



Growing Up with Divorced Parents: A Phenomenological Study of Preschool Children's Experiences *

Reviewed by
David G. Smith
St. Thomas University

In the United States in 1982, over three million children under the age of six years lived with divorced parents.¹ This dissertation, offered as a phenomenological "human science descriptive case study," sets out to investigate the experiences of six "normal" pre-school children in divorced single parent families, and to portray the experience "from the children's perspective."

The author went to great lengths to get to know her subjects well. Over the course of a year, weekly visits were made to the children's homes. Informal interviews and participant observations were gathered from the children individually and from their parents, siblings, and friends. Observational records were kept of the children's free play, as well as spontaneous drawings and open-ended activities (such as story telling) directly related to the divorce experience. Interviews and observations with custodial parents were also conducted, and all of the children were asked to draw pictures of both themselves and their families. The pictures are interspersed throughout the dissertation, and they help to provide a distinctive, vivid quality to the overall work.

Interpretation of the "data" involved two phases. In the first, thematic categories were generated after in-depth description of the contextual and interactional lifeworlds of the children. Through these remarkably rich and sensitively drawn descriptions, we get a strong sense of each of the different "universes" of the children with their families. There is Scott Parker, for example, portrayed as "the only man" (p. 74) in his mother's life. We learn of his disturbing propensity for violence (a common theme in all the descriptions), which Mrs. Parker "clearly connects . . . with her ex-husband" and also with her own father (pp. 101, 102). We learn also of the keen insight which the children seem to hold for their parents' troubles. Young Ira Goldstein, for example, is asked, "What is divorce?" He replies, "It means your Mommy and Daddy are getting sent away from each other." They can't believe it . . . that they're just getting a divorce (p. 190). This descriptive section of the thesis, which is also its most lengthy, provides us with a good example of how description, in an innocent sort of way, contains a power of its own to awaken us to new awareness.

In the second part of the interpretive phase, the conceptual categories generated from each of the family portrayals are compared, and commonalities in experience are drawn out. While variation of experience seems to be the norm, certain themes are underscored as being held in common. One theme is that of "coping with parental loss" (p. 330). It is suggested that, in each family, children cope with the loss in different ways, but how they do so is largely influenced by how their divorced parents come to terms with the marriage dissolution. Almost all of the parents struggled with "viewing divorce as a failure, producing an 'abnormal' family situation" (p. 335). Another important theme suggested is "the significance of the non-custodial parent" (p. 349), or

what we might describe as the presence of the absent parent. Even though a parent may be physically absent from the child's lifeworld, s/he is still very much a part of the child's personal meaning-making.

The dissertation concludes with a short section entitled "Reflections on the Research Process" (p. 370). The author makes some important remarks about her own conflicts surrounding confidentiality. She had to gain consent from *parents* to discuss the experiences of their *children* with the parents and other children. But the study is also punctuated throughout with perceptive (and self-reflective) remarks about the role of the lifeworld researcher, remarks which will be helpful to future investigators interested in the author's methodology. For example, the tape recorder is a dominating instrument in this kind of inquiry, and the following comment is worthy of note:

Thinking back on my tenacious insistence on using the tape recorder, I realized I wanted to 'treat' each informant in exactly the same methodological manner and stubbornly clung to the tape recorder even when I saw it caused . . . some anguish. This was a mistake. Had I stopped using the tape recorder sooner, Scott (for example) may have found it easier to talk with me about his family life. (p. 112)

Overall, this is a very thoughtful and carefully done study. The review of literature pertaining to the field of children in divorced families is a model of clarity. The long descriptive sections are extremely well-written, and in turn provide the work's real strength.

One reads a new "phenomenological study" with great interest, perhaps because we know phenomenology to hold such a vast, elusive promise; the promise of the possibility of seeing and hearing ourselves as we really are in our fullness—not just objectively, or in our context-boundedness, or in our clinical explicitness, but in our fullness, which includes our hiddenness, our inner recess, our silence. And early in this study we learn that children are reluctant to talk about their experiences, just as for parents, too, there is a hesitancy. We find also the caveat word that children's silence should be respected, for it has been found to be not empty, but fully engaged in "creating myths" (p. 367).

There may be an important lesson here, namely that anyone who dares to meet the world phenomenologically inevitably meets, after all has been said and done, a certain silence which waits of its own accord. It reminds us of what we have learned from our intellectual forebears, from the pre-Socratics to Heidegger and his successors; there is in everything said something still to be said, in everything visible something invisible, and in the mundane something transcendent.

There is a stubborn quality to the world of our investigations, a resistance that will not be assuaged by a simple following of Husserl's "*zu den Sachen selbst*," taken as a form of prescription for what Gadamer (1981) calls "dogmatic realism." We learn that that of which we speak

through long descriptive labour is still mysteriously absent from the inked lines. Rather it lurks and floats in the shadows of our explicitations, reminding us constantly that "full description" does not mean everything possible has been made apparent, but that any description worthy to be called full must eventually point beyond itself. As distinct from, say, ethnography, where brute explicitation is a primary virtue, phenomenological writing has more the character of religious or poetic narration wherein the truth of it is not in the story *per se*, but in what the story means for what we are about in this life—for our hope, our joy, and our pain. As such, phenomenological writing can be nothing if not deeply philosophical.

Can it be said that phenomenology bears a moral direction, a moral passion? One senses between the lines of this dissertation a certain ambiguity about such a question. On the one hand one "hears" a wish to say, "let us simply describe the structures of the lifeworlds of children in a variety of single-parent families, and let the 'facts' speak for themselves." But one also hears between the lines how impossible this is, how irresistible is the urge to "say more." There is a decrying of the "moral condescension" (p. 336) seen as implicit in public labelling of "children of divorce," and in labels for divorced single-parent families such as "broken . . . non-intact . . . separated . . . disrupted . . . non-nuclear . . . failed" (p. 337). It is recommended that "children should not be categorized by one of their parents' experiences" (p. 339), and the hope expressed that "society and professionals in particular will someday be able to acknowledge that divorced single-parent families are *changed* families and (thereby) rid themselves of the negative connotations that they attribute to this change" (p. 339).

These are important things to say, but phenomenologically one still carries responsibility for asking what lies unspoken behind such labels, beyond, say, the phrase "social conditioning"? What is the nature of the experience that makes the language of such labels possible? If phenomenology holds anything to be sacred, it is language itself, because we have come to understand how it is that language bears us and upholds us, and contains the keys to that which keeps us a mystery to ourselves. And so we ask about the stubborn nature of our concern about divorce not out of an interest in preserving *a priori* assumptions about the inviolability of marriage as an institutional form, but because in our stubborn "negative" ascriptions is disclosed something fundamental to what we find to be the case about ourselves in our frailty, namely that to be human is to be in relation, one with another, by mutual agreement, trust, and hope rather than to be alone and separate.

Thus it is that throughout this study one hears and sees over and over a search by both children and adults alike, for a genuine intimacy, for a true relation. We see it, for example, in Mrs. McNeil's compulsive dating, in Tommy Johnson's artistry in getting his mother's attention, and explicitly in Tanya's response to the question, "If you could wish anything or change anything about your Mom or Dad, what would you change?" Her reply: "That we could live closer" (p. 381). Mr.

Anderson's question, "How do these things happen, Ann? So many people getting divorced" (p. 319), may have been "rhetorical" (p. 319), but it is not idle. For it may be not so much a question about divorce as such, as an asking for the grounds of human incompatibility, of why it is that, more and more, we cannot live together in a genuine way, even though such a relatedness seems so basic to our nature, so much a fundamental desire, and is the yearning that undergirds our grief when relations once established in good faith seem impossible. There is something at the bottom of our experience that suggests to us that what we hold in common may be far deeper than what holds us apart, so that even though we may choose to be absent from those with whom we once lived, it can never be a complete absence; for in the absence lives a presence, linguistically bound in memory.

The human science perspective is "a hopeful one," Ann Wood tells us (p. 58), and so, while reading the dissertation left this reviewer with a profound feeling of being gathered into the struggles and pains of both the children and adults described so well, an optimism also issued from the reading. For the vivid and sensitive way in which the stories of each of the subjects are revealed from the inside out provides a rich text from which all those involved in pedagogic and therapeutic work can ground their reflection in a greater fidelity to the true depth of human experience.

Note

1. From the dissertation abstract. All page citations are from the text of the dissertation.

References

- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. "The Religions Dimension in Heidegger." *Boston University Studies in Philosophy and Religion*, Volume 2, Leroy S. Rouner, General Editor. Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981.