



## Incompletely Fractured Families

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*The modern family is increasingly isolated and increasingly unstable. As a result, family therapists are faced with a variety of problems in families where the parents have separated or divorced. One previously unrecognised problem occurs when the partners, although separated, covertly remain attached to the old alliance. Frequently a child, by becoming "ill", remains as a bridge between them to prevent the final disintegration of the marriage bond.*

*Three case histories are provided as an illustration of this phenomenon.*

Mothers, fathers and children are much more cut-off from the surrounding community than they were 200 years ago. Each household increasingly shuts out the rest of the world. It is also apparent that mothers and fathers are not as likely to stay together as they were even 30 years ago. The family therapists of the future will face a family unit that is increasingly cracking apart behind its own keep out notices.

Edward Shorter, Professor of History at Toronto University, has documented the steady change in the boundary separating the nuclear family from outsiders. (Shorter, 1975) p. 15.

*"In the Bad Old Days the family's shell was pierced full of holes, permitting people from outside to flow freely through the household, observing and monitoring. The traffic flowed the other way too, as members of the family felt they had more in common emotionally with their various peer groups than with one another. In other words, the traditional family was much more a productive and reproductive unit than an emotional unit. It was a mechanism for transmitting property and position from generation to generation. While the lineage was important, being together about the dinner table was not."*

Shorter goes on to discuss the gradual decline in the importance of relationships with peers, work mates and extended family since 1750 and the steady rise in the isolation of Mothers and Fathers and their children from the society at large. Perhaps it is for this reason that the majority of the family therapy literature focuses on the nuclear family. Only a few voices call for a focus on the wider social network that engages with the family (Attneave, 1976).

The other dramatic change in the recent history of the family is the increasing instability of marriage. The elders of successive generations shake their

heads and mutter about society not being what it used to be.

This perennial hobby obscures the historically unprecedented situation of the last 30 years. Divorce rates inched upwards from 1850 onwards, but after a plateau in the 1950's, accelerated dramatically in every country in Western Society (Shorter, 1975).

The United States sets the pace in this. Forty percent of marriages of women in their twenties will now end in divorce. Thirty three percent of children are not living with both of their own once married parents and this percentage is rising quickly (Glick and Norton, 1977). The divorce rate in Australia is not as high, but the trend is in the same direction. Between 6,000 and 9,000 divorces were granted in Australia in every year from 1945 to 1965. The rate rocketed to 66,000 by 1976 and was 41,000 in 1977. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1979).

We are confronted with an historically unprecedented situation. Nuclear family boundaries are increasingly impermeable and families more isolated than ever. At the same time disruption of marriage bonds and the breaching of nuclear family boundaries is so common now as to be almost the norm.

The implications of all this for the family therapist are very great. Although it will still be possible to view many problems as confined safely within a stable boundary around the nuclear family, we will be faced with separating families, step families or situations where it is difficult to define who is in the family or where the significant boundary really lies.

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This phenomenon has not received any close attention until very recently. Goldman and Coane (1977) systematically reviewed the literature of the previous 10 years and failed to locate even one paper on family therapy with divorced parents seen together with their children. Only one article even suggested that the non-custodial parent be involved in the treatment (Kushner, 1965). The author of this article warns against the absent parent being seen in the presence of the former spouse.

However, over the last four years the situation has altered and there is now considerable interest in family therapy approaches to separated, divorced or remarried families. Walker et al (1979) provide an annotated bibliography on this subject. Weisfeld and Laser (1977) describe their experience in a residential treatment centre for "emotionally disturbed" boys where many of the children referred have divorced parents. Their policy is to insist that both parents participate actively in therapy and they refuse to accept the child for treatment except on these terms. They report that the child is often a go-between, conveying messages between ex-spouses. Sometimes the messages are simply factual information. But more often the child is sent back and forth on covert messages to convey blame and anger, sometimes of passionate intensity. Their paper deals with practical problems in getting the active involvement of both parents and they claim a better result for the child if this occurs.

Goldman and Coane (1977) present a case report on family therapy after divorce as a vehicle for outlining a strategy for therapy. They begin by "*redefining the family as existentially including all members*" including the non-custodial parent. They then encourage the couple to replay the history of the marriage and to mourn its loss.

Kaplan (1977) approaches this same problem more flexibly and clearly. He works in the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic and uses a structural approach as expounded by Minuchin (1974). He offers himself as an alternative messenger between the formerly married parents, to relieve the child of the burden, until the adults have learned how to contact each other directly. He does not try to promote emotional closeness between them; but cultivates an easier and more relaxed style of open discussion of the continuing parental responsibilities. In other words he works to establish an effective parental sub-system.

More recently Walker and Messinger (1979) have analysed the problems involved in the dissolution and reconstitution of family boundaries. They focus

particularly on the remarriage family and its special problems.

All of these writers touch on the plight of the child caught in the crossfire of their parents' anger and disappointments. They emphasise that the child can be left as the only remaining link connecting separated parents.

However there is one facet of this kind of problem that has not received attention. There are families where the parents have separated physically, but the old alliance is not dead. At least one, if not both parties to the marriage, do not become reconciled to the separation, yet any discussion of the remaining loyalty or attachment is avoided. It often occurs that when emotionally charged issues in a relationship are not directly addressed, a third person becomes involved to stabilize the arrangement. In this case a child of the marriage volunteers or is elected to convey that at least one parent, if not both, is still loyal and committed to the old alliance. The marriage appears to be long dead but one party at least still secretly harbours something of the old sense of belonging. We refer to these as "incompletely fractured families". Although overlooked in the published literature apart from a brief mention by Leader (1973), this occurrence is common enough for us to have encountered a number of instances, three of which are reported here.

### THE HEYSON FAMILY

Mrs. Heyson asked for help for her 11 year old son, Tom, saying that she was desperate about his strange behaviour. When she rang to make the first appointment she asked if she could herself attend even though she was not living with Mr. Heyson and the children.

Tom was the youngest of three boys aged 11 to 14. Mrs. Heyson left five years earlier to live with another man. The children seemed unaffected by this until six months ago when Tom started truanting from school. Later he began stealing money from his parents. Then he started running away from home. Finally, he disappeared for 48 hours. His parents were terrified and confused by this. As Tom gave no reasons for his behaviour, Mrs. Heyson decided that help was needed.

Tom and the other boys were polite but very shy and inarticulate. Tom had little but grunts or evasions to offer. He said that he had no idea why he had run away. During this first interview the following facts were established.

After Mrs. Heyson left the family home she continued to visit several times a week to cook for the family, mend clothes and clean the house. She felt

guilty about leaving. Mr. Heyson deeply resented his wife for months after she left, but gradually the animosity subsided and they became the best of friends. They confided in each other about all their problems and often asked advice from each other. In fact they got on much better than when they lived together.

Although Mrs. Heyson sometimes slept the night in the family home, her sexual relationship with Mr. Heyson had ceased five years earlier. Heyson left because she found "a man with more spunk in him" than Mr. Heyson, although she much preferred Mr. Heyson to talk to. Mr. Heyson had one date with a woman after his wife had left, but did not enjoy it. His main social enjoyment derived from visits to the Judo Club with his three sons.

Eight months earlier Mrs. Heyson found herself accidentally pregnant and started divorce proceedings so that she could remarry. Her children had known of this for six months. When they were asked about the future of their relationship, the Heysons were surprised by the question. They were great friends and wanted to stay that way. However they had no interest in each other sexually and were definite that they would never live together again.

They were intrigued and surprised by the suggestion that Tom might be confused by their arrangement and might still have hopes of a complete reunion. After the initial interview they took Tom aside and told him that there was no chance at all of their being married to each other and that Mrs. Heyson was going to marry her new partner. Mr. Heyson said that he supported her in this decision. Tom's behaviour disappeared completely after this conversation.

Follow-up one year later indicated that Tom had remained stable and apparently happy. Mrs. Heyson had obtained a divorce and remarried. She saw less of Mr. Heyson and her sons because of the demands of her new baby and her new husband's wish that she spend more time at home.

## Discussion

Tom was exposed to a very confusing social situation. His mother continued to have a relationship with him and his father which was largely unchanged, despite her living with a new partner. Only her pregnancy forced upon him the unwelcome vision of a new family whose boundary included his mother but excluded him. He resisted this change, behaving in a way that forced his parents to meet more often than ever. Confronted clearly by both parents separately with the reality of the divorce and

mother's remarriage, he abandoned this course very quickly.

Tom's misbehaviour reflected more than his own confusion. It also helped his parents to maintain a very valued relationship. Tom's improved behaviour (as well as the birth of the baby) led in time to a weakening of the friendship as well as a lessening of mother's participation in the domestic tasks of the old household.

## THE NOLAN FAMILY

The Nolan family consists of the parents and four children; two daughters aged 14 and 16, who are boarders at a private school, an 11 year old son Hans, and an eight year old daughter. The parents described a "perfect" marriage until four years earlier when Mr. Nolan was seduced by his secretary, Rose. At this stage he left the family, obtained a divorce and went to live with Rose. However he continued to see a lot of his wife and children.

Mrs. Nolan asked for family therapy with Mr. Nolan's full agreement, because she felt that Hans was "very depressed". Hans moped around the house, crying a lot. When he was rebuked or thwarted in any way, he became extremely angry and unmanageable. Mrs. Nolan was at the end of her tether and could not cope with him. She repeatedly contacted Mr. Nolan to discuss these problems with him.

Early in the first interview Mr. Nolan indicated that there was another pressing issue for the family. He was about to make up his mind whether to marry Rose. Although he wanted to go ahead, he was worried about the effect of this on Hans, and expected all his children to hate him if he remarried. Mrs. Nolan said that she and the children were awaiting his decision with considerable anxiety.

At the second appointment, Mr. Nolan announced that he had finally decided to go ahead and marry Rose. Mrs. Nolan and the children cried and were very distressed. Hans, in particular, was inconsolable, aloof and unresponsive when his father tried to comfort him.

In the third interview the children were seen without their parents. The older daughters felt pressured by their mother to be unfriendly and rejecting to their father. The oldest girl, Joanna, reported a dream in which she was tried and sentenced to be executed for a crime that she could not recall. The judge offered her a reprieve if she agreed to the execution of the rest of the family in her place. She chose to die herself.

The parents were seen alone at the fourth con-

sultation. Mr. Nolan then announced that, because the children were so distraught about his decision, he had changed his mind and planned to drop Rose entirely. However he made no practical moves to leave Rose. Mrs. Nolan said that every few months he decided to go ahead and remarry but changed his mind when he saw how distressed his children were as a result. He agreed, said that he could not go ahead when he saw how much turmoil he was causing, but was angry with Mrs. Nolan and the children for holding him back and criticised her for making his life a misery. The couple were in complete agreement however, that before Rose came on the scene, their marriage was "perfect". Mr. Nolan referred to his ex-wife as "everything anyone could wish for in a wife". Mrs. Nolan was bitterly critical of Rose who she saw as a scarlet woman breaking up a wonderful marriage. Mr. Nolan made no moves to defend Rose.

The other point of contention was the family home. Mr. Nolan was Managing Director of a private company with assets of several million dollars. Despite this, he repeatedly asserted that he needed to sell the house he jointly owned with his wife, in order to make ends meet. He was dissuaded only by the vehement and tearful protests of his wife and children. Likewise he was restrained from selling a cabin cruiser which was treasured by Mrs. Nolan and the children as a reminder of good times when they were all together.

### Discussion

Mr. Nolan, although living with Rose, continued to act as an active family member. He shared with Mrs. Nolan a continuing belief in the myth of the perfect marriage which existed before he left home and would exist again if he severed contact with Rose. Clearly this myth would no longer be viable if Mr. Nolan finally made the break and remarried.

The role of the children, and Hans in particular, was clear. As long as they remained intensely distressed and on the verge of "serious problems", Mr. Nolan did not make his move. Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) describe this kind of situation when they talk of the sacrificed social development of one family member as an act of "latent devotion". Joanna's dream is consistent with these ideas. As long as Hans remained "ill" and the other children remained distressed they helped preserve, intact, the outmoded but still shared myth of the idealised "perfect family".

Mrs. Nolan contributed by seeing Mr. Nolan as entirely blameless and the hapless victim of an evil woman. He, in his turn, spoke of Mrs. Nolan in an

idealised way as the perfect woman and all that anyone could wish for in a wife. He did not voice any dissatisfaction with the relationship they had before he left. He did nothing to challenge the prevailing view of Rose. He did not speak of any worthwhile qualities that she had and did not defend her when she was criticised.

The family, as a whole, colluded to maintain a continuing confusion. It was never clear whether Mr. Nolan remained within the family or had moved outside. All family members were contributing to the collusion.

### THE ROBERTS FAMILY

Twenty two year old Maria Roberts complained of severe and unremitting "depression" over a two year period. This began with an illness diagnosed as glandular fever which was followed by symptoms of lethargy, social withdrawal and feelings of despair. She was treated in isolation from her family for two years because she was adamant that she did not want her family involved. However, all attempts to relieve the symptoms with psychotherapy or physical treatments were quite without effect. She seemed to deteriorate further with repeated small overdoses and minor self-inflicted lacerations and bruises.

Finally her family was invited to participate in therapy despite her vigorous protests. The family consisted of the mother who lived with Maria, the father who lived 500 miles away in Adelaide (having separated from the rest of the family five years earlier) and an older sister Joy who had left home to get married and have a baby four years earlier. Mr. and Mrs. Roberts had not met or spoken for five years. Mr. Roberts stayed with Joy on his visits to Melbourne and Joy was careful to arrange things so that her parents did not meet each other.

Joy was sure that if her parents met, they would have a terrible row. Mrs. Roberts was bitterly critical of her husband and never spoke of him except with contempt or blame. Once, several years earlier, Maria had spoken up in defence of him and Mrs. Roberts was outraged. This did not happen again. Mrs. Roberts held her husband almost entirely responsible for Maria's illness and was certain it would not have occurred if he had been a better father.

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Roberts made any moves to initiate divorce, to sell the family home or to actively seek any new relationships. Mrs. Roberts vigorously rebuffed the attentions of several would-be gentleman callers. Maria was bitterly critical and

contemptuous of any man who showed an interest in her mother.

After several interviews with Mrs. Roberts and her daughters, Mr. Roberts was contacted in Adelaide and asked to come to Melbourne. He was told that no progress was occurring with Maria and that his help with her was needed.

All four family members agreed, with considerable reluctance, to attend a family meeting. The meeting was an occasion of great discomfort to everyone and only with great difficulty did the parents address any comments to each other. Mrs. Roberts, when she did speak, was hostile and critical of her husband for deserting the family. Mr. Roberts said that he wanted to come back to Melbourne. After several week's thought, he resigned his job in Adelaide and moved back to Melbourne. He stayed with Joy for several weeks until he found a job and a flat to live in. He seemed very relieved to feel that he was important to Maria. He had hesitated to contact Maria directly, thinking that Mrs. Roberts would be enraged. Joy and Maria said that they also expected this reaction. Mrs. Roberts said, defensively, that they were all mistaken and she did not want to come between Mr. Roberts and his daughters. For her part, Maria had made few moves to stay in contact with her father, thinking that her mother would regard this as disloyalty.

At later meetings, further information emerged. Maria described a fantasy which recurred persistently after her father left the family. This involved her falling over and breaking her leg and being taken to hospital. Both parents came to visit her and accidentally met. They began to talk and eventually decided to resume their life together.

With great hesitation, both Mr. and Mrs. Roberts, at different times, admitted that they still had faint hopes of reconciliation. Mr. Roberts, even when he moved to another state, could not think of the break as permanent. He took a flat on a short term lease and found a temporary job. Mrs. Roberts had plans to sell the house that the family had built so that she could buy a smaller place in partnership with her sister. She delayed this partly for fear that Maria would get worse. At one point the 18 year old family cat died. This cat was much loved by all the family and especially by Mr. Roberts. The death led to very intense feelings of grief especially for Maria and Mr. Roberts. In discussing their shared grief they were unguarded and emotionally free in their conversation for the first time in five years.

At later family meetings there was less tension. Mr. and Mrs. Roberts were seen alone after several

sessions to discuss their management of Maria. They came to relish those sessions and began to act together happily and harmoniously as parents. Only at this point did Maria show convincing evidence of improvement.

They did not spontaneously discuss their own relationship and apparently never had been able to in the past. Any attempt to initiate discussion of the marriage led to a dramatic change from the harmony and lucidity to an atmosphere characterised by blaming from Mrs. Roberts and extraordinary vagueness from husband. Mrs. Roberts believes that if Maria gets completely well then Mr. Roberts will return to Adelaide. He in turn is unable to make up his mind about the future until Maria is well. At the time of writing the family is still stuck at this impasse. However substantial changes have occurred in the family structure and Maria's depression has lessened.

### Discussion

The Roberts family have behaved for five years as if they retain, intact, the old model of the family. Neither spouse has acted decisively to formalise the separation and make it clearly final and irretrievable. Divorce, sale of the family home or other assets, and new relationships all were avoided. Even the family cat seemed to retain her place in the scheme of things. The two daughters continued to act in ways apparently similar to those that existed before the separation. Mr. and Mrs. Roberts never knew how to talk to each other about their relationship. Joy helped them to stay apart. Maria made sure they did not get too far apart. As the length of the separation increased without sign of reconciliation, Maria became ill. This made it necessary for father to stay in touch with the family through Joy. It froze any plans Mrs. Roberts had about selling the house or making any social life for herself. In this she clearly acted in accord with the privately held wishes of both her parents.

### CONCLUSION

Although these three families are very different, there are some common features. In each case one spouse has left the family despite resentment and resistance from the other and a loyalty and commitment to the marriage continues from one and probably both parties. This allegiance is reasonably open in the Heyson family but quite concealed in the Roberts family. In this family, at the overt level, the marriage is finished, but covertly there is a continuing commitment to the relationship despite

physical separation by as much as five years and 500 miles. And responsibility for the covert wishes of the couple is carried largely by the "sick" child. The child's problem serves the needs of the couple. This is the familiar pattern expounded by Minuchin (1974) in intact nuclear families. In these three families the child's "illness" prevents the separation and the child supplies a watertight reason for them to delay.

The continuing arrangement over the material assets of the couple is one of the clearest clues to the state of the marriage. In each of these three families, the family home is jointly owned by both parents, even after as much as five years of living apart. No legal action has been taken to divide the assets or to formalize the financial affairs of the family. The cabin cruiser or even the family cat remain as material links joining the absent parent into the continuing life of the family.

In each of these families there is a discrepancy between the overt appearance of a marriage that is over and the covert reality that it is still alive. It is our impression that the severity of the child's symptoms is proportional to the extent of this discrepancy. Furthermore, it seems that if the family is closed or socially isolated the plight of the couple is the more desperate if the marriage is irretrievably lost. The child may then be called on to take prolonged and extreme measures to act as a last remaining bridge between the spouses, whatever the effects on his or her own social development.

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