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»I didn't divorce
my kids!«

HOW FATHERS
DEAL WITH FAMILY BREAK-UPS



campus

Table of Contents

Foreword	7
Introduction.....	9
1. Divorce from a Socio-Political Perspective.....	21
2. What Men Say about Their Divorces	
Fifteen Case Histories	
Divorce by Fax—Martin W.	33
Fatherhood after the Loss of Joint Parenthood— Peter T.	43
A “Vacation Dad” per Court Decree—Richard B.	51
When the Wife Is Declared Insane—Ian L.	58
When the Youth Welfare Office Joins Forces with the Mother—Frederick H.	70
When Children Are Expected to Decide About the Relationship—Aaron S.	80
A Last Minute Trip to Jamaica—Chris O.	89
“Daddy, you’re not paying any child-support!”— Harry T.	100
When the Daughter Takes Care of the Father— Philip M.	111

The Accusation of Abuse As a Conflict Strategy— Toby V.	124
“Isn’t that the guy they accused of sexual abuse?”—Herb E.	132
Uncertain Paternity—Manfred S.	141
New Fathers Unwanted?—George T.	151
A Peculiar Love Triangle—John D.	160
Divorce As a Cause of Illness—Gabe H.	172
3. “Visitation Time”—How Fathers Spend Time with Their Children?	182
4. What Makes Fathers Sever Relations with Their Children	217
5. Intimate Violence, Health and Professional Help	244
Conclusions: New Perspectives on the Discourse of Divorce	270
Notes	293

Introduction

Why Men Speak about Their Secrets

Astonishingly, more than 3,600 divorced fathers were willing to speak openly and candidly about stressful and often deeply traumatic experiences. A common explanation is that men have changed over the last 30 years and as a result can speak more freely about their feelings. But although men have indeed changed, the explanation is not convincing. Rather, it indicates that the male psyche has been misunderstood and it points to the myths that have replaced an empathetic perception and interpretation of masculinity. In point of fact, the counterthesis runs, men were always ready to discuss their feelings in a masculine fashion, but the public was simply unwilling to listen. Nobody enjoys talking about painful experiences when his words fall on deaf ears. Above all, a man will not speak about experiences that injure his self-esteem and call his capability into question. Who would want to render himself additionally vulnerable?

People who rely on the male sense of self-esteem and furthermore build their own lives on a man's ability to perform, as is still typical for women in classic gender-role assignment, will be reluctant to listen to things that could unsettle their beliefs. Women who need support are thereby deprived of emotional and social certainties they do not wish to forgo. "Male weakness" poses a disadvantage for those who are dependent and rely on "strong men." Men will not speak about their weaknesses as long as they run the risk incurring the contempt of those they have disappointed. As my teacher, Theodor W. Adorno, once wrote: "Love you will find only where you may show yourself weak without provoking strength."¹ A person who wants to discuss his difficulties will only do so if he can be sure that his weaknesses will be ac-

cepted and his unstable sense of self-esteem will not be pursued with ridicule.

With the encouragement of the women's movement toward the end of the last century, many women began to speak openly about their feelings, passions, unfulfilled desires and sexual fantasies, even revealing that they inclined toward violence against their partners and children. Naturally, such confessions were not the exclusive result of personal courage; instead, they were also promoted by a public that was suddenly willing to listen, without shaming or deriding them, or turning away in irritation. This applied to the family, the community, the political parties, the workplace, academia, and the media. Matters that women at one time had concealed in shamed silence were suddenly worth hearing and warranted discussion. Not least, this resulted in new women's literature.

Following the student movement of the sixties, the modern women's movement recognized women as historical subjects who were deemed capable of great achievement in terms of shaping their own lives and life in society beyond their role in the family. Initially, the movement had no desire whatsoever to consider the precarious political pleasure of being a female victim surrounded on all sides by evildoers and villains.² In contrast, a strong trend that no one could really foresee later developed out of the women's movement in the form of the feminist movement which stylized women as the victims of dark forces. Willingly or unwillingly, women's discussions of private matters were transformed into unrequested membership in the world-spanning circle of women as universal victims. Thus, it was less a question of meting out praise for women's courage and activity than of recognizing their willingness to identify with their assigned victim role. The emergence of this world view, which was cast in black and white opposites and devoid of all intermediate hues, will require future study no less than the silence of men who took no offense at being characterized as exclusively grim and heartless.

For divorced fathers it is equally undesirable to be cast as stereotypical victims, and—their experience of discrimination during the divorce process notwithstanding—most of them will not be inclined to style themselves as victims or unquestioningly allow others to portray them as such. This points to the phylogenetic role of males, whose hands-on activity was first and foremost important outside of the family. Since the

dangers involved were as real as death itself, war, violence, and the never-ending story of costly attempts to dominate nature on the seas, in the air, the mines and the factory hall, robbed much of the seductive allure for men to identify with a self-image of victimhood. Men were in part the actual, although usually only the perceived, players in history—predominantly outside the home and family. Although there are also men who find something appealing in the all-encompassing passivity that is accorded to victims.³

In this study our intention was therefore to investigate emotional worlds in men that are unknown to the public and arise in conjunction with divorce, visitation arrangements, violence (their own or their partner's), emotional and physical trauma, and arguments over child support. These are the dimensions of what divorced fathers experience, although they have met with an almost complete lack of interest on the part of politicians and society because certain masculinity clichés obstruct the view of men's reality. Our goal was to call matters by name that are generally tabooed, and we focused our attention on what is also encountered behind men's coerced and at the same time voluntary heroic façades: weakness, self-doubt, disappointment, insecurity, and the desire to be passive likewise, without having to become subservient to a woman. A person who acknowledges elements considered shameful in the lives of men and does not react with contempt or the exhortation that they should act like men and not be overly sensitive, will encounter buried emotions and a willingness to talk. With the aid of detailed questionnaires that offered the men a variety of opportunities to express themselves, as well as space for optional written commentaries, we succeeded over a period of one and a half years in recording large sections of this scale of buried experiences.

The scientific study of men's everyday experiences is not only uncommon but also meets with skepticism and occasionally harsh opposition. Thus, a person researching divorced fathers is more likely to encounter myths about them than empathetic identification with their inner reality. For one group of men, however, this applies less and less often, namely, the divorced fathers who are mounting growing opposition against being pigeonholed by gender clichés. These are primarily the younger men. Our research results are intended to promote this kind of change and to provide first-hand experience reports that juxtapose

pose the myths about men with reality. Not only are we hopeful, we also observe on a daily basis that divorced fathers are perceived differently from what would have been conceivable even a few years ago. And a person who perceives divorced fathers differently must also view the children of divorce in a different light. For the empathetic view of divorced fathers hinges on prior recognition that the children need not lose their fathers. Such recognition, however, has a long way to go before it becomes a self-evident.

Naturally, a large-scale survey that focuses exclusively on men and their divorce experiences must reckon with one powerful objection. It is directed against the reliability of the survey and runs: “But that’s only what the men are saying! What do the women have to say?” This objection—and it must be taken seriously—postulates in a sense that no research on divorced fathers can be valid as long as women have not likewise been interviewed about their experiences. Conceivably, this even includes the implicit idea that men respond to survey questions with excuses and lies, which once again invokes clichés. Nevertheless, the objection remains justified, for it was our intention to survey men only. But does it constitute a serious objection to our research? Our justification for focusing on divorced fathers has absolutely nothing to do with the absence of research conducted on them for decades: the worlds inhabited by men outside of their work environments were of little real interest to anyone. We are not saying it is time for justice to catch up, nor do we raise the claim that our research should be allowed to show signs of partiality, which must now simply be accepted given the backdrop of past neglect. That would amount to self-deception and have nothing to do with science.

The objection against a project involving research on men appears to be of a principled nature, for it implies that the experiences of divorced fathers cannot be true because their truth is only “correct” when their wives and partners have also been heard. The women must countersign as guarantors, so to speak, in order for men’s statements to be granted credibility. There is no doubt that listening to both of the divorced parties makes sense and is actually desirable, because only the combined insights of both parties into the divorce process are capable of presenting a complete picture of the events. Both in the USA and in Germany

this perspective has been almost entirely ignored, which has been very detrimental to the relevance of divorce research.

If one forgoes this approach, as we have, it doesn't mean that one falls short of the truth. If that were the case, then all of the many studies of divorced women and mothers, and of women's violent experiences in relationships, would also have fallen short of the truth on the same grounds. For at the time, the voices of men were not heard. Unless, of course, one were to insinuate that women are capable of making statements on relationship questions that hold true for both parties, while men cannot. Thus, a simple yet epistemologically significant question remains: can men have been telling the truth when they were interviewed about their experiences? The simple answer is yes, and it holds true for women as well. It is another matter, however, when political movements or scientists process personal statements into general ones. In this case, personal statements are then pressed into the service of ideologies.

If we disregard political motives for the moment, then the above-mentioned objection against our project conceals the highly complex question of what actually constitutes reality and how it comes about. I would like to answer this question in very simple terms: a person's reality is what he or she considers to be true. And people's emotions and actions correspond to their realities, be they good or bad, liberated or oppressed, happy or unhappy. When people say they are unhappy, they are not lying. They are expressing the way they feel. When they do everything conceivable to leave their unhappiness behind, they are acting in accordance with their condition. When people say they are happy, they will strive to maintain this state as long as possible. This may be illustrated using two polarizing examples. A husband who thinks his wife is an angel will treat her like an angel and view her with blissful happiness. A wife who thinks her husband is a devil will dread him like a demon and probably avoid him in utter horror—unless she is a masochist and stays with him.

But the realities of a man who considers his wife an angel and a wife who considers her husband a devil are, in principle, susceptible to change through new experiences and convincing arguments. If a husband describes his wife as an angel to a friend, most probably his friend will inform him that angels do not exist, that his wife therefore cannot

qualify as one, and that there is something exaggerated about his feelings that might have to do with the established fact that love is blind.

If, on the other hand, a woman describes her husband as a devil to a friend, her friend will inform her that devils do not exist, that her husband therefore does not qualify as one, and that there is something exaggerated about her feelings that possibly might have to do with the known fact that disappointed love can render one blind to a person's good qualities.

When they have discussed the matter long enough with intelligent friends or a psychotherapist, both of them will presumably arrive at the realization that they must abandon their viewpoints because they do not stand up to critical scrutiny. They will literally learn something new. Yet it is also conceivable that they would persist in their views, and that the others would then shake their heads and turn away from such hopeless cases who are blind to reality.

It is not uncommon, however, that the listeners also subscribe to these points of view and are themselves only too happy to continue polarizing guilt and innocence, good and evil. Seeing one's own views confirmed through the accounts of others is easier to tolerate than allowing oneself to be nagged by doubt. "Freedom would be not to choose between black and white, but to abjure such prescribed choices."⁴

When a divorced father describes his pain over no longer being able to see his children as often as he would like, then that represents the reality responsible for his suffering and the embitterment of his life. It is an entirely different question whether his ex-wife believes him or calls him a liar and pretender. She may see things her way, thereby contributing to the clichés about divorced fathers. But that changes nothing about *his* reality. Such divergent perceptions are, incidentally, typical for divorced partners. They are an expression of the destruction of verbal communication that has arisen between them. It is also conceivable that the divorced female partner recognizes her ex-husband's sorrow over the separation and can relate to his suffering. In that case, both partners would concur in their assessment of the other's feelings. They have not debased their commonalities from better times, such as an empathetic understanding of the other, and relegated them to oblivion or denial. This occurs more often than in the stories presented in this book, because people who come to halfway satisfactory terms with a divorce

have less reason to participate in a study such as this than those who associate divorce with a longer or shorter period of gloom in their lives—particularly since happiness does not require confirmation through science, while unhappiness is in need of its help. Furthermore, we believe that one can learn more from the conflicts of others than from the circumstances that make them happy.

We surveyed men with respect to their divorces because we wanted to find out what was true for them, and because there is no other way to understand their relationship to their children, who are subjected to serious stress in the wake of the parents' separation. We sought the truth about men with no intention of being unjust to their former partners, regardless of whether the couple was married or not. This can be accomplished if one does not draw direct conclusions from the realities of men to their former partners, thereby reflexively assigning the blame to the partners for the suffering of their husbands. Just as little as the causes for men's suffering cannot be traced exclusively to women, women cannot be solely credited for separations that run a civilized course. As players, both parties experience happiness as well as misery even though their respective views can diverge significantly.

We assumed a stance of critical solidarity toward the divorced fathers and approached their realities with great respect, care and sensitivity. Only that enabled us to ask them how—based on their suffering and anger, their outrage and the experience of injustice—they arrived at their realities. Some of these realities were biased, distorted or even self-paralyzing, while others simply appeared to hit the nail on the head. In order to carry out research that is individually and socially “helpful,” i.e., that resolves conflicts, we wanted to learn how rage, pain, and injustice, along with social discrimination, contributed to restricting relationships between fathers and their children to a minimum, either seriously damaging or even severing them, or pugnaciously keeping them alive in the face of all adversity. For the subjective reality of divorced fathers has a long-term effect on their relationships to their children. Their ability to correct their perceptions increases the likelihood that the father-child relationship will be able to survive under extremely difficult conditions.