(s) make sense of the impending transformation of family and the joint custodial arrangement. According to Lucy: *“I sat down with Beth, he and I never sat down together and discussed [the custody arrangement] with her... I don’t think it was ever presented to Rebecca. I don’t ever remember sitting down with Rebecca and discussing it.”* Lucy expressed regret about this, in hindsight: *“Knowing what I know now, I probably would have... I would probably have more communication; I probably would have talked to the girls about it, included them in on it. It happened like the rug*

was being taken out from under them, and they didn't know what was happening. And, I think that must have been very upsetting to them, and scary. And, we've never had the conversation."

Both Lucy and Paul acknowledge there was a minimum of parental communication following the separation and throughout their shared custody:

(Paul): *"My wife and I? [When she or I dropped off Beth] we didn't even talk, no. No. I have not communicated with her."*

(Lucy): *"We didn't communicate. No... And I think he, you know, I think for him it was a punishment. He was punishing me. So, it was just he absolutely put up a wall, the barrier, didn't call me, didn't receive my calls... A total refusal of wanting to deal with me on any level."*

Lucy's sense that Paul was *'punishing'* her, rejecting her in turn, by the lack of dialogue seems confirmed in the following excerpt, and illustrates, too, his difficulty maintaining any relationship with her once deprived of the marital relationship: *"Well I wasn't in control [of what went on at Lucy's house]. I wouldn't take control, and I knew I couldn't be in control. And, I knew Beth had to deal with it. Even if I tried to control, Beth would still have to deal with it... No, Lucy missed her chance, 'you missed your chance. Don't tell me what to do. I'm not telling you what to do.'"*

Paul expressed less regret about the absence of much communication or cooperation with Lucy, and more resignation, even helplessness, over the sort of 'split existence' Beth [and presumably Rebecca] was thrust into:

(Paul): *"I don't think we were on the same page... I didn't think of it as a cooperation at all. Alright. I only saw myself, what do I have to do here and now in this*

moment, each situation that ever came up during their growing years... You know the girls, whatever conflicts the girls have with me, they have to deal with me. Whatever conflicts they have with their mother, they have to deal with it... Her mother is a woman and Beth is a woman, and there's that relationship that they have to go through. And, I just have to stand on the sideline and hope... and hope that Beth could work through it, because I knew that I couldn't do it for her, but I only could be there for her."

Still, both parents expressed awareness of the limitations, and the challenges, of such 'split' parenting and in veiled ways, the loss of the other as a co-parent.

(Paul): *"I was no fool to think that I could provide a, the emotional mothering. I never felt that. I just, in my own mind, I just had to be a good father, and provide the emotion, the emotional content of a father. That's all I could do."*

(Lucy): *"You know, when I was with Beth it was all on me now. I mean, it was all on me or, either I had her and I had her 100% of the time, or I didn't have her. It was either everything or nothing. There wasn't any more shared."*

Parental unification achieved via crisis

(Lucy): *"There were times when he wouldn't speak to me at all and there were times when he would. And I don't, there were times when I'd call him and he'd be very cold and I eventually just stopped calling the house. When Beth got old enough to have a cell phone, I just wouldn't call the house. And so, we really didn't communicate very much about the girls until there were...unless there were major things, really crises as the girls were getting older."*

Lucy suggested that at times their lack of communication was *"taken advantage of"* by their daughters who were able to keep things from both parents in quite dramatic

fashion. The following example of this demonstrates how ‘crises’ can draw parents together and finally break a code of silence, but often not until things have progressed to a dramatic level of concern.

Lucy describes this particular incident as follows: *“Beth was telling her father she was living with me, and she was telling me that she was living with her father.... She lost her cell phone. So, I had to call the home. I wasn’t calling the house. That was it, because he didn’t want to talk to me [this is about a decade after divorce], so I had to call the house because she wasn’t picking up on her cell phone. She had lost it, broken it, and I needed to reach her. And, he thought she was here, and I thought she was there. And, I don’t know how long this had been going on, but it had been going on for a while, and she was living with a guy in, not far from here, but anyway, she was living in his mother’s house with him. So, they had an apartment in the house. And, neither of us knew it... And so then he came over here, and we had a big pow-wow, and it seemed to break the ice for the moment, because ‘ah-ha’, the big ‘ah-ha’ moment, look what our daughter has done.”*

Lucy’s use of the term ‘*our daughter*’ in the excerpt above seems notable for its conjuring the notion of ‘a team,’ the parental dyad, with the child belonging to both parents together and the parents convening in an organized discussion, a ‘*pow-wow*.’ We can imagine if more conversations had been had about the ‘mutual’ child, providing an alternative to the ‘split’ parenting arrangement that became established, Beth might not have fallen through the familial cracks or ‘taken advantage’ of a lack of parental coordination to seek solace in another living arrangement. Indeed, Lucy considered, albeit with some uncertainty: *“I feel that because of that, because for our lack of*

communication, and cooperation, certain things happened to the girls that could have been avoided. That's probably, you know, in hindsight, what could, you know, that's always easy to say."

Split-parenting and parental acting-out

A parent's awareness of their child's loss and subsequent suffering can contribute to a desire to soothe through generosity, or permissiveness, or a softening of expectations. Identification with their suffering, and unresolved anger toward the parent identified as the 'home wrecker' can create a contest of 'good parent' vs. 'bad parent. This appears to have played out in some of the lack of consensus building between Lucy and Paul, and in what appears to have been some undermining of Lucy on Paul's part. Before we examine this, it is useful to remember that Paul, quite sensitive to his children's pain was most consciously coming from of a place of compassion:

(Paul): *"Well, [divorce] means a split, and it's a split for them emotionally, I imagine in their own psyches. And, they have to deal with it too. And, each one had to go through whatever they had to go through. And, all I knew was that I just had to be there when they wanted me."*

Additionally, while he might have felt inclined to correct what he perceived as some of Lucy's parental mistakes at times, he appears to have practiced important restraint in expressing his feelings explicitly to his daughters:

(Paul): *"I try not to say things against her mother... but if she did say something about her mother and I knew it was true, I would certainly confirm it in her... 'The emotion is real in you...' 'Yes, it did happen, yes, you should be angry."*

There were ways in which Paul did emerge as somewhat heroic. He exercised his stern determination to retain the home, for Beth, to provide something of familiarity and constancy in her very changing world. Indeed, even when their eldest daughter, Rebecca, would return home on breaks, and as an adult for visits, it appears her mother's condo was a rejected environment and her mother described sadly that even now when her daughter comes to town she visits her father's home but not hers; the greater implication of this, that she feels more at home with her father than her mother is in the air but remains mostly unspoken.

Paul's determination to maintain stability is captured in the importance he places on the notion of the original 'home' in both the literal and more evocative figurative sense. He demonstrated exquisite sensitivity to the idea that one's home is not simply a building to reside within, physically, but offers a sense of belonging, and constancy, at a representational level:

(Paul): *"This was Beth's. I knew that this house, we could not separate, sell the house, and I bought my wife out of the house, so that Beth could have a home here, because we had to keep the stability. I knew, very much, that to keep... that this house is home to Beth. And, that was a constant, I think. So, not to break the continuity of her room, her place... I have a little piece of paper that Beth drew on, at six years old. She actually drew this house, colored it gray, and wrote in her six year old [writing], 'this is my house'. And I have not forgotten that... As it was happening. As Lucy was leaving. She drew a picture. This is my house...Psychic. Psychic. She has a home. It's psychic."*

While Paul demonstrated many strengths, and certainly emerges in Beth's interview as the parent who represents parental loyalty and unflagging dedication, we see

that he is not free of sacrificing Lucy to emerge as the decidedly 'good parent.' Lucy offered a catalogue of his permissiveness and opposition to her wishes:

(Lucy): *"Beth's father bought her a car, and I didn't pay for that, and I felt she was too young to have a car. Lots of things he bought her, that I felt it was just overindulgent."*

(Lucy): *"I felt he was very, what's the word, no limits. I just remember, as a, whatever she wanted she'd get. She had every Barbie, every whatever, those Care Bears, every color, every style, he was just... without limits."*

(Lucy): *"I also remember him taking Rebecca to see a movie...But it was very sexually charged, and she was no more than 12 or 13 years old. And, I remember thinking, this is highly - and I may have said something, and he said 'well, you're not around to tell me what to... you can't tell me what to do."*

(Lucy): *"I remember him saying to me 'you give nothing.' I said to him, 'you give too much, there are no limits.' And he says 'that's because I'm balancing, because you give nothing."*

In the following excerpt, we hear Paul identifying as the 'better parent,' while abandoning structuring activities, opportunities for mastery, and deliberately locating parent-child conflict in the home of Lucy and Beth and avoiding it himself:

(Paul): *"Well, I don't think [my daughter] experienced conflict with me here, because I never forced her to do anything, alright. 'You don't have to take piano lessons, what do you want to do,' kind of thing. Whereas I guess my wife wanted her to take singing lessons, piano, ballet, all that stuff."*

Next, we hear Paul projecting a questionable amount of metaphorical significance onto the car trips he spent transporting Beth from one parental home to the other, in a way that has him emerge as hero to Lucy's villain:

(Paul): *"We used to meet half-way. Which didn't mean anything to me, because I was willing to go all the way, for [my daughter]. And, there were many times when I would just take her to her mother, and at times I would just pick her up from her mother's, for Beth to know that I would take her anywhere at any time was very important, that I was not negotiating.. I didn't want her to think that Dad was saying he'll only go half-way to meet mom, to drop her off, nuh-uh. I would go all the way. 'you need to get there, I will take you.' But that was not true of my wife, it was always half-way, half-way, half-way..."*

So, as Paul emerged as the favored parent for Beth, he undermined Lucy's efforts to create limits in terms of rules and enforced structure, he offered his daughters as much as he could materially, as if to make up for what had been lost in the divorce, but also to make up for ways their mother might be perceived as withholding, (undoubtedly, in part) a projection of his own experience of her as withholding. While we understand that he was coming from a loving place of wanting to do *for* his daughters, we can also understand the negative consequences via lack of limits and structure, and also recognize that his motives were not pure, that he was simultaneously motivated by his desire to work *against* Lucy.

In the above enactments, we see the difficulties in not being on the 'same page,' feeling attempts at limit setting are undermined by the co-parent, but more striking, in this particular dyad's dynamic, is the suggestion that Paul might have indeed been

punishing Lucy, making her the bad parent in the eyes of the children, by being the ‘good’ all-giving parent himself. While he depicts this impulse as compensation for what she wasn’t giving the kids, we hear remnants of their failed marriage not fully mourned, and a desire to seek compensation for himself, via the love of his children, for the love that his wife took away.

While Lucy was the spouse to leave the marriage, and the parent to leave the family home, we hear throughout her narrative the conflict of feeling that she had to leave, to become whole. Sadly, we hear how divorce is divisive not only for children, but for all parties involved. Paul’s pain is clear, and it emerges brilliantly and valiantly for his daughter, while Lucy has been portrayed, even by herself at times, as the responsible party and her vulnerabilities, her loss, is harder to recognize. In the following excerpt her share in the loss is less ambiguous:

(Lucy): *“It’s, I think [divorce] puts, it’s divisive, I think it tears them apart; and, it tore me apart. You know, I always felt... I still do, to this day, Christmas is a very painful time. I’m not, I mean, I’m Jewish, but still, the thought is, they’re all having a good time, and I’m left here, poor me, boo-hoo... As I say, it’s not a big deal, except that I know my daughters are having a good time with their father and I’m not... It feels terrible. It’s really a gaping hole.”*

Repair with time, with new family formation

In recent years, Lucy and Paul and their daughters have moved awkwardly, then more gracefully, closer together. Some of this has been due to deliberate and painful healing; Lucy participated in therapy with her daughter Rebecca for two years to repair ruptures in their relationship. Their collective redefinition of family, post-divorce was

halted for a decade, but appears to be happening as new members join and they develop a more cohesive system, defined less by separation and more by participation.

(Lucy): *“I would see him sometimes picking Beth up, and I’d go up to him and say hello, and he’d be civil. And, then again it would be on and off, sometimes. I never knew if he’d say hello to me or not. At Beth’s graduation, it was on the campus, he sat at one table and I stayed at the other end of the campus. Things haven’t really gotten okay with him, until Rebecca’s wedding. Rebecca’s wedding, we actually came together. We hugged, we kissed... Time, you know, happiness. I finally, I saw him, I hugged him. And, it was a beautiful wedding. He was very happy. He was overcome with joy for her. And, I gave a very nice speech where I thanked him publicly for all that he had done for the girls, and he came up and kissed me at that time. And then we danced at the wedding, one of the last dances. And then of course with [their grandson] now, we’ve been in touch.”*

Paul was less forth-coming in his appreciation for Lucy, even after all this time, but managed to speak to her crucial and important presence in their daughter’s early lives, and his reverence for what he regards as the privileged and sacred maternal role in development:

(Paul): *“Well, I know how important a mother is to a child... I think it’s a biological notion too. I really believe, the Catholic notion stems from that. Really, I mean. Where’s Beth right now? [She’s holding her infant]. Where does a baby want to be? That’s the first relationship in life. And, I have to say, my wife did a wonderful job in the beginning for both girls. She took care of them.”*

APPENDIX E

Sample Case Study: Wendy and Tara

The Stories of Wendy and Tara

In the following story we are introduced to Tara and her mother, Wendy. Their accounts demonstrate consistency in terms of understanding what had led to the separation of Wendy and David, Tara's parents, but comparisons of their accounts of Alicia's adjustment to post-divorce life and joint custody illuminates the difficulties parents often have in terms of gathering children's struggles when they are engaged in their own loss reactions and/or transition. Both of their accounts describe a post-marital parental relationship with relatively little conflict or parental disparagement, but also an absence of home-to-home consistency or co-parenting cooperation. Wendy seemed intent to rest on the assurance that the shared custody arrangement, a 50/50 model, communicated belonging and love from both parents, but Tara described feelings of marginality in both parental homes, in different ways. The lack of active positive regard between parents left her feeling like a burden and a reminder of the failed marriage. While Wendy portrayed the dramatic differences between parental homes from a perspective of multiple and diverse strengths, Tara's account depicted disorientation in the midst of little consistency and difficulty negotiating conflicting messages about expectations and behavioral norms.

The end of the parental marriage and institution of joint custody

Tara was three years old when her parents separated, and similar to other very young children of divorce, she has little recognition of her parents as married, but has a clear recollection of the moment of separation, of painful parting and severance. Wendy

met Tara's father, David, in college, they married after graduation, and were together almost a decade before Tara was born. Tara laughed when asked if she knew the story of her parents coming together and admitted it is difficult for her to conceive of them as a couple, even then.

(Tara): *"Oh my gosh. I cannot imagine how they ever, I mean, I can imagine, you know, like I can see, my dad has never really talked about it, but my mom has definitely said, you know, that she was really shy and had a hard time meeting people in college, and that a lot of the reason that she, you know, really started dating my dad is because he was one of the only guys that approached her, and you know, was willing to get to know her, and didn't just want to sleep with her. And, there, I mean, I can imagine them having like a good friendship, you know, because they're both really great and interesting people, and I'm sure they had a lot of like good discussions, and, you know what I mean, like I'm sure that they, and they enjoyed doing things together, like cooking together, and stuff like that. You know, I think that they really differed on, like, some very fundamental issues, like the way that they viewed life. And, I think that... Yeah. It's sort of an important one. I really think that if they had both known themselves better, that they probably would have broken up... So like, I can see why they got together, kind of, but I just can't imagine why they ever like, got married and had a kid."*

As with many parent subjects, Wendy described experiencing a sort of internal shift during the marriage, a realization that she needed something different, something more, and a longing for independence and individuation. Throughout the interview Wendy stressed that Tara was 'a gift' to them both, but it was clear that over time there was little else that she and her husband shared in common.

(Wendy): *“What I would say is I went into my first relationship pretty unconscious about who I was and what I needed, and it wasn’t a bad relationship. I would say, you know, we started growing very much in different directions with what we kind of got, politically, socially, emotionally, and because we didn’t have a really strong connection really to begin with, because I don’t know that either one of us really knew ourselves very well, I just think that it to a point, I think that when Tara was born, I very clearly all of the sudden had a sense that I needed to wake up... And, I think that, we both kind of came to a choice point around the same time of realizing that it wasn’t going very well, and that we actually both decided that a separation would be a good idea.”*

Wendy and David went into therapy to work on their marriage and during their initial separation they toyed with the idea of reconciliation. After an illuminating therapy session when David was pressing for Wendy to stay together in the interest of family, but could not voice romantic yearnings for her, Wendy became firm that they needed to move into mediation to formally separate and work out custody details about Tara. In the following two excerpts we hear this story first from Wendy, then from Tara, with a great deal of consistency and demonstrating Tara’s desire for an explanation and acceptance of the explanation provided:

(Wendy): *“We went to counseling, there was a counseling session because David kept on saying how much he thought I needed to come back. And, that he didn’t want to break up the family, and you know a lot of traditional stuff that way. And, the therapist looked at him, and he said to him, ‘David, can you tell Wendy how much you love her?’ And he couldn’t say it. And, when he couldn’t say that, that was kind of it for me. It was like, you know, this is not about somehow saving the family if there’s not a couple here,*

you know. And so, that was, that moment was kind of another defining moment for me. You know, I still, I was hesitant, because again, I felt so much freed up, kind of growing and doing, you know, once I left the marriage and I was exploring who I was. But, I still think that, you know, I felt enough guilt about it that I was willing to go back and do the right thing, if you will. But, I think that at that point, that just really struck me. And I just was like, you know, I can't do that. I can't go back with someone who can't even tell me that they love me. And, that was it. And that was when I decided it was done and it was time for me to move on with my life."

(Tara): "And, the only thing I really know, I don't know if my dad, I think that to a certain extent my dad had maybe been unfaithful. And, I know that they went to marriage counseling, they were going to marriage counseling, and again my dad has never talked about this, this is all from my mom. But, her version of the story is that they were going through marriage counseling and the counselor said to my dad, you know, when they were trying to decide, kind of whether it was worth working through some things, he said, 'you know, David, can you look at Wendy and just tell her that you love her, you know, tell her how much you love her.' And, my mom said that he couldn't even, at that point, couldn't even look her in the eye, and definitely couldn't say, I mean, he couldn't look her in the eye because he knew that he couldn't say that truthfully. And, at that point she was kind of like, 'ok, well, I guess there's no reason for us to stay together' ... And, I think my dad was much more willing than she was to put up with, like being in a loveless relationship, if it was easier than not, you know what I mean. Like, it was easier than dealing with the pain and those feelings of like, loneliness and rejection ... But, I think for my mom, it was a really important step in saying, no, you know, I do want this, like I do

want to feel respected, and I do deserve to be in a relationship where I feel valued and loved and all that kind of thing.”

Wendy described managing feelings of guilt about formally ending the marriage and awareness of David’s feelings of loss, but reassured herself that she and David both made a concerted effort to shield Tara from their emotional reactions – though they weren’t always successful.

(Wendy): *“I think we did a pretty good job of trying to keep her out of any emotional upset between the two of us. And, that there was one particular time when that did not work so well. And, she remembers it very clearly from her point of view. But, it was basically that I think I went to pick her up after he had her for a little while, and he got very emotional and started weeping, and I don’t remember being mean or anything, but I, you know, I just told him that this wasn’t the time, and that I would talk to him, and, and we left, Tara and I. And, I think she always felt bad, you know, like here was her dad falling apart and we were leaving him. I think that was really hard for her.”*

Tara also remembers this event but locates it in a temporally different place, on the day the separation began, demonstrating the emotional power of this scene and how the story she told herself about the separation casts her mother more definitively as the ‘leaver’ with her father being left behind. This is significant given that even though there appears to have been more overall consensus about splitting up, at least initially, and an allusion to her father having had an affair, her recollection captures a broad truth about the story of the separation, that her mother was taking flight into a more independent phase of life.

(Tara): *“I remember very clearly the day that my mom and I left the house. And, that experience has actually come up for me several times, like during meditation, or even like hypnosis. I remembered my mom and I standing in one corner and my dad was sitting on the couch, like facing us. And, he was crying. And, my mom was saying to me, ‘It’s time to go, let’s go.’ And, I don’t know that I said anything at the time, but I remember that my feeling was like, ‘why are we leaving? Why are we leaving?’ Because it was clear to me, that us leaving was making him sad, you know, was making my dad cry. So, it was like, why would we do that to him, you know. And, but I also remember feeling like, I think that’s the only time I have ever seen my dad cry like that in my entire life. So, I remembered just feeling really overwhelmed by like, the emotion that was happening, but not really understanding, and not really knowing what I could do in that situation.”*

Such confrontation with parental fragilities can promote accelerated maturity in some children and can be experienced a loss of innocence and taken-for-granted parental support. Tara reflected on how this event, the experience of seeing her father in such distress and feeling powerless to intervene or make it better, had a lasting effect on her personality.:

(Tara): *“So, and I’ve always thought about that because I, I always had this sense growing up that it was like if only I could be, you know, like, this idea that in any situation, there’s something you can say, or an action that you can take that will sort of, you know, diffuse any hurt or negativity, or you know, like fix any problem that there may be. So I’ve always had like, if only I could, like do the right thing, or just say the right thing, or never do anything wrong, then, you know what I mean, then it would be, like*

everything would be ok. But, I just really, I have a really clear memory of just feeling really angry at my mom for leaving, but just feeling really confused about what was going on, you know. And now, looking back, I can understand, but at the time, it was like why would you ever do something that is so obviously hurting this person that you care about, you know. So, and that's really the only memory I have, and then after that, you know, I mean I think that was the day that we moved out."

Following the separation, Tara's life changed dramatically, became characterized by transition, with frequent movement between homes and a sort of vagabond existence. As she became older, her parents were able to accommodate her independence by permitting a more flexible custody schedule that allowed her to participate in important extra-familial pursuits:

(Tara): *"It was hard. Well, it changed. Like every year they would make a different schedule. Some years it would be like week on week off, some years it would be like day on, day off, some years it would be like, you know, Mondays, Tuesdays, Mom; Wednesday s, Thursday s, Dad, and then alternating weekends kind of thing. So, it was different, it would kind of depend... Yeah, I mean once I got old enough, I definitely had say [about custody schedule]. And then a lot of it was dictated by, like when I, I think I was still in middle school, maybe in eighth grade, and I got accepted into the dance company at the dance school where I used to take classes, and so then, you know there were certain classes that I was required to take and rehearsal times, studio times, depending on my dance schedule, my dad lived a lot closer to the studio. So, nights when I would be there later, I would usually go to his house."*

Wendy remarked on Tara's sensitivity to her parent's needs around time spent with her and her understanding of being 'shared,' from a very young age. Given Tara's encounter with her father's strong loss reaction during the divorce, we can speculate that her insistence on 'fairness' in seeing her father more regularly, as described in the excerpt below, was related in part to a desire to take care of him, give him back something of what he lost in the divorce.

(Wendy): *"When she was little, you know she spent more time with me. And, then there was a certain point where she, I would say it was Tara's decision. I don't know how she remembers it, but she decided that she really felt like she needed to be fair to her dad and spend half the time with him. And, that was maybe around when she was five, or six or something. And so, you know, and he certainly agreed that he was willing to do that... I think that one thing I do know is that she always had a really kind of strong feeling of she needed to be fair, again, that whole thing about, you know, I've got to go see daddy because it's daddy's turn. It must be weird to feel like you're kind of like this commodity that has to be shared, you know, like that... But, she had a sense that she had to be there, and she, you know, when she got a little older, you know, again, it was her idea that, you know dad needs to see me more, that's what's fair."*

In addition to alternating time between each parental home, Tara experienced the added stressor of moving repeatedly, as her mother struggled to establish herself financially post-divorce. Here we hear the implications of children being thrust into two different socio-economic brackets following divorce and having to withstand displacement upon displacement:

(Tara): *“Well, the thing that was hard for my mom was that she really didn’t have a place to go. I think at the time she was working as like a social worker and not making a whole lot of money. My dad owned the house that we lived in. So, we moved in, kind of, with several of her friends in succession. And, we would share a room or I would share a room with the kids, the other kids in the house, and she would sleep on the couch. And, I can remember at least, at least three places. And there may very well have been more that we moved into right after the separation. And, like I remember one time when I was 12 counting and realizing that I had moved 13 times.”*

Wendy expressed gratitude that her ex-husband retained the family home, for a time being, and then settled in the same neighborhood, providing Tara features of consistency amidst transition – something she was financially unable to provide:

(Wendy): *“Her dad stayed in the house that we had. I moved out. And, he stayed in that house for probably, I would say almost another two years after. And so, you know, that’s where she went to. So, she didn’t lose her home, you know, that home that she knew for another two years. And, with me, I mean, you know, she lived in, I moved in with one of my officemates, and then I moved in with a woman who had a couple kids, because I just couldn’t afford anything on my own at that point, because I didn’t have the money from the house or anything... But, you know, she had that peace, and so she was in that neighborhood, and there were a few friends. And I used to go back, and you know, I’d visit those people a little bit. But that was, you know, and then I think he moved into kind of another temporary situation, and then he met Nancy and they got married. I don’t think that that took a whole lot of time before that happened, when he met her. And then, you know, they kind of moved into a house in a neighborhood, anyway, that they lived in*

until now. They switched one house, you know, but it was still the same neighborhood... I think just knowing that that's what needed to happen."

Tara and Wendy both described minimal overlap in belongings shared between homes, which meant there was little to transport, but this created inconveniences, as well, and further undermined Tara's sense of continuity. In a comparison of accounts, we hear Wendy focusing more on the degree of convenience/inconvenience, whereas Tara reflected more on the issue of stability/instability:

(Tara): *"I really didn't take a whole lot [of belongings between homes], just because I, again, I was so young when they split up, that I kind of grew up with two sets of everything, which meant when I went to college, I had a lot of stuff. But, and I remember being really excited about, being like, all my stuff is going to be in one place. Never again will I be like, oh, I want that shirt, and it's somewhere else, you know."*

(Wendy): *"I mean, she definitely, I would say that, you know, she pretty much had her own worlds in both places. She had her clothes there and her clothes here, and her stuff there and her stuff here. And, that was, I think the only place where it was ever at all really an issue, was the school stuff... And so, when she would forget, I think that was one of the hardest things. And I think that was actually one of the reasons why we ended up going to a week on and a week off, you know was because it just made it a little easier to kind of keep track of what was where at that point."*

Tara described becoming rather habituated to the regular migrations between homes and other environmental upheavals, and credited her youth - contrasting her experience with that of friends whose parents divorced when they were older.

(Tara): *“Well, again, I mean I think I felt comfortable in different ways in each place, you know. And, it got to the point that it was so normal to me because I was so young when my parents separated, that, you know, I remember having friends whose parents got divorced later, like in middle school and high school, and obviously, you know, they had a really hard time because they were used to having this one home and then all of the sudden, you know, it’s different. And like, you know, even with my dad, who really is such a, you know, like stable, you know, that’s the plan, but, I mean even at his house it was like we did move a couple times, and obviously he remarried and there were new siblings and stuff. So, you know, I was sort of more used to, I think, that change, I guess.”*

Child’s heightened sensitivity to parents’ emotional experience post-divorce

Tara’s regular contact with both parents offered her a good vantage point to observe their adjustment to life after the divorce. In contrast to Wendy’s sense that she and David succeeded, overall, in shielding Tara from their emotional struggles following divorce, Tara described sensitive awareness of their attempts to cope, and how, in the midst of their own reactions to dramatic life change, they became less equipped, or too preoccupied, to provide consistent support and attention to her needs.

(Tara): *“I think that a lot of what, kind of what was confusing for me, especially like right after the separation, was like a lot of the symptoms that I feel, or the things that I was doing, or things that were happening, that I feel were symptoms of my trouble dealing with that, were treated like bad behavior. You know what I mean? Where it wasn’t things that I was doing intentionally, or necessarily really even had control over, but I, and I understand that [my dad] just didn’t know how else to deal with that, you*

know? And then I think, honestly I think my mom was so, kind of stressed and confused about her own life, that it was almost like she didn't have time to really deal with it... because of her own life, she wasn't able to be consistent and really present for a lot of the things that I was going through."

Despite allusions to an affair on her father's part, Tara attributed the decision to end the marriage to her mother and reflected on the myriad of emotions that might have afflicted her father: loss, shame, feelings of failure, and fear of an unknown future:

(Tara): "Well, I think for my dad, it was...it was a really big blow for him. Even though now I would say, and I've never talked to him about this, but I would imagine that like looking back, he would probably feel like, 'oh thank goodness' that, you know, we separated, just because, I mean, he can see like, the choices that my mom has made in her life, and he is remarried and has two kids, and I think he, you know, he's much happier than he would have been if they had tried to stay together. But, I think that for him, you know, it was really my mom's decision. And, I think for him it kind of felt like a personal failure. And, there was, like a lot of judgment from his family, about getting divorced, and, so, I think for him, like he really was kind of depressed for a while... And, I can imagine that he was really lonely ... they had been together a really long time. So, I can just imagine being 35, and him feeling like, oh my gosh, like, you know, I have this toddler, and I had this relationship, you know, of like a dozen years, and I'm never going to, what if I never find anybody, and all that kind of stuff, and I'm sure it was really hard for him."

Looking back as an adult, Tara was able to consider her father's reaction with empathic appreciation for the complexity of his loss, but as a child she recalled feeling he was just less playful, less available, and hard to reach:

(Tara): *"I wouldn't really say that [my dad], like took it out on me so much, but I think that he just, like withdrew, and...he was never an emotional, I mean, still to this day, is not like a very emotionally expressive person. But, I think especially after that experience, just really was like, you know, do what you can, you know, to get through the day. Like, I can remember asking him, you know, not so long after that, being like 'dad, how come we never talk?', you know. And, he was like, 'what do you want to talk about?' And, I was like four or five, and I was like, 'I don't know,' you know. So, we would just like be in silence a lot, you know... [Prior to the divorce] I think that he was a lot more like playful with me, and I, you know, like I can remember him like taking me on walks and teaching me about things, and telling me stories. And, not that he didn't do those things after, but I think it, especially for a while right after it was a lot less that he was able to really do that. Yeah. I mean, you know, which is understandable. It's hard to end a long relationship like that."*

Parents' lessened sensitivity to the child's emotional experience post-divorce

In terms of Tara's post-divorce functioning, she and her mother offered quite different accounts. Wendy described Tara as adjusting relatively well following the separation, besides sadness and regret that her family was no longer intact.

Wendy: *"I don't think there was a big change in her. I know it was hard on her, no doubt, and that, you know, she wanted her family to be together, and that's pretty much what she said. I think that, you know, it's hard. A lot of people said to me that she*

was the most well adjusted divorced kid they ever knew. But, I also think she struggled with it. Although, part of that...you know it's hard because part of it was that she was an only child. And so, you know, some of the difficulties that came up were more around peer relationship stuff. But, it's possible the divorce, you know, played into that. You know, she would just, she just said that, you know. She wanted us to be back together. And, I would try to explain why we weren't together. And, I think that, you know, she actually just went through it... "

Tara's description of how she changed is more dramatic and her adjustment to the separation, especially in her early years, is recollected by her as being characterized by pronounced anxiety, in contrast to her sense of feeling safe and light-hearted beforehand, suggesting that Wendy was minimizing her difficulties because these were hard to face:

Tara: "Obviously I was really young [before the separation], but I remember being happy.... I remember, you know, feeling pretty safe, pretty ok. I was a very kind of precocious, little kid. And, I was always wandering off, and knocking on neighbor's doors and things. So, I felt pretty ok, like, it's all my house. Everyone's nice... After my parents separated, I had a lot of kind of symptoms of like distress I guess I would say. Like, I used to have really bad night terrors and would wake up every night like screaming and would call my parents names, you know. And, I mean that went on until I was like, in middle school that I would have them. I mean, I obviously stopped calling for my parents at a certain point, but, you know, because for my dad, he would be like, this is not acceptable. You know, like you are old enough, you do not, like I am not coming to comfort you every night. This is just ridiculous, you know. I also had problems with like bed-wetting, and, you know, for my dad, and like anything with being comfortable, like in

social situations, like I went through kind of a phase where I just felt like I never really knew what I was supposed to be doing or supposed to be saying.”

Tara described little in the way of emotional processing with her parents after the divorce. While she was free from the stressors of children who contend with pronounced post-marital conflict, she described feeling confused by how much her parents and her life had changed and felt left to make sense of it all on her own:

Tara: “I just think it’s really important, I think it’s mostly important for like children to be able to have a voice, you know, for like the parents to acknowledge that it’s going to be hard for them and to give them time, like how is it going for you? Like what are you thinking? ... I don’t really remember either of them talking to me about it, pretty much at all, you know. I think for my dad, it was kind of like, you know, like I said, something kind of embarrassing for him, and so it was like, let’s just not talk about it, you know what I mean. Like, I just don’t want to even acknowledge that anything happened... You know for me, it wasn’t really being in the presence of, like a hostile or an argumentative relationship, but it was that they both changed so much after the separation, and I didn’t really understand. You know, I didn’t understand why when I had been happy before, now it was like I lived in two different places, like why my life had changed so much.”

Tara likened the period of moving from familial intactness to life after separation to her disorienting experience, around the same time, of transferring from a Montessori school to a public school: different rules, contrasting expectations and uncertainty about how to proceed:

Tara: *“I do, I think I definitely changed... kind of like that transition from Montessori to public school, because that was like a very similar feeling where I just felt like all of the sudden I didn’t know the rules, whereas before it was like no matter what I did, or, you know, even if I did something that my parents didn’t like, there was always an opportunity to be like, to say like, ok, well you’re not allowed to, you know, break things, or you’re not allowed to, whatever, like learn the rules, but it was always in a way that, you know, I could understand, and, you know, that I could follow in the future, whereas like after they separated..., I sort of for a long time felt, you know both at school and at home, I was sort of like out of place. Like, I wanted so badly to do the right thing, but I just didn’t understand what I was supposed to be doing.”*

Tara made a point, several times during the interview, to stress that she does not regret, at least in hindsight, that her parents divorced, believing it was the appropriate decision for all involved. She explained that it was not the separation, per se, but her parents’ difficulties in remaining dependable, regulating figures for her that impacted her the most:

Tara: *“I mean, I think, you know, it was probably very good for both of them, but I just think... I think it wasn’t so much that they got divorced. I mean, I’m always very happy that I didn’t have to grow up with them around each other, because I’m sure there would have been a point where I would have become painfully aware of all the tension and the arguing that was going on. But, I just think, you know, so it wasn’t the fact that they separated, but that they didn’t really handle the separation very well, like on a personal level, that it was just a really difficult time for them individually that made it so*

hard for me, because it's hard to see your parents be so upset, or feel like they're not in control."

Dramatic difference between homes

Tara and her mother both described her parental homes along similar lines of distinction. Her mother's home was a space where emotional expressiveness was permitted and encouraged, her lifestyle was more 'alternative,' and rules and regulations were considered secondary to deference to context and consideration of feelings. Her father's home was more emotionally constricted, his lifestyle was quite conventional, and routine and discipline were enforced with more consistency.

Wendy described that initially she and her ex-husband's differences were less pronounced, but emerged more dramatically overtime: *"When I met [David], I mean, you know, I don't think we were that different in terms of our world views and our aspirations. But, he very much became much more of a kind of corporate, he became much more like his dad, who he really didn't want to be. He just kind of went that route... a much more traditional kind of American. And you know, he married someone, and they had two more kids and they bought a big house in the 'burbs, and you know, it was just, you know, and I was off buying a hundred year old house and turning it into a bed and breakfast, and, you know, doing sweat lodges. And, Tara did all that stuff with me. I mean, she was the one little kid who always came along... But, that was very different than kind of the very much more standard, you know, normal kind of American family experience that she had through her dad... Living with mom, and living with dad were two quite different experiences, I'm just, I'm just not a real, I mean, I think I'm a real stable person, but I'm not a real traditional person... I think that even maybe from very*

young, you know, she had a sense of how very different we were. I know that she knew that we were really, really different. I mean, you couldn't help that, especially once we were separated. The world that she lived in with me was really different, in terms of the kind of quality of it, and what she was exposed to in terms of different kinds of people, and ideas, etcetera, than where her dad was."

Wendy seemed most focused on the lifestyle differences between herself and her ex-spouse, but acknowledged that Tara experienced differences in terms of self-expression and enforced structure, as well: *"[In terms of parenting style:] I don't know that it was really, really different from one another. Again, I think the big thing that was probably different for us, is that I was just more kind of emotionally keyed into where she was. And, you know, we did, probably, Tara and I, even when she was really young, did a lot more processing about what she was feeling, and kind of what was going on. And, you know, in his household, I just don't think, you know, that's what they did, a whole lot of. It was loving, and these were the rules, and what the expectations were, and, and for me, I just, I'm just kind of one of those much more, kind of how are you feeling, and what do you think would work for us, and, even the whole discipline thing, you know, we would just try different things... So, she, I think she had a lot more sense of that things were a lot more kind of structured there... And, so I think that there was much more of an emphasis on achievement, and money management, definitely. And, again, I, you know, there were, some of those things I really appreciated that she got from him. But, there was definitely more of a kind of, there definitely wasn't the emotional openness that she had in my household."*

While Wendy stressed the opportunity for processing and more relaxed expectations in her home, she didn't reflect long on the implication of Tara feeling silenced or more restrained at her father's; likewise, while she expresses gratitude for the structure and consistency offered by Tara's father, she didn't reflect long on the implications of very little structure in her home. In Tara's description, we hear a similar comparison of homes, but her account is more balanced in terms of emphasizing strengths but also the deficiencies of each home:

Tara: *"It's funny because like my, and still to this day, it's kind of like this, my dad and my mom, I mean, definitely the way that they live and kind of, you know, their homes are reflective of their personalities, you know. And, my dad has always been much better at just, you know, being stable, and like these are the rules and we live by the rules. So, his house always feels very, you know, it's like I know that I can always go there, and there's always going to be food, and there's always going to be, like a clean bed. And that's always been the way that it was, you know. You know, but then on the flip side, it's like a place where you really have to, you have to live by those rules. You know, you can't necessarily, I mean, you can't be yourself, or you know, say things that you're really feeling, or do things that are, not necessarily bad, but like are kind of frowned upon, just like, you know, just like being silly or being a kid, or, you can't always do those things without getting in trouble, but you know, but then again, there is that kind of sense of stability, whereas like my mom, and definitely the living situation reflected this, for a long time, it was like you were free to do or say whatever you wanted, you know. But, there might not be food, or, you know. I mean, you might come home, I mean, if I'm showing up there, you know, or like in college, if I would show up, it's like well, maybe,*

you know, there's like, your old bedroom is now like a friend's bedroom, or like you know what I mean, like somebody that I know that needs a place to stay, or, it's like, well, ok. It's not a lot of stability."

Wendy explained that she and Tara's father accepted that they had different ways of raising Tara, with little consensus-building, but mutual respect, or tolerance, for their different styles. While she acknowledged the challenge of regular transition between homes, and different sets of rules, she expressed confidence that Tara was able to move between these with overall fluidity:

Wendy: "I would say the challenges [of shared custody] probably are that sense of having to go back and forth, you know. It's like you don't really have one home base. You're kind of having to operate out of two home bases. And, you know two kind of, at least for a lot of kids probably, you know, different sets of ideas and expectations. And, for Tara that was certainly the case. Although, you know, again, I think that both of us kind of respected each other's way of doing things. And so, you know, it wasn't like there was a lot of contention. So, she wouldn't have felt like, oh, that shouldn't be that way... I think that we pretty much just had an agreement, whether it was overt or not, that we both would decide, you know, on our own set of rules. And, I think that she was, you know, she knew that, you know, the rules were the rules, and she just got used to [that]."

Tara agreed that she adjusted to the different set of rules at each house, and suggested that it made for an ability to appreciate a 'gray area' in situations, but also described her struggle to avoid conflict around contradictory expectations and the lack of uniformity:

Tara: *“The rules were really different. And, it kind of makes you an interesting person, I feel like, because you definitely grow up with the idea that, like it’s not black or white. Like, it’s not like this is ok, this is not ok. It’s sort of like, well, I think this is ok, but I know that you don’t think it’s ok, so I’m going to pretend like I’m not doing it, or that I agree with you, just because it’s easier than arguing about it, you know... I think, like as far as consistency, I mean, well, there were just a lot of, there were a lot of differences, like between the two houses. And, I think that overall, like you know, to speak about my childhood in general, there was very little consistency of things that were **always** ok, or **always** not ok.”*

Wendy mused that Tara was able to ‘incorporate’ the best of both of her parents, again seizing a sort of ‘strengths perspective,’ and cited Tara’s intelligence and resourcefulness in achieving an integration of sorts:

Wendy: *“I think that I actually, in some ways, although I think, again, it was difficult for her, that she was bright and resourceful enough to really incorporate a lot of those things into who she is. You know, that she really could take kind of the best of both of us, and, although I’m sure, you know, you also pick up all the other stuff too. But that she really has taken, you know, the best of both of us and incorporated it into who she is.”*

In actuality, Tara described significant difficulties reconciling different messages of what was considered of value, what was and wasn’t acceptable behavior, what was normative, what was expected of her. She described the experience as internally disorienting as she struggled to make sense of the notion of ‘right and wrong’ when it seemed so relative from home to home. For Tara, the outer-world stylistic differences

between her parents, in terms of ‘suburbs’ vs. ‘sweat lodges,’ were not nearly as difficult to negotiate as developing a coherent internal guide for how to proceed in any given situation.

Tara: *“It’s almost like, without having any like constant rule, it’s sort of like, well, and even like, you know, when your parents, when you’re so young, and your parents are definitely like that source of authority, to have them not have any consistency is like, almost makes you feel like nothing is like totally right, or totally wrong, you know what I mean. So, you almost don’t grow up with that sense of like, you know, like a real, I don’t want to say a moral compass, because I feel like that’s so much bigger, but like it took me a long time, I especially remember, like in elementary school, it took me a long time to figure out, why lying was bad, you know... If I say I’m going to the bathroom, but then I go outside instead, you know, I’m not lying, I’m just telling you what I know that you want to hear because I think it’s ok to go outside, but you don’t, you know what I mean. And, I just had a really hard time understanding like, you know, why it wasn’t ok... I think when you’re so young and you kind of like, you learn, like, I mean, what I, sort of the way that I operated for a long time, which is also why I think I was really frustrating for a lot of my teachers, is that it was like, ok fine, I’ll smile and nod and tell you that I’m doing what you want me to do, so that you’ll leave me alone, so that I can do what I really want to do, you know. And, I don’t think that’s really a positive thing, but that’s definitely something that I got from my mom and my dad, you know, where it’s like, I know that you’re going to want one thing from me, and you’re going to want another thing from me, and I can’t do both. Or, I can’t do both consistently, so I either have to kind of be this like, you know, duplicitous person... But, when I was young, I had no*

problem with like saying one thing and doing another, people asked me if I did something that I obviously did and I would say no, and thinking that there was no way that you would catch on to me, you know, growing up with two totally different sets of rules. It was almost a coping mechanism.”

Child’s fragile sense of belonging and lessening primacy in parental lives

Tara and Wendy both expressed their conviction that joint custody was the most optimal arrangement for Tara following her parents’ divorce. Tara expressed, in particular, that she had the opportunity to develop relationships with both of her parents, despite stressors:

Tara: “I think that joint custody is really positive, especially for the child. If, you know, if the parents are going to divorce, because I’m still like, you know, it was in a lot of ways a good experience, even though I feel like, you know, I make it sound negative sometimes, you know, like even in this interview, but, I would much rather, like in retrospect, I can imagine what my life would have been like with one parent or the other, I would much rather have had both. And, also I’m really glad that I feel like I know them both and have relationships with them both, and not like I don’t really know my dad or I don’t really know my mom, you know.”

Wendy echoed Tara’s sentiment of the importance of children maintaining relationships with both parents, but described her hope, that joint custody - by virtue of the design -communicated a message to Tara that she was wanted by both parents:

Wendy: “The advantage [of joint custody] is that I think the child feels like they have that kind of equal time with both parents. And, that, you know, both parents are involved and care enough to want to be involved. So, that I think is the major advantages.

And, then you know, they have that time to really develop whatever relationship they're going to with either parent... And so, I, and it was, was a good thing in the sense that I think that she was really clear that both her parents wanted her, you know. And, I don't know that there was ever a sense, although, you know, we all interpret things a certain way, but I really don't think she had a strong sense that somebody didn't care about her..."

Despite the opportunity to spend equal time with both parents, Tara described a phenomenon common in the accounts of children in joint custody, that 'more home' can paradoxically result in a feeling of having 'less home,' a sense of not fully belonging in either parental home. In terms of being at her father's, Tara described feeling like a reminder of his marriage that had gone badly, a reminder of her mother, and a lack of genuine acceptance by him. In terms being at her mother's, she described feeling that her presence was an added burden to her mother, and how having a child interfered with her mother's pursuit of a new life:

Tara: "I think in some ways, like I almost never really, felt totally at home in either place. And that was hard, but, I mean, at a lot of times I felt, and I said this before, but I felt like both my parents, their lives would have been easier had I not been there, you know, that they definitely gave me that impression. Not that they ever said that to me, but, I mean my dad made it very obvious, you know, that he didn't really approve of the things I did, and it was like, well, when I was dancing, for example, it was like, well, you know, you could be on the field hockey team, and you know, be in the sports league in the high school ...he was like kind of disappointed in me, or he kind of wished that I was like, something different than what I was, and that's hard to live, you know, it's hard to live in

any environment where people are making you feel like being you is not enough, you know... And then I think my mom, and especially in her relationships, the men that she was seeing never had kids, so it was like, 'I would be so much prettier if I didn't have to deal with this kid,' from her point of view... So, you know, I always kind of felt like I wasn't anybody's first priority, you know. So, I mean, I don't know that I ever really felt at home until I had my own place, where I really felt at home... For a long time I remember feeling like I was just sort of inconvenient for both of them. You know what I mean? That their lives would be easier if I wasn't there, you know. And even, I mean, even now, I mean, definitely I don't think, I mean, my mom does not act like, and I'm sure they never really felt that way, or even if they had that thought, I'm sure they never would have really wanted me to go away. But, I do think, you know, that in some ways it was sort of like, I mean, for my mom, I think it felt like an extra responsibility when she could barely kind of take care of herself. And then, I think for my dad, in a lot of ways it was more, not so much like an extra responsibility, but just like a reminder of like this failed thing in his life... I think in some ways he would have rather been able to just close that chapter entirely."

Wendy described her efforts to maintain a primary parental role with Tara, despite not having daily contact with her; for example, she tried to design her schedule around the time that they did spend together:

Wendy: *"You know, being a mom, I mean, I put a lot into that. And again, in a really good way. There was, you know, it just felt so natural, and so good to me to be in that role. And, it was something that I valued, and again, it was part of my identity at that point, where 'here's something that I can do really well. I can be a mom.' I had, you*

know, tremendous amounts of love, and enjoyed the hell out of her... Although, the way that we did joint custody we really tried to work it, I tried to work it so that for instance, when I didn't have her, I worked late, and when I did have her then I could take off earlier, so I would have more time with her. So, you know, really tried to schedule that in a way that worked for her."

As in many child subjects' accounts, Tara was faced with managing a variety of challenges as her family became 'blended' and accommodated new familial members. Tara's described how aspects of this transition heightened her sense of marginality and of being a lesser priority for her parents as they embarked on new lives with new significant others. For instance, Tara's sense of being less of a primary concern for her mother emerged not in terms of how much time they spent together, but feeling that her needs and wishes were made secondary as her mother made room for new men in her life - even when Tara expressed her lack of comfort or lack of safety with them:

Tara: "You know, she never really stood up, so, you know, like I would tell her very honestly, not in front of the guys, but like how I felt about the men that she was in a relationship with, and it wasn't always positive, you know. And, another thing is like, especially with the guy she's seeing now, who now I really love, but, we definitely fought a lot when they first got together, because he was drinking a lot, and we would just argue all the time, and I would tell her, you know, I don't feel safe being at home alone with him. I don't think you should live with him, because, then I'd have to live with him. So, but you know, then he moved in, and we still fought, and I would still tell her, I don't think this is fair. I think I should be able to feel safe when I'm at home alone, and I don't. You know, but she never asked him to move out..."

Wendy expressed her awareness that Tara was not fully comfortable with her new significant others, but didn't express awareness of how Tara's discomfort with her choice in partners contributed to a sense of holding a lack of primacy for her mother. Instead, Wendy described how she made attempts to create boundaries in terms of maintaining her role as parent, as the primary parental figure in the home, to communicate that she did not expect Tara to embrace her new partners as parental figures:

Wendy: *“Well, I think that, and she may have a different point of view about this, I think that, you know, I always had the sense that I wasn't so much going to introduce her to anybody that I dated until I felt like I was in a more committed relationship... [My second husband and I] lived together for a little while before we got married, and, but I think that when we moved in and actually all started living together and stuff, she had some trouble adjusting to him. And, he had never had children, and I think he had some trouble kind of knowing, you know, I think that, you know, looking back, I think that he thought it would be easier than it was, to gain her affection and stuff like that. And so, he, you know, I think was a little like, 'how come she doesn't love me this way,' and all of that. And we did, you know, we tried to talk to some of that. And, I think that the two of them had a bit of a struggle. And, I don't know how she felt about, you know, again, Tara and I have always been really close. And, you know, in the relationship that I'm in now, I'd say the same thing, that she really didn't appreciate him being there. And, it was more difficult at the beginning. But, I think that they're in a pretty good place now, you know. But, I'm still mom, you know, I'm still our connection, and that's just, that's kind of how we've always been... And, I think that even though I did remarry, I very much, always was Tara's parent. Nobody ever, else really ever stepped in and filled that other*

parent role. They were just kind of more my partner. And, it's not that they weren't an adult with her, but I think that I, she always saw me as the main parent. And, in her dad's household, I think it was a little more balanced, that, you know, her step-mom, who came in when she was pretty young, you know, I don't think she saw her like another mom, you know, like she did me, but I think that she did very much see her as a mom."

As is often the case following divorce, Wendy became less materially comfortable and Tara was well aware of the economic disparities between homes. In the following excerpt we hear how this created tensions in terms of what each parent could provide materially, but also how it contributed to Tara's sense of marginality in her father's new family. In particular, we hear how she felt identified as her father's child, but not her step-mother's child, in contradistinction to her half-siblings, who were both of theirs and belonged without question:

Tara: "Well, it was, there was definitely kind of tension about [class difference between homes] while I was growing up. You know, like, because I know that my mom would feel bad when she couldn't give me things and my dad could. And, she would say things like, you know, like I would ask for something, and it would be like, 'well, you know Tara, I don't have like tons of money like your dad does.' Or, you know like, 'I'm just not as well off as your dad, and I can't help you with that.' And, I think, you know, there was definitely some like resentment on my dad's part, because everything, you know, all the savings, everything that he, like, every big expense of mine, it was just pretty much a given that my mom could not contribute... it was like all on my dad, and it was also hard, because once he had two other kids, you know, he was saving for them too. And, for them, and I know also that it was a source of conflict between he and my

step-mom, because Nancy sort of always had the opinion, well if, you know, it's not really my fault that Tara's mom can't contribute, so I'm not going to contribute my salary, because she's not my daughter, you know..."

This message, that she was not her step-mother's daughter, was reinforced in social situations as well, and we hear traces of feelings of rejection as Tara described her step-mother's tendency to highlight that they were not in fact mother and daughter:

Tara: "Even without saying it, I mean it's very obvious when, you know, it's sort of like when he, with my step-mom, who are so conservative, and you know, cut and dry, it's like, [people would ask] 'well how are you related again?', or like, oh, 'is this your mom?' It's like, 'no, this is my step-daughter,' you know. Kind of like, feeling like they don't want to have to admit that their life isn't fully, you know, under control or perfect, or whatever they want, you know. And, it's hard not to feel like that's kind of a reflection of like how they feel about you."

Tara expressed some feelings of rivalry for her younger sister, perceived as favored by her father, which might have further undermined her sense of acceptance, and belonging with him:

Tara: "I do remember, with my sister it was, I think there was a little bit more jealousy, because my dad was very doting with her, whereas he had never really been like that with me. He was definitely, like much harder on me than he was on her. And, I think a lot of that came from the fact that he was like, you know, at that age, when that kind of situation was going on was the time when he was a single parent and was having a lot of trouble, like dealing with the divorce. But, you know, with her it was like, oh, my

little princess. And like, who's my angel, like who's daddy's little girl. And, I was like, 'you NEVER talked to me like that!' You know, and it was like she could do no wrong.'

Wendy seemed blithely unaware of her daughter's feelings of being displaced by her new sibling(s), and consistent with her desire to place a positive spin on challenging features of her daughter's life, voiced her appreciation that Tara had been given the opportunity to play the role of older sister:

Wendy: "I was really thrilled that she had the opportunity to have another brother and a sister. And, she really loved that. I mean, that was really something that she really enjoyed was her closeness with them. And so, you know, I don't, I think because it was so clear for me, it wasn't like I wanted more and couldn't have them; at some point I made a really clear decision that that was just not where I was going to go. And so, I was just really happy that she had that experience, you know, of having siblings, and having that part of her life."

Minimal conflict, but minimal co-parenting and lack of broad family unity

In some families, children will act out in problematic ways, or have emotional struggles, that demand parental cooperation and dual management. (We can speculate that in some cases this is unconsciously motivated by children's desires to bring their parents together in some regard, to recreate, or force a mutually acting parental dyad). In families where the children function well independently, and exhibit overall good behavior, pressure might seem lifted in terms of the need for co-parental cooperation and child management, as reflected in the excerpt below:

Wendy: "Tara was pretty easy. She didn't do a whole lot of rebellion, you know. She kind of found her way, and you know, she kind of wanted to do her things, but you

know, she didn't do sex, drugs and rock-and-roll. That, you know, that wasn't until college. And by then, she was a mature person. But in high school, I mean, she was a really good student, and she really didn't, you know, I had more, I think we had more emotional kind of upset when she was in middle school. By the time she was in high school, she threw herself into dance on top of being a really good student. And so, she was just really focused and kind of had her thing. And so, there wasn't a whole lot of difficulty at all."

Wendy and David were relatively successful in avoiding disparaging communication about each other and this appears to have minimized the sort of splitting and loyalty pressures some children experience; still, Tara described normative anxiety when her parents were brought together for occasions on her behalf: she was faced with juggling time and attention between her two families given that there was not more of a broad family unity established:

Tara: "I mean, there were definitely times where like they would come to the same event, but they would just, you know, I mean they were always cordial to each other, they would just like sit separately, and then, you know, would kind of be like, there were times when it felt like kind of awkward for me, because it was like oh, well if I talk to this person first, or like, you know, if I choose to go out to dinner with like this family instead of this family, what is that going to mean to them, and, but, I mean, in general that kind of thing was ok."

According to Wendy, she and David were able to establish a conflict-free co-parenting relationship with clear channels of communication and appreciation for their shared commitment to Tara:

Wendy: *“I think, for the most part, it was, for me, one of those things that I got when I left, was my voice back. And, I, you know, we would, every once in a while, we would kind of get together for a meeting, and just kind of talk through how things were going, and what we were observing, but that wasn’t that often. But I, it was more like if there was ever a concern that we saw, you know, I think both of us felt like we would call the other person, and you know, talk about it, whether it was health related, or whether it was something she was struggling with in school, or anything like that. You know, I think that, and we always felt that, you know, it was fine, we would just call the other one and just touch base, and kind of come up with a plan. And, I don’t remember that part being difficult at all. And, I think that, again, I always knew, and he always knew, that we were both really concerned about her, and that we both wanted the best for her. And, even if how we saw the best was different, that we both appreciated that about each other.”*

Tara agreed that her parents were able to function with a polite rapport, without a great deal of conflict, (except for tensions around finances,) but she described a culture of minimal contact, which might have been her parents’ implicit means of keeping the peace:

Tara: *“I mean, they’re very good at being cordial to each other, you know. So, it’s like, they’re always invited in, or, but a lot of times it would just be, like my dad would pull in the driveway and I would get out and go inside... I think they did not speak very often at all. I think that they maybe communicated like a few times a year, and a lot of times it would just be to talk about the scheduling. I remember a couple times that they said they were going to meet to talk about, you know, my schedule, or like the custody schedule... My parents, they were very good about being, like civil to each other. I don’t*

think I've ever seen them really argue, you know, or get in a big fight... And, that I would say, honestly, more than anything, has caused, like a lot of, any of the conflict that I did really experience, or that, you know, my parents would discuss things, was financial...."

Tara was enlisted to help maintain the boundaries of autonomy between her parents, and described how, with her father in particular, the less he knew about her mother's life, the better: *"whereas she had been raised Catholic and then just hadn't really been religious while she was with my dad, we started going to like, like Native American ceremonies, and doing sweat lodges, and you know, doing like pagan ceremonies, and she would be like, 'do not tell your dad about this.'"*

Tara described one instance where her father's disapproval of her mother's lifestyle emerged in no uncertain terms:

Tara: "Maybe a year or two after she had moved out of my dad's house she actually moved in with a woman and started having a lesbian relationship. And, I thought that was great, because it was like I had my own room, and I loved Kathleen, and you know, I remember feeling very comfortable and very safe in that house. But, my dad found out and just completely, completely flipped out, and told my mom that if she did not immediately move out that he would sue her for custody. And, so she did move out."

Throughout the interview, Wendy seemed determined to focus on the more positive, successful aspects of the co-parenting arrangement she and David established. Consistent with this, when she mentioned the relationship Tara described, it was in the context of how her departure from a more conventional way of life left her increasingly differentiated from the life she and David had established together; while she mentioned

that revelations of this relationship created ‘quite a stir,’ she didn’t disclose the threats and influence wielded by Tara’s father in the situation:

Wendy: *“David and I, in the neighborhood, we had this other couple that we hung out with quite a bit. And, he and [his new spouse] have remained friends with them. And, I am still friendly with them. They’re still my eye doctor and I talk to them, and I know that they both have warm feelings about me, but that was, you know, that’s what kind of continued. And, that was kind of that, you know, where I was kind of the one who did that wild and crazy things, which to me wasn’t really so wild and crazy. But you know, I just definitely, I probably neglected to mention that, I went into a relationship with a woman for a while, when I left Tara’s dad. And, that did not last very long, but that was also, you know, that was quite a stir! And again, my friends at that time, the ones who knew that I had done that, some of those close people, again it wasn’t like they rejected me, but then they really didn’t get that at all. So, you know, that was, so again, it was never like this hard feeling, but it was really clear that I had stepped out of the world that everybody was kind of used to.”*

The distance that Wendy and David established in their co-parenting relationship can be termed ‘parallel’ or ‘disengaged’ co-parenting. While exercising such autonomy in parenting was effective in decreasing opportunities for conflict (e.g. limited contact helped them to refrain from critical communications), there was also an absence of consensus-building and cooperation. Wendy stressed that while she and David were not particularly close, she trusts that Tara had a sense of feeling wanted by both of her parents:

Wendy: *“David and I were never really close in a way. So, it wasn’t like we had a really close relationship afterwards. But, we were both very mindful that we had this child together and that we had to do our best for her. And I think we both made a really honest effort to do that, you know. And, I think that it was really good for Tara. Even though her family was not together, I think she had a, you know, pretty clear idea that, you know, she had two parents and both of them were very invested in her well-being and cared about her a lot... And, I really do feel like, you know, that we did a really good job of, again, trying to keep it clean, not taking our stuff out that was between us on her... I think that we both really tried to be, you know, just, not say bad things about the other, or put her in any kind of, try to spare her as much as we could from feeling like, you know, she was at all, that she was the best part of it, and that, you know we were both there for her. And, you know, I think we tried really hard.”*

We have already discussed how a lack of consensus-building in establishment of rules and expectations left Tara feeling on her own to make sense of rights and wrongs; it is likewise important to consider how the lack of parental cooperation, even in a climate of overall civility, might have communicated disdain for the original parental dyad, leaving her un-tethered to a basic sense of belonging. Tara was not given a sense of whole family continuity or an ongoing dyadic parental holding space. She described how, were she ever to raise a child in joint custody, she would want to actively communicate that the child was of worth, was mutually valued by parents who continued to value each other, and was made from something that wasn’t regrettable:

Tara: *“I would like to think that if I was close enough to somebody to have children with them and we did split up, that afterwards we would be able to still spend*

time together with the child, you know, which my parents never really did. You know, just like kind of give that child or children a sense that, you know, it wasn't like they came from this thing that was like an embarrassment to both parents, or, you know what I mean, that they were wrong, or that they didn't have a family, you know, that yeah, they were ok. And, I think it would be really great to show, you know, that there still was a lot of love between the parents, and just to be able to explain really honestly, like 'it didn't work out; it has nothing to do with you; obviously we still love each other, ' you know.'"

Consistent with her wish for a more continuous sense of parental unity, outside of the bounds of the marital dyad, Tara described her gratitude that following a serious car accident her mother was involved in, her father (and step-mother) made a point of showing up regularly to visit her mother. Tara seemed to experience this as a demonstration of her parents uniting on her behalf, a communication of broad family sentiment, and a declaration of her primacy:

Tara: *"Like when my mom had the car accident and, it was, it was kind of funny, because my dad started coming **a lot**. She was in the hospital for a month, and she was in the nursing home for two months. And he would, even when she was in the nursing home, he and my step-mom both would come by like every other day. And it finally got to the point where my mom was like, 'I think they're trying to be nice, but can you please ask them to not, I don't know why they keep showing up', because you know to her, she's like, 'I haven't had a real shower in over a month, you know. I don't really want to like entertain people that aren't my close friends', you know. But, I think that was kind of my dad's way of showing, like how much he cared about me, you know what I mean. Like, because I know he and my mom were definitely not close, but sort of that idea, that like*

you are still the mother of my child, you know. I think he saw how difficult it was for me. So, I think part of that, you know, was kind of him trying to be supportive of something that was such a big deal and so important to me... I do think they see me as like a binding force that keeps them having any kind of contact or relationship. But, and I think, I think that for them, I probably am sort of the binding force. I'm pretty sure that the only reason they have any sort of contact is because of me. But, and I think that sometimes they, you know, I think they have mixed feelings about that. I think there are times when they're like, I wish, not so much me, but you know, my dad is like, 'I wish I didn't have to deal with Wendy', and I'm sure my mom has been like, 'I wish I didn't have to deal with David', you know. But, it was nice, like when my dad and [my step-mother] came and visited, it was nice, because it was like saying, you know we care about you more than we care about the fact that it might be weird or inconvenient."

APPENDIX F

Sample Case Study: Karen

Karen's story

Karen was quite forthcoming during her interview, was “*happy to participate,*” but proved resistant to having her family members participate. Initially she seemed open to this, but after offering a variety of explanations as to why they might be too busy, or were difficult to reach, she disclosed feeling ‘*certain*’ that they would not be willing to be interviewed and was unwilling to provide contact information for them.

Karen comes from a family with one sibling, a sister, and two step-brothers from her father’s second marriage; her mother has recently remarried, to someone without children. Her story illuminates themes of familial fracture following divorce characterized by insufficient parental availability and emotional support, the presence of direct and indirect disparagement between parents, demands for allegiance from their children, and sibling splitting along parental lines. While the divorce itself marked an important loss of intactness, the subsequent experience of 50/50 joint custody ushered in a host of challenges including the introduction of new family figures that resulted in not more, but less, familial resources and support. What was most impressive from Karen’s interview was that the divorce of her parents marked not only the loss of their marriage and the original intactness it provided, but also a loss of a sense of family overall.

Karen began the interview by describing that the re-definitions of her family following her parents split had assumed a defining quality in her childhood: “*I’d say for the bulk of my life, my early life, I was focused around divorce, or remarriages,*

subsequent divorce, and adjustments to those changes... for the first half of my life, thus far, it was pretty prominent.”

Following her parents' divorce at ten years old, both of her parents became less emotionally available to Karen and her sister; her mother suffered a long period of depression and was overtly bitter toward Karen's father who had left the marriage via an affair, and her father quickly remarried and was focused on designing a new life with his second wife. Thus, it appeared that their preoccupation with their own experiences of loss and life transitions obscured their perspectives on their daughter's experience.

Karen described the adults in her environment as ill-equipped to help her and her sister understand and cope with the adjustment demands of divorce and joint custody. Throughout her narrative we hear her feeling very alone yet surrounded by many others, also struggling with the fragmented features of family: her mother coping with loss and demanding allegiance from her girls, her sister feeling rejected by their father and holding on tight to their mother, submitting to demands of allegiance, and her father trying to manage loyalty to his daughters, but exhibiting primary allegiance to his new spouse. Karen described her relationship with her sister as traditionally close, but more and more defined by the loyalty splits that found her more explicitly aligned with her father, (even though she found only ambivalent acceptance there), and her sister firmly aligned with her mother, leaving them essentially at odds, and acting out the ongoing parental opposition.

Insufficient parental availability or emotional support following divorce

In terms of her parents' lack of availability, and inquiry, regarding hers and her sister's experience following the divorce, Karen speculated:

“Well, I think for them, it was just logistical shit. I think for us, I think that they understood from our behavior that something was clearly wrong, but I don’t think they understood the nuances of what the divorce and the transition meant for my sister and me... I think they did connect the problems we were having with the divorce, but just didn’t ever do the next step, which was to really just listen to what we were going through.”

When there were attempts made to ease the transitions between households, these appear to have been less focused on the children’s needs, and more about the parents’ desire to feel less taxed, as suggested in the following excerpt: *“I think [they] tried to normalize [the transition between homes]. But, not really, per se, about ‘what’s it like for you in these transitions?’ No, absolutely not. More like, ‘we need this to be smoother, what can happen for that to happen?’ This, you know, ‘what can make this smoother?’ Not ‘how is it?’ Not really.”* She attempted to rationalize her father’s position, and seemed to collude with his position of privileging his needs over his daughters’ in the period following the divorce: *“He wasn’t un-empathic, he was just still wanting his life, when I got there, to not be still full of conflict. That’s partly why I think he left my mom. He just wanted less conflict and we were still bringing it there, you know, in some ways.”*

Karen also assumed an empathic tone when considering the various complexities of experience her parents would have been faced with had they been more inquiring, and wondered whether she would have even been able to explain what she was feeling had they expressed more interest:

“Part of it’s that my sister only wanted one thing. She just wanted to never go to my dad’s house. I wanted to go to my dad’s house, but I couldn’t stand my step-mom. I

mean, what were they going to do with all that information? I don't know. I might have done the same thing. I mean, it's like, it was just so complex, all the things. And, I don't know, I definitely did not have the words. I was very angry with my mother, I didn't have the words."

When Karen's father and step-mother married, within a year of his divorce from Karen's mother, they both had children and created an instant step-family, but according to Karen (and what they have told her since), they had little sense of what they were getting into, or how to proceed.

"It quickly evolved into a step-family, that I don't know that anyone, including my father and then step-mother, were prepared to entertain. So, I think there were no books at that time. My step-mom and dad said they had no literature to guide them. They were pioneers in thinking about divorce and step-families in the seventies. So, they went along, and just winged it. They didn't have the benefit of what people might have today in terms of how to build a step-family and make a smooth transition. So, it was kind of hell, basically."

In such a scenario, when parental figures are 'winging it,' with the array of potential outcomes of this, children are also burdened with the recognition that the parents are out of their element and might not be as reliable as they previously were, or thought to be. In Karen's story, this contributed to her sense of being '*on her own*' – that not only was she misunderstood, or managing her loss and adjustment reactions alone, but even if she could have found the words to communicate her experience, the adults in her environment might not have known what to do for her.

The confrontation with her parental figures' frailties was most pronounced in the relationship with her mother. Karen described her mother as "very depressed" following the divorce and that there was "anxiety in the air" at her house. With her mother struggling with her own loss reaction, it seems her daughters' needs became largely obscured for her. Her mother's vulnerability was out in the open, expressed in various communications of loss and feelings of aloneness, placing a lot of pressure on her daughters not to abandon her, (as she felt her husband and even their mutual friends had). Her mother's preoccupation with life at her father's house also served as a reminder that her own world felt impoverished and lacking. At times Karen felt pressure from her mother to act as a messenger, or spy, to deliver information about life at her father's house; again, this was not requested in an effort to be more informed and sensitized to her daughters' experiences, or to foster openness in the interest of co-parenting, but pointedly regarding her own needs:

"My mom wanted to know everything, like as if you had gone to a party, because, I mean, you know, it's just in line with her anxiety about us having a relationship with my step-mom, so I think she just wanted to know... And plus, I think my mom's life is just, in general much smaller than my dad's, in terms of social life, in terms of travel, and so she would also just vicariously be living through just the stories. And, she lost a lot of friends in that divorce, that my father kept up with. So, she wanted to know about them; if they had been in town, she'd want to know. She didn't say 'go through a list of who has been in town,' but if they had been, if I said, 'oh, so-and-so came to visit,' she'd say, 'oh, really? What's going on?' and then she would expand on, or elaborate, like, 'why aren't

they friends with me, I met them at the same time as your father, I don't understand.' So, a lot of it was maybe stuff she shouldn't have been talking about with us, it was a stress."

Setting boundaries with her mother, about such inquiries was challenging for Karen and often manifested in expressions of anger:

"A lot of time [when] we came back, I think I came back very enraged, because probably I liked some of the simplicity at my dad's and it was very hard to come home to that kind of interrogative feeling, interrogation, or that feeling of being interrogated. And then, at some points I was probably like, 'fuck you, I'm not telling you!' ... So, I might have been nasty to her, which was my usual M.O. So, I might have just been an absolute raging bitch about it. But, privately in my, in the sophistication of my own mind, I might have, in a tender moment thought 'that really sucks.' But, I wasn't openly empathic."

While Karen's mother's apparent vulnerabilities made her ill-equipped to provide emotional support to her daughters, Karen's father became more distant, and not too emotionally unstable to provide support, but seemingly too emotionally defended:

"My father became much more distant from my sister and I. He basically became nearly unavailable outside of scheduled appointments... he became incredibly rigid. I mean, which is part of his personality anyway, but he became increasingly that way. Like I said, he changed his behavior, at least toward me, radically. I mean, radically. He became incredibly formal and just basically did whatever my step-mom wanted him to do to have a less "enmeshed" relationship with us... And so, yeah, he became much less available."

When Karen expressed her feelings to her father, that she felt he tended to ‘side’ with her step-mother, leaving her feeling less important or less preferred, she recalled him being straightforward about his shifting loyalties:

“He told me, ‘if you want a relationship with me, you have to have a relationship with the woman I’m with, because that’s a more important relationship than- that’s the primary relationship, not more important, but the primary relationship for me will always be the woman I’m with.’ And that, to this day, I think is pretty much the iron rule, the iron rule of my dad. I accepted it. I said, ‘I want a relationship with you, and I will do what it takes.’ And I just bit the bullet, as they say.”

This is an important phenomenon to consider, because while rivalry will occur in intact families as well, parents are generally affirming of their spouse’s affection and regard for their (shared) child. In contrast, for a step-parent, such affection and regard for the child brought from a previous marriage can signal threat, serve as a reminder of a former life (and spouse), represent a resistance to full commitment to the new life; since the child is not held in common, as mutually created, they can become a symbol of division and rivalry.

Karen described feeling that a close relationship with her father was not only unsupported by her step-mother, but at times even sabotaged; in the following excerpt, we also hear the possible projection/wish to be sufficiently important to her father as to pose a threat to his new significant other:

“My step-mom was very jealous of me and my relationship with my father. My father and I had been very close growing up. And so, she had a lot of rules and so everything changed. Like, we weren’t allowed to be alone together, unless we opened the

door. We weren't allowed to play any games, unless we asked everybody in the house. So, we really were no longer allowed to hang out alone together. And, it just threw my whole relationship with my dad upside down. And, I felt he was very passive about it, so we used to fight a lot. And he really, kind of wanted to make it work with her, so I think he just went along with her..."

Karen's sister reportedly had more emotional struggles and behavioral acting out than Karen did, following the divorce. Karen considered that given her youth, her sister had internalized less of a 'good-parental' dyadic foundation: *"they were happy when [I was little], when I was born. I got a couple of good years. My sister got none."* In line with her hypotheses that her sister had not gotten 'as much,' she believes her father's increased distance was particularly painful for her younger sister, and contributed to a more 'enmeshed' relationship between her sister and her mother.

"I certainly don't think my father would agree with this, but he might actually, that his inability to cope with [my sister], especially in the context of a new marriage, where the woman wanted my dad to be with her, primarily, and my sister needed all this attention, was very, it almost, kind of broke my sister in some way. I think it was kind of life-altering to her, to lose that male, that stability and that structure... She became, I think, more clingy with my mother, a lot more dependent on my mom, which also, the seeds of that already had existed. So, I think that that became much more, as my father pulled away more, my sister leaned more on my mother."

Managing direct and indirect disparagement of parents and demands for allegiance

Karen described feeling intensely aware of her parents' mutual disdain and receiving exposure of such disdain from extended family, as well. She described this

knowledge as burdensome and throughout the interview we hear the pressure of such malignant sentiment on a child already managing the loss of her intact family, 'shuttling' between homes that felt like 'different worlds' and now struggling with competing loyalties.

Her mother's expressions of contempt for their step-mother, in particular, and demands for maternal allegiance were direct and unambiguous:

"Every time we'd pack off to go to my father's, [my mom] would disparage my step-mother. So, it was hard to embrace my step-mother because my mother would reinforce like a mantra, 'you only have one mother,' we weren't allowed to call her step-mother. And so, it was confusing... she kind of made it very clear that we had allegiance to her, we would not become close to our step-mother, we would not call her step-mother, and that 'your step-mother's such a witch. She's a bitch. You love me, I'm your mother. She's not your mother, remember that. She's not your step-mother. Your step-mother's when your mother's dead, and I'm not dead.' And just over and over the same thing."

In contrast to feeling a lukewarm reception in her father's home, leaving her mother's home was treated as abandonment by her mother. Karen described how their mother's difficulty separating as her daughters prepared to transition to their father's home compromised their ability to functionally separation:

"It was very hard for us to leave our mother. And, in retrospect, it was largely due to the fact that she would give us this anti-pep talk of how, you know, trying to get reassurance of our allegiance to her before we left. So, it was very hard for us to leave her... It was just very hard. I think we left feeling very attached to our mom. My sister used to call our mom crying hysterically every time things, she wanted to go home all the

time. She used to call our mom. We used to call our mom a lot, but my sister was much more like 'mom, I hate it here, I hate it here, I want to go home.'"

Her mother's efforts to firm up her daughters' allegiance were fulfilled to a large degree by Karen's sister, but Karen too described giving in and, essentially, telling her mother what she needed to hear: *"I think it was a little bit different. I wasn't necessarily trying to go home, but I might have said something like, 'I hate it here, and my step-mom's a bitch.' I might have said back to her what she had said to me."*

Meanwhile, her father was putting pressure on Karen and her sister to act with civility and respect their step-mother as an important primary figure: *"we'd show up at the door at my father's house and we were expected to be very polite to my step-mother and to call her step-mother."*

Karen described that her mother's fears of being displaced by their step-mother, (and perhaps her father's request that they reference her as a parental figure), were ill-founded given that she and her sister felt quite marginalized in her stepmother's household and felt little encouragement from their step-mother to bond with her: *"My step-mom wasn't parenting toward us, she wasn't mentoring, she wasn't guiding. She was just, she just didn't want to be bothered by us..."* Still, Karen wondered that had her mother given 'permission' for them to make space for the step-mother as an important other, it would have eased the relational tensions: *"I think if my mother kept that [disparagement] private, we wouldn't have... it would have been a much easier transition... If we'd had her [the mother's] permission to forge a separate relationship with my step-mom, I think that we... it would have happened maybe 15 years earlier than it did ..."*

Karen described her father as more restrained than her mother in terms of disparagement or demands for allegiance, but his communications about her mother were, in Karen's words, *'pathologizing,'* though often made under the guise of offering support: *"[Dad and step-mother would say] 'your mother's so troubled. Let's see if we can help you deal with it...' It was very difficult. It was pejorative, it was pathologizing, and that went on for many years..."*

Karen described also suffering the burden of awareness of her extended relatives' negative opinions of her parents: *"My father's mother was a completely insensitive person about the divorce, and she said at one point, 'I never liked your mother, she was...' you know, things that you don't say to somebody, [she] just started bad mouthing my mother... and my mother's parents, actually, I think were much less private people than my father's parents, but in this case they were actually more discreet. They didn't like my father, but they didn't badmouth him ... (though) somehow I knew from somebody, when I didn't need to know that, that they didn't like my father... There were lots of splits, like my aunts and uncles, like they just, it just seemed that nobody liked my mother."*

In addition to managing reactions to disparagement of her parents, and the discomfiting implications of this, Karen struggled too with the implication of this as disparagement of her, especially in relation to her father's sentiments, for the ways she resembled her mother, was identified with her by virtue of gender, and realized that she served of a reminder of her mother.

"One time I went to hug [my father] and he moved and I almost fell onto the ground, when I was 18...he basically admitted to me that I reminded him of my mother

and, because he felt rejecting of my mother, he felt rejecting of me. Because I look more like my mom, or I have her mannerisms, or voice...”

Karen reflected further on the confusion and anxiety she felt as she struggled with what felt like rejection by her father, often via criticisms of her mother, and the confusion of messages she internalized from this. Karen sounded conflicted as she strived to imagine his positive intentions in speaking negatively about her mother, but the loyalty bind it presented, combined the problematic messages internalized:

“I think the intention [of father’s negative depiction of mother] was to try and help me separate from my mom, and grow up and have decent relationships, because I didn’t have great role-models for relationships. And, my dad, I think the was trying to help me, but, I felt also very protective of my mother, not as much as my sister, but I definitely felt some allegiance to my mom, I felt like, ‘I’m going to be my mom one day, and I’m a reflection of my mom, I’m bad.’ And my father basically confirmed that in so many ways, that it was hard for me, because he stopped giving me any affection. He didn’t want to be alone with me. All the things that my step-mother instituted. But, I started feeling like my dad and I were having sex, and I didn’t know it, or that I was just repellent to him. So, I really couldn’t figure it out. And, I know my dad felt that way about my mom, so repelled. So, I kind of felt like, you know, I felt bad, partly for my mom, but partly because I was an extension of that, and so they were somewhat talking about me [when they criticized my mother], and that was difficult, especially at that age, around adolescence when you’re so fucking confused anyway. It’s difficult to know how to become a woman in that situation.”

Her father's attitude was degrading of her mother, but more important, perhaps, was implicitly degrading of Karen's normative, expectable identification with her mother. While we hear Karen's mother's explicit demands for allegiance, fulfilled most dutifully for her sister, (given for fear of losing her mother's loving regard) she received a different, more implicit, kind of message from her father – the communication that her mother was not worthy of his love and the implication for Karen that if she becomes like her mother, she might lose his love as well:

“My dad said he never loved my mother. It's kind of hard, once you hear that, it's kind of hard to think that... When my parents divorced, he told me that. That's when I was ten. It's pretty hard to put, I mean, it's like someone telling you, it's like your mate telling you they don't love you. There's nothing after that.”

Sibling splitting along parental lines

According to Karen, she and her sister had always been somewhat identified as 'dad's daughter' and 'mom's daughter,' but following the divorce, sibling splitting along parental lines became more dramatic, conflict-laden, and Karen described the pressure they felt to choose one parent with the implication of losing the other parent:

“We were treated so differently, my sister was much more attached to my mother. The whole joke in my family, not a joke even, was that I was like my father, and she was like my mother, and she was my mother's kid and I was my father's kid... so, when I was with my mother and my sister, they would say 'that's just like what your father would say, you're just like your father' ... It really became very pronounced and articulated [following the divorce]. I don't think it was ever articulated before. And, it was just like, it was like an 'us and them.' It was like those two and me and my dad. And, I think that it

became much more obvious, and I became, it was like we had to choose which parent, and I kind of went with my dad, even though it was hard, because I felt that I could grow there. And, I just felt, like I felt that, I didn't feel like I had a future at my, with my mom... I don't think I thought about it. I just felt so stifled and so overwhelmed, so engulfed by the pressures. At my dad's, I could actually think and breath, and you know, so, I think, for my sister, well, it was just very divisive for my sister and I."

The sibling relationship, potentially a space of comfort and consistency amongst transition became more and more defined by this splitting of parental allegiance, and another source of discord in their family. *"[Prior to divorce] I think we were more allies in this crazy household of tension and unhappiness... clearly, they were having a problem and we banded together."* At times, she and her sister were still able to draw comfort from their relationship, but it became primarily characterized by discord related to parental allegiance:

"We didn't share a room at [mom's] home, but we shared a room at my dad's. But we did, you know, I remember we used to play this game, we used to sneak up on each other in the dark and laugh and scream and yell and have a good time... we would come together at night, because we felt unsafe. I think in general we both felt unsafe, and at night we would often hold hands or sleep together, or talk. That was really our intimate time. I think we comforted each other...But in the day, we just were just so disconnected from one another, and I, my sister has like a long-standing grudge against me, like for years, and years, and years, and years, and I'm sure it was all forming then, because she feels that I betrayed her... I just chose to take on some of, I wanted some of the life that my dad had and was offering me. And, I guess there was a very 'either-or' pressure. I

think my mom definitely reinforced that pressure to choose... There were two household cultures, as you could say, two environments, and my sister was so clearly backing up, well, for example, my sister would say 'we promised mom we wouldn't tell anything about this...' and I would violate that... And my sister would say, 'you, you're a traitor!' And so, it became this thing... I was more increasingly a part of my dad's household, and my sister was more my mom's."

In addition to Karen's sister fulfilling their mother's demands for allegiance and Karen feeling thus aligned with her father, almost by default, perceptions of favoritism for Karen by their father added another dose of divisiveness to the sibling relationship:

"[My sister and I] had very different upbringings and very different treatment by my father ... I think the thing that changed for my sister after the divorce, the way that my father was colder toward me, he was toward her, but he already had been colder to her than toward me, so it just got so much worse for her. The rejection that was already there was so much worse for her than me. So, it was just incredibly hard for her. Our relationship was quite strained, my sister and I, because she felt keenly aware of the disparity, the difference in treatment between me and her, in terms of how our father was with us."

While Karen feels sympathetic to the rejection her sister experienced by her father, she is also able to recognize the affront to her, in being treated as distinguished in a special way from her sibling and the guilt-inducing quality of this - that her father certainly wasn't doing her any favors:

"I just felt bad, because I felt my sister did get the shaft. And it's hard to, it's hard either way. It's hard to be the person who's more favored, and it's hard to be the person

who gets the shaft, because you think only the person who gets the shaft suffers. But, the person who feels favored also suffers in a different way, because it's hard to understand why you're any different from your sibling."

In the following excerpt, we hear Karen's feelings of conflict and guilt after explicit communication from her father of his preference, or loyalty, for her, her determination to protect her sister from knowledge of this, and the burden of harboring such potentially painful and plainly divisive information:

"At some point [my father] called me [while I was abroad at school] and said he would take custody of me, but not my sister. And he would take care of everything, like I wouldn't have to worry financially...But, I said I couldn't do that without my sister. My sister doesn't know that, and I hope she - it's only up to me -she never will know that. I don't think my mom knows that. So, I just said that to him, I said, I was very, of course, personally tempted, because it was a kind of sane environment, and I felt like it would help me go to college... I thought it might be my way out of my own, kind of morass at home with my mom, but I said no. So, I must have done something right, but I don't know what it was."

Either out of sound and accurate observation or a need to rationalize her father's behavior, Karen was able to couch her father's preferential treatment of her in more benign light: *"[Dad] would process with me a lot, I mean he had been in therapy for many years, and he would process with me about my mom and the dynamic and the unhealthiness of the dynamic and how I could maybe try things differently. He was constantly trying to help me get out of that enmeshed relationship that he felt that my*

sister was not going to get out of. So, I think early on he decided that maybe he could help save me, but he couldn't save my sister."

Despite feeling favored by her father, more identified with his home in some regard, and appreciative of the refuge from the emotional upheaval and emotional disclosures of her mother, she expressed not feeling authentically accepted at his house: *"At my mom's it was, like, my home, and all the things you do in a home for better or for worse, I did there. At my dad's, it was quite clear it was not our home, so it was kind of like being a perpetual guest. It kind of wears thin after a little while. But you also do things that you do when you're a guest, like try to behave... so, it was kind of pros and cons."*

Karen described the lack of satisfaction in getting to express herself freely one week, but feeling deprived of clear parameters for behavior, then being given straightforward, if strict, guidelines then next week, but feeling emotionally censured: *"In thinking about it, in some part, I didn't like being at my father's because of my step-mother, but I liked the structure. I think kids respond to structure, so I know I did.... I liked that organizing principle. Just the organizing aspect of rules, even though I didn't like all the rules. So, on the one hand I was happy to get away from my step-mother and go home, and then, but I also missed the kind of relaxation of the structure. It's like you have a meal, you go to bed, everything was set and it was relieving to me... I could say anything I wanted to my mother, I could act out, I could do whatever, I could read, I mean I could do a host of things, but, I also missed, you know, it was just a trade off, I kind of loved being familiar, but I also missed the structure."*

A primary feature that emerged in terms of her not feeling ‘at home’ in her father’s home, in particular - despite living there 50% of the time - were the disparities Karen experienced, or perceived, between her and her step-brothers. On one hand, these were quantifiable in a real world sense: *“my step-brothers are trust-fund children and they had a completely different life than my sister and I. And, they had many more privileges, financial privileges,”* but what sounded more affectively charged as she spoke were her step-brothers’ privilege in terms of being welcomed to feel ‘at home:’ *“My sister and I slept together in separate single beds in a room. And, my step-brothers lived in the attic and they had the whole attic... [my sister and I] weren’t allowed to go into the fridge. We had to ask permission ... I think we were supposed to consider ourselves guests when we were there...I don’t think they had to ask [to go into fridge]. No, it was their home, their primary home, so it was very different. Like, we had different rules... I think it was their home and we were guests, and we had to ask and we didn’t know what to eat and not to eat, so we had to, we couldn’t just eat anything. We had to ask what we could eat. It was just very un-relaxing that way.”*

In summary, a primary feature that emerged in Karen’s interview was a sense of internal pressure not to bond with her family members, that bonding with one family member meant harming another, that there was limited attachment to go around – that she and her sister had to choose a parent to align with, that making space for a new wife meant less space for daughters, that step-brothers belonged but step-sisters did not. The demands of allegiance from her mother served mostly to highlight loyalty binds that were already paramount in the bi-familial custody arrangement. The pressure from her mother did not facilitate closeness but created discord in this attachment, with skewed roles and

feelings of obligation to provide support for her mother. With the creation of her father's new family, there was a profound marginalization of the members of his previous family and a lack of overall inclusion. Karen emerges as quite solitary, existing near but barely with her family members given that these relationships were characterized by rivalry, competition, and constraints on any formation of togetherness. To be with her father was experienced as taboo in the household with her step-mother, as a rejection of her mother, and a victory over her sister. She and her sister rushed to different sides of the parental battle and found little sibling alliance or ability to draw upon opportunities for constancy in this relationship amidst transition. Her mother's needs were promoted as paramount, her loss experience as overshadowing the loss of her daughters' and demands for attachment interfered with the natural inclination toward mother-daughter attachment. Thus, from all directions Karen experienced pressures not to bond and pressures for allegiance, which were inherently at odds and left her feeling increasingly isolated.

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