THE DEVELOPMENT AND MEANING OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCE


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Structural Changes in Children’s Understanding of Family Roles and Divorce

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During interviews with children concerning their understanding of family relationships, one first-grade boy was able to talk about how his parents were divorced and how they no longer lived together (Watson & Amgott-Kwan, 1984). His conversation seemed to indicate that he understood that being divorced meant his parents were no longer married. However, when the interviewer asked him whether his father was still his father even though he did not live at home, the boy looked concerned and finally answered that his parents were actually still married because his father was still his father. He concluded that the divorce meant that they lived in two different houses even though his parents were still married and they were all one family.

This anecdote illustrates confusions that children may have as they attempt to organize and represent social relationships in the face of discrepancies and dilemmas thrown at them by real-life conflicts. This boy seemed to have a partial understanding of marriage and spousal role relationships and was trying to grapple with the changes that were happening in his family (and had no doubt been discussed with him). He also had some sense of an understanding of parent–child role relationships, but when the two sets of relationships were juxtaposed, he showed that his understanding did not include a clear differentiation of spousal roles from parental roles and a clear definition of marriage. When he thought about the fact that his parents were no longer married and what this change would do to the role of the noncustodial parent—the father—this was more than he could handle. He resolved his dilemma by creating a new scenario in which the parents were still married, and thus the father–son relationship could remain intact. Clearly, he did not separate spousal and parental roles.
The dilemma could have been resolved in other ways. The child might have concluded that the father was no longer his father because he no longer lived at home and was not married to his mother. Or he might have concluded that ending a marriage in divorce does not destroy the parent-child relationship, and so his father would go on being his father. Indeed, different children come to all these conclusions as they deal with the separation and divorce of their parents.

As shown in this example, a major confusion seems to arise from children’s lack of skill in recognizing the joint independence and simultaneity of multiple role relationships for the same person—that a person can be both a father to his child and a husband to his wife, as well as other things, all at the same time (Watson, 1984). Each role influences the other roles and is coordinated with them, but they are not identical.

These confusions do not arise in an emotional vacuum but are permeated with feelings. In the example, the child was not a detached bystander, objectively attempting to solve a mental puzzle. Instead, he was truly concerned, confused, and intensely emotional as he talked about his father. The problem in social role relationships was of prime importance to the boy. The strong emotions may have focused his attention on the problem at the same time that they distorted his judgment and made him less adept at resolving the dilemma in an accurate manner (see Fischer, Shaver, & Carnochan, 1990; Sigel, 1984). Although all normal children would be expected eventually to consider and represent the social role relationships in which they are enmeshed, it seems that divorce in a family is a highly emotional family conflict that pushes children to come to grips with the way their social world is organized. This family conflict seems to force a reorganization of children’s social systems in that it exposes them to differences between their living situation and the situations of their friends, which they observe. It thus promotes comparisons and judgments about differences.

The objective of this chapter is to consider how highly emotional family conflicts—in particular, separation and divorce—provide discrepancies and dilemmas for children, who then have to come to grips with the changing family role relationships surrounding them. We think that children typically develop through a hierarchical sequence of increasingly sophisticated skills in representing and acting out role relationships. At the same time, highly emotional and personal family conflicts heighten role discrepancies that push children to reorganize the structure of their skills. This development involves issues forced on the child by the parents’ divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), the process of distancing brought on by the family environment (Sigel & Cocking, 1977), normal structural changes in social-cognitive understanding (Fischer, 1980), and the influence of emotions in organizing and motivating change (Fischer et al., 1990). Several studies carried out in our laboratories investigated the relation between understanding family roles, children’s emotions, and divorce.

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**THE DILEMMA OF DIVORCE**

There has, of course, been much research on the effects of divorce on children’s development and adjustment (e.g., Hetherington, 1979; Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989; Kurdek, Blisk, & Siesky, 1981; MacKinnon, 1989; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Most of this research has focused on the various factors surrounding the divorce, including children’s age, their adjustment to the change, and their eventual psychological outcome. There has been less focus on children’s understanding of divorce at the time of the crisis or the way the divorce influences children’s social-cognitive understanding (for exceptions, see research papers from our laboratories by Denham, 1982; Purcell, 1983; and Watson & Reimer, 1990; plus Hilbers, 1987; Pickar, 1982; Warshak & Santrock, 1983). Research on children’s developing understanding of divorce and the effects of divorce on their understanding can provide insight into the processes of social and cognitive development, specifically the understanding of the role of relationships in the family environment.

Many studies indicate that children face at least four major dilemmas or issues when their parents divorce. First, they must deal with the actual loss of contact with someone to whom they are attached—usually the father. Second, they must deal with the fear of possible further loss of contact with both parents and the lack of security brought on when a parent leaves the home. Third, they must deal with feelings of responsibility and guilt for personally causing the divorce or at least exacerbating the marital conflict. And fourth, they must deal with real-life discrepancies to their representation of their parents as good, loving, and trustworthy people.

If something has gone awry in the family, children, like adults, will attempt to understand the situation and find a cause. It seems that many young children blame themselves for the separation, while older children more often blame the parents (see Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). But blaming the parents leads to the conclusion that the parents are not adequately loving or trustworthy and may not always be relied on. Thus, all the issues noted above are intertwined. For example, either the parents are guilty for the conflict, or the child is guilty, or both are guilty. None of these alternatives is particularly easy for a child to deal with.

We contend that the level of children’s structuring of family role relationships will in part determine how they resolve these dilemmas, just as the crises will likely force the children to restructure their level of understanding.

**THE CONCEPT OF DISTANCING**

The concept of distancing, as formulated by Sigel and his colleagues (see Sigel, 1984, 1986; Sigel & Cocking, 1977), contains two aspects that help explain structural changes in role understanding and the effect of divorce on children. First, distancing is a process whereby children are able to establish a psychologi-
cal separation between themselves and an event thus allowing them to consider the event without being involved with it in the present environment. In other words, children can represent a past and a future, as well as hypothetical situations, when they have distanced themselves from the immediate here and now. In addition, children can stand back and use metacognitive skills in monitoring their own processing (Flavell, 1979) and can use a dual coding capacity (Fischer, 1980; Flavell, Green, & Flavell, 1986) and decentration skills (Piaget, 1962) in order to see and compare things from two or more perspectives.

With respect to children’s understanding of family role relationships, distancing can be thought of as the process through which children step back from their personal roles to see the roles as they exist for other people as well as themselves. Whenever children consider the general nature of role relationships, particularly the ability of people to occupy multiple roles simultaneously, they have distanced themselves from their immediate relationships, which usually carry intense emotions that can affect their behavior and understanding. The distancing process helps children to disentangle themselves from role relationships so that they can assess the general nature of roles.

For children to understand the changes brought on by divorce and to deal with their intense emotions about these changes, they need to develop some psychological distance from their family role relationships. In the example provided at the beginning of this chapter, the boy would need to distance himself from the dilemma in his family so as to gain an accurate understanding of what was lost and what remained in his relationship to his father, as well as what aspects changed but were not lost.

Second, distancing concerns the actions of people close to children that force the children to deal with discrepancies to their current perception of the world. In some cases, these distancing behaviors are the challenges and the scaffolding that parents provide to help their children reorganize their thinking (Bruner, 1975; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1984). In addition, parents also provide unintended discrepancies and challenges that come from marital discord and divorce. In the anecdote at the beginning of the chapter, the father’s leaving caused a discrepancy in the child’s understanding of spousal and parental roles as inseparable, and the child could not ignore this discrepancy because it was so emotional and important to him.

Divorce in a family pushes for a separation of spousal and parental roles, so that any child who has not already differentiated them will be forced to take a fresh look at how the roles are different and how they are related. Indeed, roles may be especially important to children when there is conflict between the roles or the chance of losing an important role relationship (see Pickar, 1982, for typical confusions for children). For example, we have heard children express a concern that the parent role will not continue when one of their parents gets a new job or enters a new role (e.g., becomes a doctor, works as a teacher) or when the children enter a new role (e.g., think about getting married or going to college): “Mommie, when you become a doctor, will you still be my mother?” or “When I get married, will you still be my mother?” (Watson & Amgott-Kwan, 1983; Watson & Fischer, 1980). These concerns seem to appear precisely when the role relationships are seen as in danger of being lost. Highly emotional and personal discrepancies seem to push for reorganization of role understanding.

Developmental Sequence

Table 8.1 depicts a sequence of skill levels in children’s understanding of social roles in the family. At about 2 years of age, children’s skill in using social roles begins with independent agents, people who carry out single actions that may fit
## TABLE 8.1
Developmental Sequence for Understanding Family Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level and Step</th>
<th>Roles</th>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Examples of Behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level Rp1: Single Representations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Independent Agents:</td>
<td></td>
<td>[agent]</td>
<td>Child describes a doll’s actions or acts them out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Family Behavioral Roles:</td>
<td></td>
<td>[mother] [father] [child]</td>
<td>Child describes a mother (or father or child) in terms of his or her typical behaviors or acts them out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level Rp2: Representational Mappings</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Family Social Roles:</td>
<td></td>
<td>[mother—child] [father—child] [mother—father]</td>
<td>Child describes or acts out the role of mother (or father or child) in terms of having and taking care of children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Family Social Role with Three Agents:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Child describes or acts out the roles of mother, father, and child all together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level Rp3: Representational Systems</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Family Role Intersection:</td>
<td></td>
<td>[wife husband mother father]</td>
<td>Child describes or shows how a man can be both a father and a husband simultaneously with a mother who is also his wife.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Family Role Intersection with 3 Agents:</td>
<td></td>
<td>[wife husband mother father child]</td>
<td>Child describes or shows the same role intersections as in step 5 but with the child added to the interaction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level Rp4/A1: Single Abstractions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Role Network:</td>
<td></td>
<td>[wife husband mother father wife husband grandmother grandfather]</td>
<td>Child compares family role relationships across two generations and forms a concept of a traditional family in terms of intersecting parental and spouse roles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Example: In the table, the Level Rp2 section illustrates the transition from single representations to mappings. For instance, in step 3, a child is shown describing or acting out the role of mother in terms of having and taking care of children. This is a representation of the concept that the role of mother involves care-giving responsibilities. As the child progresses, the concept is expanded to include multiple roles and their interactions, such as the role intersection in step 5 where a man is described as both a father and a husband simultaneously with a mother who is also his wife.
social roles (Watson & Fischer, 1977). By 3 years, children build from this initial representation of agents by compounding together various actions fitting a role to form a behavioral role. This first role is based on what people in a particular category do or say or how they look. For example, a mother role is a category of people whom children define as having the following characteristics, among others: They are women, cook meals, and play with children. The specific behaviors or characteristics that any one child uses in defining a mother role are not so important as the general organization: Mothers are people who do certain things and look a certain way.

The next major transformation occurs when children of about 4 years intercoordinate one behavioral role with another, such that one role is defined and determined by the complementary role. This structural level is labeled a social role to differentiate it from the earlier behavioral role and to stress the new aspect that is added—the social relationship. At this level, a mother role may be conceptualized as a category of people whose actions are closely tied to the complementary role of child. A mother has a child and must take care of her child and respond to her child. Of course, the child role can also be defined in terms of a complementary role of mother.

At the next level, children of about 6 years and older can intercoordinate one social role with another to form what is labeled a role intersection. For instance, the complementary role relationship of mother and child can be combined with the complementary role relationship of wife and husband. Thus, one person can take part in this complex role relationship as both a mother to her child and a wife to her husband. The child can now understand how one person can occupy multiple role relationships simultaneously, how social roles are differentiated, and also how one social role influences another when they are part of an intersection. In everyday life, roles may never be completely simultaneous or completely separate. Nevertheless, role intersections differentiate two role relationships and indicate how one role continues to exist when a person happens to be functioning in the other role. By functioning in the wife role, for example, a person need not lose her mother role.

At yet a higher level, children of 9 or 10 years can intercoordinate one role intersection with another to form a role network. For instance, the child can combine the role intersection for one generation with that for another generation to understand relationships across generations in extended families, such as how one person can be mother and wife in one nuclear family and grandmother or daughter in another nuclear family.

In addition, intermediate steps occur as transitions between these major levels. In our research, the steps assessed were based on the child’s compounding of new skill components to make role understanding at a given level more varied and complex. For instance, in the family the social role of mother may have two, rather than just one, complementary roles (e.g., mother goes with child and father).

Several studies provide evidence that children develop through this hierarchi-
spousal role is ended. In two separate studies of 5- to 9-year-olds from both intact and divorced families, scalogram analyses showed that virtually all children fit the predicted profiles for this sequence (Denham, 1982; Purcell, 1983). The understanding of divorced role intersections, where spousal and parental roles were clearly differentiated and coordinated, varied widely across children, first developing as early as 6 years but often not appearing even by 9 years.

Developmental Range

The developmental sequences for family roles have been described as if children's role understanding is only at one step on the scale; however, children's understanding typically varies across a wide range of steps (Fischer, Hand, Watson, Van Parys, & Tucker, 1984). The highest, most complex level of children's understanding is called their optimal level, which occurs when children are assessed in highly supportive contexts, where explicit cues to key components of a task are provided to support children's understanding. In some of the family-role studies, for example, children were shown a story that embodied one of the steps in Table 8.1 or 8.2 and then asked to explain or act out the story themselves (e.g., Denham, 1982; Watson & Fischer, 1980). This modeled story primed the children's understanding of the key components at a given step. The children than had to explain or act out the story on their own, without any direct assistance from the examiner, but the priming did help them to produce a high-level story.

In contrast, children's functional level of understanding occurs when children are performing without contextual support; it is the upper limit of their spontaneous understanding; it is typically lower than their optimal level; and it shows high variability across children at a given age. In some of the family-role studies, functional level was assessed by asking children to make up their own stories about roles in a family, or specifically in a divorced family (e.g., Denham, 1982; Purcell, 1983). There were no immediate models or prompts given to support high-level understanding. The stories that children told varied across a number of the steps identified in Tables 8.1 or 8.2. One typical pattern for divorced family roles (Table 8.3) was for 8-year-olds to show a functional-level understanding at step 3 or 4 and an optimal-level understanding at step 5 or 6. In this way, the same child demonstrated an understanding of the intersection of spousal and parental roles under optimal conditions but showed a much more primitive understanding under spontaneous conditions.

Children typically show evidence for such clear differences between their optimal and functional levels of understanding. This developmental range reflects the psychological distance between what children can understand with no help from the context and what they can understand with social priming of key components of a task. Both optimal and functional levels are upper limits on children's understanding, but the limits vary as a function of contextual support.

As such, children cannot be said to have a single competence for understanding family roles, even within a narrow domain, such as understanding of roles in a divorced family (Fischer, Bullock, Rotenberg, & Raya, in press). Instead, the limit of their understanding varies with contextual support, as well as with other contextual and organismic factors. In fact, their behavior typically will not be stable at one developmental step but will vary. People show many skills at levels lower than the highest or most complex of which they are capable.

Constructive Process

In the process of restructuring role understanding, as required by a change such as divorce, children reconsider and reevaluate the attributes of categories of people, as well as those of social relationships. With the normal developmental sequence, the child first expands roles beyond sensorimotor components to behavioral roles and can thus step back from (or beyond) the personal actions of roles. He or she then expands roles beyond behavioral roles to social-role relationships and can step back from specific behaviors or characteristics. Next he or she expands roles beyond specific relationships to look at broader networks of relationships, which may be less likely to be tied to the specific roles that he or she inhabits.

What makes this flexibility in handling roles possible is the construction of multipart skills, the availability of lower level skills when children are capable of higher levels, and the ability to step back from personal relationships and treat roles in a more objective manner. Thus, the construction process of skill development seems to be in part an explanation for the process of distancing—being able to evaluate general role relationships. In effect, distancing allows the child to see two complementary aspects of roles: A given role is greater than the individual members, and a given individual is greater than an individual role he or she inhabits.
EMOTIONS AS ORGANIZERS OF CHANGE

As already noted, skills control not only actions and thoughts but also emotions (Fischer et al., 1990). According to skill theory, these various factors interact in influencing the rates and pathways of development. As children come to control increasingly complex skills, they use these skills to appraise situations in new ways. As a result they feel new emotions (e.g., moving from sadness to grief, guilt, and loneliness), relate their emotions to other actions and events (e.g., coming to realize they are feeling angry because of a particular person, such as their father), and develop more self-control over their emotions (e.g., turning overt anger into a more subdued and covert contempt).

At the same time, the emotions experienced in any given context also organize children’s behavior. An emotion can facilitate the restructuring of skills in that context, or it can lead to a narrowing of approach so that children cannot step back and gain distance from the context. Emotional reactions to divorce can have either a facilitative or an inhibiting effect on understanding of family relationships. The person may or may not be conscious of the influence of emotions.

Emotional development, like role concept development, is context dependent. Thus, a child will develop different levels of feelings and attachments for different individuals in different situations. This emotional variation may in turn affect the role-level understanding the child develops for any given relationship. A child who has experienced neglect or abuse in his or her family may not structure parent-child role relationships at the same level or in the same way that he or she structures other role relationships, such as those of teacher/student or doctor/patient. A child who has experienced the divorce of his or her parents may develop sophisticated structures for understanding and differentiating spousal and parental roles in his or her family. Or because of the strong emotions accompanying the loss of a parent from the home, he or she may distort his or her understanding of family role relationships and of his or her parents in those relationships.

In summary, strong emotions can focus children’s attention on a situation such as divorce and lead children to restructure their understanding of family roles. For example, losing a father from the home can make a boy sensitive to what he can expect from both his parents and what he can do to keep his father in his life. Or high emotions may increase the difficulty of the task. Anger, for instance, can lead a child to see his father as all bad instead of seeing him as having both positive and negative qualities. Fear can lead a child to avoid thinking about the consequences of divorce and the limitations of the parents and this means that they do not develop an age-appropriate, realistic view of them. For children grappling with their relationships to their parents following a divorce, emotions can both facilitate understanding and interfere with it.

ROLE CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT AND UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSES OF DIVORCE

Three studies in our laboratories related children’s level of family role understanding for either intact or divorced families to other aspects of their behavior and family situation. Two of the studies suggest how divorce and the attendant emotions relate to children’s level of understanding of role relationships.

In a study of 47 kindergarten and third-grade children from divorced and intact families, Purcell (1983) found that although divorce did not affect the more structured, optimal level, it did affect the more spontaneous, functional level of kindergarten children’s understanding of divorce roles. That is, for kindergarten children from divorced families, the highest level of understanding in spontaneous stories was typically at step 3 or 4, but for kindergartners from intact families it was typically one step higher. However, divorce status did not relate to the functional level of first graders. It appeared that conflict brought on by the divorce situation acted as a propellant for the development of role understanding in kindergarten children, who were at a period of transition between levels and because of this reorganization in their thinking were more susceptible to such conflict.

Children’s emotions in their stories also related to the effects of divorce. Children of both ages from divorced families depicted more emotional themes in a story-completion task than children from intact families. Children who showed more positive emotions in connection with divorce had higher levels of role understanding.

A study of 10 third- and fourth-grade boys, all from divorced families, suggests one explanation for the absence of a relation between divorce and role understanding in the older children. Denham (1982) studied the relation of role understanding in divorced families to feelings about parents. Role understanding was assessed with the high-support condition of the divorce role sequence in Table 8.2. Perceptions of parents were assessed on the Parental Satisfaction Scale, adapted from the Perceived Competence Scales of Harter and Pike (1984). In this task, children were asked to indicate how happy they were with various aspects of their parents’ behavior toward them.

The children also participated in a 6-week intervention condition designed to help them both to talk and learn about relationship problems. For 1 hr each week, half of them focused on the problems of divorced families, while the other half (a control group) focused on problems between friends. In each group, the boys were given experience dealing with the complexities of role relationships and discrepancies and changes in these roles, especially as a result of divorce or shifts in friendships, respectively. The groups also focused on understanding people’s emotions in the face of such changes—parents and children, or friends. This intervention thus pushed children to distance (Sigel, 1984, 1986) by considering
people’s role relationships, emotions, and perspectives in divorced families or changing friendships.

Although the intervention did not produce a change in the mean level of role understanding, it did change the relation between the children’s understanding and their feelings about their parents. Before the intervention, there were no reliable correlations between children’s role understanding and their evaluation of their parents; correlations were positive, modest in size, and not statistically significant. Following the intervention, the correlations shifted dramatically: Children’s role understanding showed strong negative correlations with their evaluations of their parents. Boys with lower levels of role understanding gave exceedingly positive evaluations of their parents, but those with higher levels of role understanding had more moderate, realistic evaluations of their parents. All evaluations of their parents. Boys with lower levels of role understanding gave exceedingly positive evaluations of their parents, but those with higher levels of role understanding had more moderate, realistic evaluations of their parents. All the boys with exceedingly positive parental evaluations failed to understand intersections of parental and spousal roles (step 5 and beyond), and all the boys with more moderate parental evaluations understood some of these intersections (passing at least one task at step 5 and beyond). This effect was strong and reliable for the group that had focused on divorce in the intervention. For the group that focused on friendship, the pattern was similar, but the correlations were not as large and were not statistically reliable.

It seems that the distancing involved in the intervention led some of the children to recognize that their parents were not all good or all bad. In fact, after the intervention focusing on divorce, the children who understood role intersections gave lower evaluations of their parents’ behavior than they had before the intervention. In contrast, the children who did not understand role intersections before the intervention gave higher evaluations of their parents’ behavior.

One plausible interpretation is that emotions caused some of the boys to be defensively positive about their parents, allowing them to think about their parents’ faults and mistakes, including the divorce. They therefore said that their parents were nearly perfect. These were the children who were unable to understand the intersections of spousal and parental roles in divorce. The boys who were open to understanding their parents as not being perfect were better able to deal with the separation of roles in divorce.

In summary, children who could understand the nature of role intersections were more likely to develop a realistic understanding that divorce is caused by the parents. Furthermore, use of an intervention that involved focusing the boys on the discrepancies associated with divorce relationships appeared to facilitate a different level of understanding of these relationships.

A third study (Watson and Reimer, 1990) investigated the relation between family-role understanding and recognition of parents’ contributions to the divorce by focusing on children’s understanding of normal family roles as depicted in Table 1 (not the understanding of divorce roles). The children in this study ranged from 3 to 9 years of age. They were from divorced families and living with their mothers. Findings from this study indicated that recognition of parents’ contribu-

tions to the divorce increased dramatically as role understanding improved. Of those children who understood at the level of behavioral roles (step 2), only 20% could discuss causes for the divorce related to the parents’ behaviors. At the level of social roles (step 3 or 4), 40% gave parent-related causes. At the level of role intersections (step 5 or 6), 75% gave parent-related causes. Despite differences in the specific family roles studied—divorce roles or conventional family roles—both the intervention study and this study suggest that children’s ability or willingness to criticize the parents, such as blaming them for the divorce, increased with role understanding, especially the understanding of role intersections.

These findings suggest that when children are able to differentiate the spousal and parental roles, they can step back and see their parents realistically, as neither all good nor all bad. Their ability to distance themselves from the causes of the divorce seems to provide them with a way out of the dilemmas of divorce—losing a parent, seeing one or both parents as bad because of the divorce, or possibly being to blame themselves for the parent’s leaving. With the distance of the higher-level understanding, they are more likely to reach constructive conclusions: Their parents are responsible for the divorce, their parents are not all bad just because they did some things wrong, and their relationships with both parents can continue even though the spousal relationship has ended and one parent has left the home.

In a similar vein, several investigators have noted that preschool children have a difficult time understanding that a person may feel two or more emotions (e.g., both happy and sad) at the same time or that a person may be both good and bad (Hand, 1982; Harter and Buddin, 1987), although they can deal with such combinations in very limited ways (Fischer et al., 1990). Ready understanding of the intersection of emotions seems to begin at 6 or 7 years, like understanding role intersections. Perhaps younger children cannot bring themselves to blame their parents when this blame results in seeing their parents as all bad. Consistent with this argument and the findings of the three studies, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) also reported that preschoolers were more likely to blame themselves for their parents’ divorce and to fear a parent’s leaving them, while older children were more likely to show anger at the parents for the divorce.

Despite the adaptive developmental shift in the understanding of divorce that seems to be linked to understanding role intersections, strong emotions can still hinder children’s perception of reality and even make children defensive. Older children of divorce in the Watson and Reimer study continued to show a belief in the possible reconciliation of their divorced parents (see also Warshak & Santrock, 1983). In such an emotionally charged context, these children’s perceptions continued to be distorted in the direction of their strongest desires, despite the realities of the divorce situation.

In the studies reported here, it appears that divorce does not have a single, across-the-board effect on children’s basic level of understanding family roles.
Children seem to face four major issues when their parents divorce, and advanced family-role understanding seems to correlate with children's coping with three of the four. First, children often feel responsibility and guilt for the divorce, and understanding role intersections may help them to realize that they are not to blame. Second, with regard to their parents' limitations and mistakes, understanding role intersections and multiple emotions may facilitate saying, in effect, "My parents blew it! They did some things wrong, but they are still good in many ways, they are still my parents, and they still love me." Third, with regard to fear of losing parents, role intersections help children to realize that parent-child roles continue despite the dissolution of spousal roles: Their parents will still be their parents. The one issue where role understanding probably cannot help is when the divorce leads to loss of contact or reduced contact with one parent; the contact may decrease even though the missing parent will always remain the child's actual parent.

These two correlated domains of crisis and development (skill in understanding family roles and skill in dealing with divorce) provide examples of the constructive process of skill development, which includes the children's distancing of themselves from the personal roles and circumstances in which they are enmeshed as they construct more general and abstracted family role understanding. In addition, highly emotional contexts such as divorce seem to force children to face discrepancies in their understanding of role relationships, which are resolved through restructuring their understanding. The higher level of understanding seems in turn to help children to regulate their emotions. For some children, however, emotions appear to interfere with understanding, and the reciprocal advances in understanding and emotion regulation do not occur.

In summary, it is important to recognize that the relation between role understanding and emotions is bidirectional. Emotions affect understanding just as understanding affects emotions. In further research, ideally including longitudinal studies, researchers need to determine the sequence of effects from a given developmental level of role understanding to a given emotional reaction, and vice versa. Questions for the future include: When do children show stronger or more disruptive emotions related to the conflicts of divorce, and particularly, do these emotions occur at specific levels of role understanding? Under what conditions do strong emotions lead children to be defensive, and under what conditions do these emotions lead instead to the reorganization of understanding? Perhaps a path of influence can be traced that shows a subtle but precise sequentiality of development rather than just overall reciprocal influences between these domains.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank Gayle Denham, Helen Hand, Kathleen Purcell, and Wendy Reimer, who contributed ideas and research reviewed in this chapter. Some of the work was supported by grants from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and Harvard University. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the authors.

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