

DIVORCE TALK

WOMEN
AND
MEN
MAKE
SENSE
OF PERSONAL
RELATIONSHIPS



CATHERINE KOHLER RIESSMAN

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DIVORCE TALK

To the memory of my mother
Mary Conway Kobler

P R E F A C E

How do women and men make sense of getting divorced? Like other events that we experience during the course of our lives—job loss, a move we don't want to make, the death of a family member or a friend—divorce challenges the stability and continuity of the world we take for granted. To cope with events that jar our illusions of permanency, we usually talk about them. We reflect on what has happened, assign motives, and characterize the situation in the context of a general scheme of meaning, which includes explanations provided by our cultures. Through interpretation, we not only render events meaningful but also empower ourselves to go on, despite loss and change.

I studied a group of divorced or divorcing women and men to see how they went about making sense of divorce and how they went on with their lives after they had separated from their spouses. I learned from them that although divorce is difficult, interpretative work is the way through the hardship. The healing and empowering effects of talking about the process of reconstructing themselves allow the divorced to develop positive outlooks on their lives. In contrast to other students of the topic, I do not conclude that divorce has a generally negative impact on the partners.

Although women and men go through much that is the same when they divorce, they also have experiences that are distinct to their gender. The sexes make different sense of divorce. Women, more than men, find much to praise in their divorced state, even though they often experience considerable personal trauma and financial hardship. Women and men remember their marriages quite differently,

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which suggests that what they are looking for when they marry again may not be the same. Both women and men go through a process of defining the marriage as moribund, but they seem to be mourning different dreams of what marriage ought to provide. When marriages end, women and men construct different lives, distinguished by gender-linked pressures and opportunities, and both groups claim to discover new aspects of themselves. In a word, the divorced say it isn't all bad.

I came to these findings because I used an approach that allowed me to enter into the points of view of those I studied. What began as a survey of the adaptation patterns of women and men became a more intensive study of the ways women and men talked and made sense of their experiences. The research process provided an opportunity for the divorced to go through a thoughtful assessment of their lives, and these assessments, in turn, became categories for analysis and interpretation. There are numerous approaches that rely on interpretative methodology, of course, including symbolic interaction, hermeneutics, psychoanalytic investigation, and qualitative sociology. My approach probably comes closest to symbolic interaction, though I do not in every case refer specifically to this tradition. Like it, however, I focus on process, language, and the definition of the situation—member's views of social reality.

I should add that although I am a sociologist, this work does not fit neatly into any single theoretical or methodological tradition of that discipline. It is an effort at "blurred genres," as Clifford Geertz so eloquently described in *Local Knowledge*—reaching into a variety of disciplines for insights and methods to study social life. Through attention to the interpretation of meaning as an issue, increasing numbers of social scientists are trying to forge links between sociology and the humanities. I also take inspiration from Henry Glassie, whose words in the preface of his book, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone*, articulate what "blurred genres" can mean:

We have one enterprise. We could call it historical ethnography or local history or folklore in context or the sociology of the creative act or the ecology of consciousness—the potential for flashy neologism seems boundless—but whatever its name, study is distorted and reality is mangled when disciplines harden into ideology, categories freeze into

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facts, and the sweet, terrible wholeness of life is dismembered for burial . . . if work is good old categories will slip and shift, and then melt away as we find the place where social science joins the humanities, where art and culture and history, time and space, connect, where theoretical and empirical studies fuse.

To set the stage for what follows, I begin with the historical and cultural context of divorce in Chapter 1. In the next four chapters I analyze "divorce talk" in several different ways, comparing how women and men explain why they divorced and how they felt afterward.

Chapter 2 examines divorce accounts—what people say to explain why they are no longer married. I treat these accounts as templates, into which women and men have poured their visions and passions for marriage. The approach here is on the content more than on the form of the talk, that is, *what* they say rather than *how* they say it. Chapter 3 shows how personal meanings and narrative form are related, and how the interview context enters into each narrative because of the "teller's problem"; the interviewer and interviewee together produce a text, making sense together. The *how* of the telling is important in understanding *what* it is that is significant for the teller. It is becoming common for investigators to refer to, and sometimes to recount, the "stories" subjects tell in interviews. Here I go one step further and analyze how narratives are told, how divorcing individuals reconstruct their shattered selves through the language of autobiography and heal parts that only narrative can bind.

Chapters 4 and 5 are mirror images of each other, one analyzing how women as opposed to men express and interpret the personal trauma of divorce, and the other analyzing how women as opposed to men make positive sense out of it. I also use both quantitative and qualitative findings in Chapter 4 to discuss what may be termed the feminization of psychological distress, through which traditional mental health research has considerably underestimated distress in men. In Chapter 5 I examine the considerable innovation that divorce brings in its stead, as individuals construct new structures of meaning to replace what they have lost. Instead of considering only pathology (as most studies of divorce have done), this work looks at benefits, too. There may be clues here to understanding why so

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many people are getting divorced and what the positive side of the trend is. The book ends with reflections on divorce, remarriage, and alternatives to remarriage.

In sum, this book concerns the divorcing process, as veterans of the experience understand it. The analytic approach emphasizes the relationship between personal experience and historical, social, and cultural contexts—the link between people and settings, self and society. The detailed analysis of personal narratives knits these themes together and shows more precisely how the divorced create themselves and their social worlds through language and interpretation. The contrast throughout is between women and men—how gender shapes the experience and meaning of divorce.

CONTEXTS have been important for my interpretive work, just as they were for those I studied. The research project was originally designed and the data collected with Naomi Gerstel. As my interests shifted to the interpretative process and to language, we eventually decided to pursue independent projects. Yet ideas we developed together infuse this book.

I have been in the fortunate position of working in two settings, Smith College School for Social Work and the Department of Psychiatry of Harvard Medical School, that have greatly facilitated this project. As a sociologist and social worker in a school of social work, I have not had to attend to some of the disciplinary imperatives that sociologists face in traditional departments, and this fact has indirectly made this book possible. I thank two deans of the School for Social Work, Katherine Gabel and Ann Hartman, who have each been supportive of my research in very different ways. I also received a Brown Foundation Award from the Clinical Research Institute at Smith, which supported the research for Chapter 5. Peg Whalen did much of the computer work, always with care, and Debbie Katz assisted immeasurably with tracking down references. The clerical support at Smith was extraordinary, especially from Muriel Poulin, who always came through, and provided badly needed humor, as well.

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Smith and go to the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School to study qualitative methods, which, in turn, transformed the study. Elliot Mishler in the Laboratory of Social Psychiatry at the Massachusetts Mental Health Center was my mentor while at Harvard, and his thoughtful criticism of my work did not end with the conclusion of my fellowship. He taught me about narrative approaches, supported me through my “paradigm shift,” and was an attentive (but uncontrolling) midwife for the project. My debt to him is very deep. The weekly research seminar he led at Harvard, and the exciting discussions all the fellows had in it about alternative methods, also provided a critical context for my work.

Friends, many of whom also happen to be first-rate social scientists, were another important source of support and help. Rosanna Hertz and Patricia Rieker read the entire manuscript and gave much thoughtful criticism. Gail Hornstein read several drafts of the whole work with a particularly critical eye, picking up (among many other things) my changing epistemologies as the book progressed—which helped me not only to construct a more coherent book but also to think about and write the Appendix in the way I did. Elliot Mishler patiently read draft after draft and always helped me to clarify my ideas and tighten my prose. I am also grateful for the support of Susan Bell, Jack Clark, Uta Gerhardt, Joy Newmann, Cynthia Shilkret, and Alexandra Todd, some of whom also commented on draft chapters. Others who gave good suggestions for revision at various points were Kathy Davis, Sue Fisher, Joan Laird, Charles Lemert, and Dennie Wolf. Sandy Jencks may not be aware how helpful our conversation was (sitting on the banks of Long Pond), but he helped me think through how to handle social class in the book. Lyn Harrod gave me many insights on our long walks together through the woods of Cape Cod, and her warm friendship made my final work on the manuscript much easier. Finally, the members of my two study groups provided important feedback and support: my philosophical friends from schools of social work in the Boston area, and the narrative group from the Massachusetts Inter-disciplinary Discourse Analysis Seminar (MIDAS).

Marlie Wasserman at Rutgers University Press understood and valued the approach of the book from the very start. The readers she obtained for the manuscript, Arlene Kaplan Daniels and Deborah

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The study could not have been done without the cooperation of the women and men who agreed to be interviewed and who talked so fully and so frankly about their lives. Although they cannot be identified by name, I am deeply grateful to them. My three children—Robin, Janet, and Jeff—continue to be an important context for my life and my work. They have taught me, among many other things, that children of divorce can grow into happy and productive adults. Finally, I thank my mother, who made this book possible in more ways than one.

Wellfleet, Massachusetts

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DIVORCE TALK

Making Sense of Divorce

Personal Meaning in a Social Context

For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it.

—GEORGE ELIOT, *Middlemarch*

Divorce has touched the lives of more individuals today than ever before in history. The marital bonds that in earlier generations (and in many parts of the world to this day) were broken most often by death are in many Western societies now most often broken by divorce. As a relatively common response to marital unhappiness, divorce is a recent phenomenon, characteristic of the past century only.¹ Yet because of it, the world is changing for the large numbers of people whose lives are uprooted by the experience.

Like death, divorce can be traumatic, because our lives are organized around particular relationships that are crucial to how we find meaning in our lives. When we lose an important relationship, whole structures of meaning disintegrate, as do the routines of everyday life organized around the relationship, and these losses often lead to distress, anxiety, and grief. We search for a compass, a new structure to

give us bearing, as we try to separate emotionally both from the person and from our own previous identity associated with the relationship. Eventually, we reconstitute a new identity so that we can live and act. Central in this process is the development of an account—what happened and why. Because divorce assaults the world we and others take for granted, it requires explanation.²

We usually think of this process of making sense of a stressful event as a private matter. People go through it on their own, in isolation, perhaps with family and friends, but out of public view. Similarly, we often think of divorce as an individual problem, having to do with someone's character, relationships, or milieu. In the words of C. Wright Mills, it is a "private trouble"—values cherished by the *individual* are threatened. But as Mills argues, private troubles can become *social* issues when they transcend local environments and people's inner lives. Divorce is a social issue because it suggests there may be structural trouble in the institution of marriage, in relationships between husbands and wives in general. Divorce is a *public* issue, as well, because it involves institutions outside the family, notably the state, and raises a variety of policy questions.³

In its frequency alone, divorce can no longer be viewed only as a personal matter. Particularly for Americans born after World War II, it has become commonplace. Between 1963 and 1975 the divorce rate in the United States increased 100 percent, and it continued to increase each year until it reached its all-time high in 1981, when 1.21 million people divorced. Although there is debate over the reasons for this trend, it is clear that as a consequence of the liberalization of divorce laws, divorce became possible for countless individuals who would never previously have considered this means of ending marital unhappiness. Had the spiraling rate of increase of the late 1960s and 1970s continued, by the end of the century nearly every American would have ended a marriage through divorce. As it is, demographer Andrew Cherlin estimates that if recent trends persist, about half of the people getting married today will eventually get divorced. Historian Lawrence Stone estimates that in England over a third of current marriages "will end in the divorce court rather than the funeral parlor." (England and the United States have the highest divorce rates in the Western world, apart from Scandinavia.) The enduring married couple has become somewhat of an endangered species, and couples

in which one or both members have been married before are increasingly the norm.⁴

It is paradoxical that individuals must take pains to make sense of divorce—to interpret it to themselves and to others—given that so many people end marriages and that it is so easy to do. Legally, the event is handled “with conveyer-belt speed and impersonality,” suggesting that it has become an administrative action and is no longer a moral or judicial action.⁵ Yet divorce, while statistically normal, is not normative in a sociological sense: marriage remains the desired state for adults. Witness the rituals and symbolism that surround weddings, and the absence of these for divorce. Rituals carry powerful messages about the kinds of women and men we are expected to be, just as they perpetuate beliefs necessary to maintaining a particular social order. The custom of elaborate weddings persists from one generation to the next, with the bride usually wearing white, and the language of the ceremony reflects the belief that the union will be permanent—“until death do us part.” Even in weddings of “modern” couples, who construct their own rituals and write their own vows, or even for couples who themselves were raised with divorce, there is still the expectation of “forever.”

Although the belief in living happily ever after may have been replaced by the idea that marriage is “work,” commitment nonetheless is the rule of the day. Marriage continues to be something that people take very seriously, despite massive changes in other aspects of family life. Divorce challenges this cultural value. It is not surprising that in spite of all the rhetoric of liberalization (and the fact that Americans broke the divorce barrier and elected Ronald Reagan, who had been divorced and remarried, as President), divorcing individuals still consider themselves somewhat deviant, at least while they are going through the process. Feeling like “damaged goods,” they perceive that others view them as stigmatized.⁶ They seem to continue to carry in their heads past notions of matrimonial fault, despite the no-fault ethic of contemporary legal practice. Societal expectations help explain why divorce is so stressful, and why individuals must go to such great lengths to explain why they are divorced.

In contrast, another major change in family life—married women working outside the home—has become both statistically normal and sociologically normative. In the not too distant past it was