

The dissolution of the dyad. The identity crisis during divorce

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The subject of Platons Symposium is love. Here Aristofanes gives his famous explanation of love: Once in ancient time when Zeus found the human beings were becoming too clever and therefore threatening to the Gods, he had them cut into two halves. Since then each part has been searching for his lost half, that is why love has such a strong power.

As the expectations to marriage very often are like the fulfilment of this tale: Becoming a whole person through the union with the beloved, many people, many people feel like cut into two halves when they divorce.

When one partner unexpectedly and suddenly is left by the other, you immediately understand his or her grief. Generally however the partner who initiates the divorce suffers just as much, even in cases where a person finally succeeds in getting released from a very harmful relationship. It seems as if the most destructive relationships, leave the deepest and longest lasting psychological scars

Throughout my work for the last ten years with clients before, during and after divorce, this experience has repeated itself again. How come that divorce is such a profound blow to a persons identity?

From the beginning of our life, attachment to another caring person - who is able to appreciate our unique personality - seems fundamental for a healthy personality development, according to Bowlby (1969) and other leading experts within the field of developmental psychology.

Further research on the psychological development into adulthood - especially concerning the marital relationship (Skynner 1976, Dicks 1977 and Scharff 1982) - has demonstrated the everlasting importance of a continuous attachment figure who can fulfil our needs for recognition of the persons we are. Divorce is often the result of an unsuccessful attachment.

Although we are in the age of equality between the sexes, men and women usually go through

different identity crisis during the divorce process. Here their reactions often follow traditional gender patterns: Women give most importance to relationships and men to achievements.

To women therefore, the meaning of divorce is that their investment in empathy for the partner hasn't been returned. Whereas the focus of the male experience is the failing of the female partner to understand and recognize his efforts to gain status in a world of competition for the benefit of the family.

For both sexes this results in a loss of self-esteem and an identity crisis, usually followed by anxiety, anger, depression and guilt feelings (Levinger & Moles, 1979).

To come to an understanding of the psychological divorce process - its healthy and unhealthy outcome - I have designed a graphic model (1982-83) fig. 1. This model builds upon Horowitz (1979) configurational analysis.

Configurational analysis stresses a holistic view of the personality, showing that transformation in any of the main areas: Self-others, images, content of consciousness and emotional states immediately results in changes in the two other areas.

The last phase in the model: The phase of reintegration - illustrates the healthy solution of the psychological divorce. The divorce has arrived at realistic self-other images. This again is a sign of that the individual is no longer locked in a dependent attachment in the vain search of recognition. At the same time this indicates reappraisal of identity aspects - such as his striving for achievement and her empathic attitude - rejected during the divorce crisis - and a development of those aspects which earlier had been projected into the partner in the expectation that he or she would fulfil them.

To overcome the spell of Zeus is therefore to seek and develop the lost half within oneself. Only then the individual is able to form a mature attachment to another person with mutual recognition.

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