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Ending the ‘Cult of the Broken Home’: Divorce, Children and the Changing Emotional Dynamics of Separating British Families, c. 1945–90

Abstract

From the 1960s, rising divorce rates forced a re-thinking of family dynamics beyond the nuclear. Traditionally, experts and the public had presumed that children from ‘broken homes’ typically drifted into juvenile delinquency and crime. Children of divorce were blamed for a plethora of social problems. The increasingly common nature of divorce rendered this model unsustainable. Post-war children of divorce were more likely to be framed as ‘emotionally vulnerable’ and studied in more nuanced ways, not least because it seemed increasingly obvious that not all affected children grew up delinquent. A new consensus emerged that problems could only be avoided if parents created appropriate emotional conditions while separating and divorcing, and if parents and children openly communicated their feelings throughout the process. Children themselves were actively encouraged, through a new genre of divorce manuals often aimed at them, to express their emotions with parents and friends. Using Britain as a case study, this article argues that emotions became central to discussion of divorce in the post-war period, placing onuses on breaking down families to create a positive emotional space for affected children.

Since at least the nineteenth century, British society recognised the married biological family as a fundamental social institution. Stable family life underpinned the nation’s integrity, being a key site for raising

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responsible citizens.¹ From the 1960s, the legal restrictions on divorce were relaxed causing divorce rates to rapidly rise. As this article argues, this forced a re-thinking of family dynamics beyond the biological and nuclear. Parents now commonly re-married, negotiated access to children while living separately and accepted that marriage arrangements could irretrievably break down. The number of children aged under sixteen named annually in divorce petitions rose from 51,310 in 1969 to 120,000 in 1975 and then to 138,706 in 1981.² Divorce replaced parental death as the leading cause of one-parent families.³ While the family continued to be upheld as the model environment for children, new ways had to be decided upon for maintaining the basic emotional dynamics of the biological family in complex situations of separation and divorce.⁴

The article argues that, particularly from the 1970s, divorce was comprehensively considered from its emotional, as well as legal, dimensions and through the lens of children in addition to separating parents. It explores the trajectories and processes by which this situation developed in post-war Britain, asking in particular why and how a transition occurred from stigmatising children from 'broken homes' towards viewing them instead as emotionally vulnerable. In addition, the article argues that this changing landscape of marriage and divorce forced a reconfiguration of ideas about acceptable interpersonal behaviour in breaking down post-war families orientated towards safeguarding the emotional well-being of involved children. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as a matter of course the 'broken home' had been routinely stigmatised and blamed for juvenile delinquency. By implication, the typical 'broken home' was working class. The growing acceptance of divorce, and its spread across all classes, made this model unsustainable. Rather than being resignedly castigated as potential criminals, post-war children of divorce were re-cast as 'emotionally vulnerable' and studied in more nuanced ways. All of this was accompanied by a growing interest in children affected by divorce beyond the domestically unstable working-class stereotype as families from all social backgrounds – even the respectable middle classes – began to be impacted by divorce on an unprecedented scale.

As divorce rates rose, it seemed apparent that not all affected children turned to delinquency. Instead, they displayed far more varied emotional responses. Permissive divorce legislation clearly did not cause the anticipated sudden upsurge in child crime after all, forcing researchers to adopt more sophisticated approaches to examining divorce's impact on

¹ Roderick Phillips, *Untying the Knot: A Short History of Divorce* (Cambridge, 1991), 164.

² *Parliamentary Debates (Lords)*, 419, 27 April 1981, 1119-29WA.

³ Richard Leete, *Changing Patterns of Family Formation and Dissolution in England and Wales, 1964-76* (London, 1979), 10.

⁴ Hugh Cunningham, *The Invention of Childhood* (London, 2006), 213.

children. A new consensus emerged that successful navigation of parental discord was possible only if parents created appropriate emotional environments while separating and divorcing, and if parents and children openly communicated their feelings throughout the process. Children themselves were actively encouraged, through a new genre of popular divorce literature often written for them, to express their feelings about family breakdown with parents and friends. This was a significant transition away from stigmatising involved children by labelling them deviant.

Importantly, emotions became central to discussion of divorce. For the first time, breaking down families were encouraged to create positive emotional spaces in which carefully chosen forms of affective behaviour would help their children grow into emotionally literate, socially adjusted adults and avoid the onset of psychological and behavioural problems. Biological parents and their children were encouraged to maintain close bonds, continue expressing love towards children and quell negative parental emotions such as anger and guilt, at least in the presence of children. These new prescriptive ideas spawned new literary genres designed to facilitate positive affective communication. From the 1970s, and particularly the 1980s, advice on emotions and divorce was communicated within popular divorce literature (aimed at both adults and children) as well as the media, supported by a new focus among social psychologists on emotional vulnerability.

Historians such as Edward Shorter have discussed the twentieth-century importance of the nuclear family and the disintegration of broader family networks, but had relatively little to say about the effects of its breakdown.⁵ Stephanie Coontz has traced the rise of the nuclear family and its subsequent fall, in a rather celebratory way, portraying the decline of the male breadwinner family as socially liberating.⁶ Historians of broken families have explored the economic challenges historically facing widowed and divorced mothers.⁷ While a reasonably sized historiography of divorce exists, little attention has been paid to involved children, despite their constituting an important, and ever-expanding, social group that attracted much concern, discussion and attention in post-war western societies.⁸

The article also relates to a growing literature on post-war Britain that deals with the governance of emotions, the politics of the family in Britain and the ever-growing role of (usually psychological) expertise. Teri

⁵ Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (London, 1976). Divorce is mentioned briefly at 270–2.

⁶ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage: A History* (London: Penguin, 2005).

⁷ See the essays in Manon van der Heijden, Ariadne Schmidt and Richard Walls (eds), *Broken Families – Special Edition*, *History of the Family*, 12 (2007), 223–310.

⁸ Key texts not mentioned above are Glenda Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition* (Oxford, 1991) and Kristin Celello, *Making Marriage Work: A History of Marriage and Divorce in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 2012).

Chettiar, in her exploration of marriage welfare services, argues persuasively that post-war marriage became viewed as an 'emotional responsibility', and as a 'relationship' rather than 'institution'. By implication, improving the emotional health of nuclear families was the basis for resolving a host of social problems and securing a stable democratic polity. This opened up possibilities for therapists to treat marriage as a fundamentally emotional landscape.⁹ Chettiar's research is invaluable for outlining how marriage relationships came to be constituted as therapeutic objects in post-war Britain and how husbands and wives were urged to reach psychological maturity.¹⁰ However, it curiously omits consideration of attitudes towards involved children.

This is perhaps surprising given how historians, most recently Mathew Thomson, have highlighted the post-war period as one in which concerns mounted about children. In addition to the physical threats seemingly rife in public, anxieties rose about the emotional well-being and happiness of children.¹¹ Hugh Cunningham argues that in the later decades of the century, deep anxiety arose about society's ability to preserve the innocence and safety of childhood.¹² Similarly, Peter Stearns portrays the twentieth century as an era of anxiety about children and parental inadequacy. Parents grasped that the modern world was a dangerous place for children, with there being no easy transition from childhood innocence to an emotionally stable adulthood.¹³ Stearns' focus was on parenting, not so much 'broken families', but it was perhaps inevitable, given rising divorce rates, that breakingdown homes came to be seen as a key site of childhood danger, packed with emotional hazards and turmoil. As Cunningham adds, children became seen as a 'threat to civilisation' in the sense that a precarious childhood might lead to a problematic future adulthood.¹⁴

In this context, as Michal Shapira argues, raising children properly was upheld as key to ensuring family stability and helping to produce democratic citizens.¹⁵ Marga Vicedo demonstrates (in relation to America) that nurturing children into emotionally healthy individuals and good citizens

⁹ Teri Chettiar, 'More than a contract': The emergence of a state-supported marriage welfare service and the politics of emotional life in post-1945 Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 55 (2016), 566–91 on 589.

¹⁰ See also Teri Chettiar, 'Treating marriage as "the sick entity": Gender, emotional life and the psychology of marriage improvement in post-war Britain', *History of Psychology*, 18(2015), 270–82.

¹¹ Mathew Thomson, *Lost Freedom: The Landscape of the Child and the British Post-War Settlement* (Oxford, 2013).

¹² Hugh Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (Harlow, 2005 [1995]).

¹³ Peter N. Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America* (New York, 2003).

¹⁴ Cunningham, *Children and Childhood*, 187.

¹⁵ Michal Shapira, *The War Inside: Psychoanalysis, Total War and the Making of the Democratic Self in Postwar Britain*. (Cambridge, 2013), especially chapter 7.

was an important post-war imperative, helping to explain the popularity of ideas such as British psychologist John Bowlby's theory of maternal attachment.¹⁶ Harry Hendrick suggests that between the 1940s and 1970s, the ideology of parenthood was informed by socio-democratic beliefs that emphasised tolerance, optimism and collectivism, underpinned by more permissive approaches to child rearing.¹⁷ Analysis of these shifting familial dynamics takes on new contours when we consider how child-rearing, and maintaining and expressing bonds of love, was ideally meant to continue despite separation and divorce.

More generally, historians now recognise that emotions (as experienced as well as expressed) can change over time. Emotions are not simply a biopsychosocial constant determined by chemicals in the brain but are also shaped and experienced in light of political and socio-cultural factors.¹⁸ However, as Peter and Carol Stearns suggest, clear distinctions need to be made between 'emotionology' and 'emotions'. 'Emotionology' refers to the prescriptive emotional standards set by particular societies. These can change over time, as was evident in discussion of the emotions involved in post-war divorces. Certain 'emotionologies' can predominate at any given time and dictate how individuals ideally *should* behave.¹⁹ Of course, individuals ignore, defy or reject these emotional standards, meaning that actual experiences often differ from social expectations.²⁰ This article uses this model to argue that from the 1970s, divorcing families were urged to act in a new, emotionally appropriate manner for the sake of the child. As such, it focuses on the new emotional prescriptions for separating families and the ways in which these were communicated to both parents and children. What changes, then, did rising divorce rates force in the emotional economies of the post-war British family? Which emotional behaviours were seen as conducive or destructive to affected children? And how were angry, traumatised separating families encouraged to become emotionally literate for the sake of their children?

Delinquents from 'Broken Homes'

As a matter of routine, early twentieth-century criminologists and psychiatrists blamed 'broken homes' for juvenile crime.²¹ Children from

¹⁶ Marga Vicedo, *The Nature and Nurture of Love: From Imprinting to Attachment in Cold War America* (Chicago, 2013).

¹⁷ Harry Hendrick, *Narcissistic Parenting in an Insecure World: A History of Parenting Culture, 1920s to the Present* (Bristol, 2016), 2–4.

¹⁸ Carol Z. Stearns and Peter N. Stearns (eds), *Emotion and Social Change: Toward a New Psychohistory* (New York, 1988).

¹⁹ Peter Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, 'Emotionology: Clarifying the history of emotions and emotional standards', *American Historical Review*, 90 (1985), 813–36.

²⁰ This gap was explored in terms of 'emotional suffering' in William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge, 2008).

²¹ See, among others, Geoffrey Pearson, *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (London, 1983); James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the*

'broken homes' were presumed to be among the most anti-social, usually criminal, members of society. They were stereotypically from less affluent homes, places in which fathers were allegedly more likely to desert, end up in prison or die at a younger age. As Deborah Blythe Doroshov observes, the language of 'broken homes' allowed professionals to articulate judgements about which kinds of homes were unhealthy and which produced well-adjusted children.²² Particularly in Britain, these judgements were drawn along class lines.

The home was upheld as a place in which children were trained to be emotionally literate, responsible adult citizens, imbuing parents with a fundamental role in setting an example for moral and emotional behaviour. Home and family were seen as the centre of citizen formation; pathological domestic environments posed a threat to society more generally.²³ Post-war British society was 'home-centred'.²⁴ However, this emphasis inevitably raised anxieties about the vulnerability of breaking down homes. The absence of a parent was presumed to encourage deviant behaviour among affected children.

These presumptions were visible in the Denning Committee on Divorce Procedure (1946). The Committee sought to reform procedures in divorce cases but was also established in response to fears about rising marital breakdowns and divorces during the Second World War.²⁵ Its recommendations included shortening the length of legal proceedings and establishing marriage welfare services. Members of the committee presumed that children deprived of a stable family life were prone to delinquency. Boys risked turning to crime, girls risked having illegitimate births; children of both sexes were exposed to moral dangers when witnessing parents re-marrying or co-habiting with another person.²⁶ Subsequent parliamentary debates on the report insisted that 'there is no earthly way by which a child may be given a second childhood if its first had been spoilt [by divorce]'. The presumption here was that children derived happiness and learned appropriate social behaviour only from

1950s (Oxford, 1986); Heather Ellis (ed.), *Juvenile Delinquency and the Limits of Western Influence* (Basingstoke, 2014).

²² Deborah Blythe Doroshov, *Emotionally Disturbed: A History of Caring for America's Troubled Children* (Chicago, 2019), 58.

²³ Stephanie Olsen, *Juvenile Nation: Youth, Emotions and the Making of the Modern British Citizen, 1880-1914* (London, 2015). For the United States, see Deborah Weinstein, *The Pathological Family: Postwar America and the Rise of Family Therapy* (Ithaca, 2013).

²⁴ Claire Langhamer, 'The meanings of home in post-war Britain', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 40 (2005), 341-62.

²⁵ *Final Report of the Committee on Procedure in Matrimonial Causes (The Denning Committee)*, reprinted in *Modern Law Review*, 10:2 (April 1947), 184-92 on 185.

²⁶ National Archives, Kew, LCO2/4642, 'Denning Committee, Final Report Part II: Children and Divorce', 1947-1953.

their biological parents living in a happy home. As Viscount St. Davids insisted in the House of Lords, 'the best thing that can happen for any child is for its parents to throw aside their divorce proceedings and come together and rebuild the home they have broken'. In the same debate, the Lord Bishop of Derby argued that 'where it is known that there has been a divorce almost invariably some psychological abnormality, in many cases tragic disability, is discovered in the offspring'.²⁷ Following the Denning Committee, probation officers were put in place to advise on the social and material circumstances of divorcing families and involved children.

Discussion surrounding the Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce (1951–55) framed the reconciliation of husband and wife as a matter of public policy. Like the Denning Committee, the Commission arose from concerns about rising divorce rates and stressed the importance of families remaining together, where possible. Targeting the behaviour of warring parents was seen as the only salvation for affected children. Where children were discussed, this was mainly in relation to practical arrangements, not emotional well-being. Indeed, the report presumed that 'children can put up with a good deal of friction between their parents so long as the home remains intact' and that 'the relations between the parents must usually be very bad indeed before a divorce is in the interests of the children'.²⁸ As Chettiar suggests, in the 1950s, the main focus was on the emotional relationship between husband and wife.²⁹ Addressing this relationship alone would apparently ensure familial stability and naturally reduce problems associated with children from 'broken homes'. Nonetheless, most people took for granted connections between divorce and juvenile crime and insisted that homes with one parent or a step-parent could never provide happiness. Divorce was a last resort only; children were better off within a warring family than without one at all.

Such attitudes help explain why, in 1949, Cyril Garbett, Archbishop of York, asserted that 'from every direction, from welfare workers, probation officers, police and from the clergy, I get the same answer: that the failure of the home is the most common cause of juvenile delinquency'.³⁰ In the same year, juvenile magistrate Basil Henriques insisted that ninety per cent of children brought before him came from broken homes.³¹ Similarly, in 1961, Labour politician, Christopher Mayhew, described children from broken homes as 'emotionally

²⁷ Parliamentary Debates (Lords), 170, 14 February 1951, 336–50.

²⁸ *Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce, Report 1951–1955* (London, 1956), p. 15. For discussion, see Stone, *Road to Divorce*, pp. 402–5.

²⁹ Chettiar, 'More than a contract'.

³⁰ *Guardian*, 10 February 1949, 3.

³¹ *Observer*, 14 August 1949, 5.

immature, mainly because of the absence or inadequacy during their childhood of one or both parents'.³² It was usual to read journalistic statements that a failed marriage was a 'festering sore in the body politic', a dangerous threat to the health of the community, if not the nation.³³ Implicit in these views was a sense that maintaining a marriage was a basic social responsibility and that husbands and wives should only part if absolutely necessary rather than neglect their duty to raise responsible, emotionally mature citizens. There was also a prevailing assumption in much of this rhetoric that families from poorer classes constituted the 'festering sore', not the respectable middle classes whose families offered (in theory) good models of domestic harmony.³⁴

Gradually, however, throughout the post-war period, the 'broken home' lost its centrality as a trope for explaining delinquency. Admittedly, in 1976, British criminologists could still be found arguing that children of divorce developed lower pulse rates which predisposed them to a lifestyle of crime and delinquency.³⁵ In 1984, Lord Tony Pandy, chairman of the National Children's Home, announced that 'broken homes', not television violence, was the key cause of rising delinquency levels.³⁶ And as late as 1989, conservative think tank, Centre for Policy Studies, horrified by the apparent decline of family values, insisted that baby battering and sexual abuse were rife in 'broken homes' and that children from unstable family backgrounds would be the next generation of child abusers.³⁷ The article draws a clear arc of change over time, with the caveat that differences of opinion undoubtedly existed at any given time. These claims, with their conservative emphasis on family and home, were in fact swimming against the tide of a far less gloomy portrait of children of divorce, one that saw hope and salvation for 'emotionally vulnerable' children, if given appropriate affective attention.

Nuanced Emotions

In 1963, the *Guardian* optimistically announced that the 'cult of the broken home' had been broken; divorce and separation scenarios were now understood to have varied effects on youthful personalities.³⁸ Despite children from 'broken homes' having been routinely blamed for all manner of social and moral evils, researchers persistently struggled to

³² *Observer*, 18 June 1961, 23.

³³ *Manchester Guardian*, 3 May 1954, 12.

³⁴ For a broader history, see Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1987]).

³⁵ M.E.J. Wadsworth, 'Delinquency, pulse rates and early emotional deprivation', *British Journal of Criminology*, 3 (1976), 245–56 (also discussed *Sunday Times*, 8 August 1976, 9).

³⁶ *Guardian*, 19 September 1984, 3.

³⁷ Andrea Gledhill, *Who Cares? Children at Risk and Social Services* (London, 1989).

³⁸ *Guardian*, 29 July 1963, 16.

substantiate these presumptions with firm empirical evidence.³⁹ By the 1960s, psychologists were now adding deeper nuance to their approaches to children affected by divorce. As Shapira suggests, delinquents themselves were thought of in more compassionate psychological terms after the Second World War.⁴⁰ Internationally, researchers openly acknowledged that the links between 'broken homes' and delinquency had been grossly exaggerated.⁴¹

Rather than considering emotional disorder as a direct consequence of divorce itself, a new consensus established the period leading up to divorce as the greatest threat to childhood emotional stability. It was not the actual separation, but the tensions and conflicts omnipresent within deteriorating families and precarious domestic life that posed problems. For instance, in 1971, London-based psychiatrist Michael Rutter published a key study which suggested that separation caused neurosis, not delinquency. For Rutter, it was family discord, not the actual separation, which was the root cause of behavioural issues.⁴² In turn, these new ideas suggested that divorce might actually rescue many children from emotional turmoil, and even a life of delinquency, by halting the traumatic process of marital breakdown.⁴³ This was an important turning point. These new perspectives saw potential benefits in divorce for involved youngsters, an escape from the trauma of constant arguing and family strife. Some researchers now asked whether adolescents from 'broken homes' might in fact be better adjusted than those from deteriorating, but still 'unbroken', homes.⁴⁴

Broadly speaking, children from 'broken homes' were no longer portrayed as a homogenous group of budding delinquents. Instead, a wider variety of emotional responses and circumstances to separation and divorce was acknowledged.⁴⁵ In addition, as divorce became commoner across the British social spectrum, the class-based assumptions about delinquency and 'broken homes' unravelled. By the mid-1960s, even key texts on delinquency, such as the influential Scottish sociologist Robert M. MacIver's *The Prevention and Control of Delinquency*, conceded that 'broken

³⁹ L. Edward Wells and Joseph H. Rankin, 'Families and delinquency: A meta-analysis of the impact of broken homes', *Social Problems*, 38 (1991), 71–93.

⁴⁰ Shapira, *The War Inside*, especially chapters 5 and 6.

⁴¹ E.g. James F. Short and F. Ivan Nye, 'Reported behavior as a criterion of deviant behaviour', *Social Problems*, 5 (1957–58), 207–13; Thomas S. Langner, 'Broken homes and mental disorder', *Public Health Reports*, 78 (1963), 921–6.

⁴² Michael Rutter, 'Parent-child separation: Psychological effects on the children', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 12 (1971), 233–60.

⁴³ F.H. Scholow, 'The broken home and juvenile delinquency', *Dicta*, 27 (1950), 239–42.

⁴⁴ E.g. Paul H. Landis, *The Broken Home in Teenage Adjustments: A Study of 4,400 Rural and Urban Young People in Washington*. (Washington DC, 1953); F. Ivan Nye, 'Child adjustment in broken and in unhappy unbroken homes', *Marriage and Family Living*, 19 (1957), 356–61.

⁴⁵ J.T. Landis, 'The trauma of children when parents divorce', *Marriage and Family Living*, 22 (1960), 7–13.

homes' were not consistently damaging, and that many parents continued to provide love and care even when separated. More generally, MacIver was strongly opposed to simplistic sociological theories, a stance which informed his critiques of pre-existing ideas about the causes of delinquency. In addition, he advanced ideas that delinquency should be prevented, rather than simply rehabilitated.⁴⁶

Further research published in the 1970s continued to refute presumptions that youngsters from 'broken homes' were prone to using drugs⁴⁷ or suffering low self-esteem.⁴⁸ This was not simply an academic debate: the issue of children in divorce, and their emotional well-being, began to be widely discussed in newspapers and popular magazines. For instance, newspapers such as the *Sunday Times* and *Guardian* regularly raised issues about fathers abandoning, or not being allowed to visit, their children after divorce, as well as the new phenomenon of 'weekend fathers'.⁴⁹ In 1977, *New Society* sympathetically discussed the problems surrounding custody decisions.⁵⁰ In 1982, the *Listener* pondered over whom to prevent children losing their childhood during parental divorce.⁵¹ Awareness that at least some, if not many, children survived divorce encouraged researchers to consider which emotional circumstances had contributed to their successful navigation.

Ideas about the inter-generational effects of divorce were also rethought. In earlier decades, divorce had often been conceptualised as a vicious cycle with involved children being likely to suffer unsuccessful marriages when they grew up.⁵² Some strands of psychiatric thought insisted that broken homes caused future adulthoods of household instability, career problems and marital disharmony.⁵³ Not only was the immediate emotional well-being of a child seemingly at stake but also that of the future generations of the family unit itself. But, in contrast, a 1976 study entitled *Cycles of Disadvantage*, funded by Department of Health and Social Security, a study of deprivation in modern Britain, concluded that the disadvantageous effects of a broken home on succeeding generations were more complex than previously presumed and that

⁴⁶ Robert M. MacIver, *The Prevention and Control of Delinquency* (New York, 1966), esp. p. 74.

⁴⁷ *The Times*, 14 August 1973, 3.

⁴⁸ For example, Berthold Berg and Robert Kelly, 'The measured self-esteem of children from broken, rejected and accepted families', *Journal of Divorce*, 2 (1979), 363–89.

⁴⁹ For example, *Sunday Times Magazine*, 30 October 1977; *Guardian*, 12 August 1981, 9; *Times*, 13 March 1980, 10.

⁵⁰ See, for example, *New Society*, 19 May 1977, 344.

⁵¹ *Listener*, 18 March 1982, 5–7.

⁵² Christopher J. Wardle, 'Two generations of broken homes in the genesis of conduct and behaviour disorders in childhood', *British Medical Journal*, ii (1961), 349–54.

⁵³ S. Greer and J.C. Gunn, 'Attempted suicides from intact and broken parental homes', *British Medical Journal*, i (1966), 1355–57.

divorce did not necessarily act negatively.⁵⁴ The study continued to inform debates on poverty in Britain in subsequent decades.⁵⁵

British society increasingly recognised that the child of divorce's emotional decline could be averted in the right circumstances. Children from 'broken homes' were no longer causes lost to delinquency but a new terrain upon which disaster could be potentially halted. These changes in thinking about divorce, guided by emotional considerations, by no means created less anxiety about divorce. However, it now seemed possible for children to grow into emotionally stable adults with successful relationships and careers, in the right conditions, helping reduce social stigma. Importantly, both children and parents were seen as requiring guidance if they were to productively navigate their way through the emotional turmoil of divorce. As the remainder of this article argues, this new recognition of the emotional landscape of divorce forced a re-consideration of prescribed behaviour during the processes of separating and divorcing.

The Emotional Divorce

From the 1960s, 'no-fault divorces' allowed marriages to be dissolved even in circumstances where no obvious blame, responsibility or offense could be attributed to either spouse. Roderick Phillips observes that this new legislation was passed in light of new social-scientific approaches to understanding social behaviour that departed from the older moralistic and retributive principles that had once underlain theological conceptions of marriage. These gave way to secular interpretations focused on social, economic and environmental determinants. In practical terms, this encouraged adultery, cruelty and desertion to be understood as symptoms, not causes, of marriage breakdown.⁵⁶

At the same time, psychologists and child experts were placing enormous importance on the relationship between childhood experience and personality development, explaining in part their mounting interest in the impact of divorce on youths. The influence of humanistic psychology, particularly from the 1960s, encouraged researchers to move away from examining psychopathologies and deviant childhood, to also explore 'normal', 'healthy' psychologies. Embedded within humanistic psychology was the idea that humans have innate tendencies to grow and mature positively. Children, even those from the oft-caricaturised 'broken homes' of the poorer classes, were no longer doomed to a life of crime

⁵⁴ Michael Rutter and Nicola Madge, *Cycles of Disadvantage: A Review of Research* (London, 1976).

⁵⁵ John Welshman, 'The cycle of deprivation: myths and misconceptions', *Children and Society*, 22 (2008), 75–85.

⁵⁶ Phillips, *Untying the Knot*, 215–17; Stone, *Road to Divorce*, 404–6.

and pathological behaviour, as opportunities existed to be rescued and grow.⁵⁷

More specifically, as Michael Staub outlines, the turn to the social in psychological research shifted academic focus towards interpersonal dynamics. Social psychologists became more interested in how early familial experiences helped determine the emotional capacities of adults. If insufficient emotional nurturance was now considered important to personality development (and, indeed, the well-being of future generations), then familial environments required close scrutiny and policing.⁵⁸ Chettiar outlines how these ideas, first developed in America, were taken up by a new generation of British psychiatrists and psychologists who focused on social and familial environments, and developing new therapeutic possibilities for intervening in family life.⁵⁹

Shapira also argues that post-war British psychology supported forms of selfhood required of democratic citizens. Democracy required maturity, mental stability and freedom from the forces seen to breed aggression in authoritarian cultures. The family, and its ability to provide emotional care for children, was therefore central to practices such as psychotherapy.⁶⁰ Families were seen as the basis of social democracy and the chief incubator of citizenship and community values.⁶¹ British psychologists saw children as helpless and aggressive. This framing of childhood, explains Shapira, 'created a social place for experts and helped in the remaking of democracy and modern Britain'.⁶²

Given the contemporary emphasis on childhood experience, complemented by broader debates on the 'youth question', the lack of attention paid to children in the 1969 Divorce Reform Act is somewhat surprising. At the time, this omission did not go unnoticed. Quite rapidly, after 1969, discussion moved away from the divorce itself, its legal dimensions and, to some extent, even the parents, emphasising instead the potential emotional effects on affected children. In 1971, divorce court judges and child welfare experts met at a London conference, the first of its kind, to discuss the estimated 60,000 children annually involved in broken marriages. The event aimed to make judges more aware of the views of child welfare experts and ensure that judicial decisions were in the best interests of children.⁶³

⁵⁷ Jessica Grogan, *Encountering America: Humanistic Psychology, Sixties Culture and the Shaping of the Modern Self* (New York, 2013).

⁵⁸ Michael Staub, *Madness is Civilisation: When the Diagnosis was Social, 1948-1980* (Chicago, 2011).

⁵⁹ Chettiar, 'Democratising mental health', 108.

⁶⁰ Shapira, *The War Inside*, 17-18, 200.

⁶¹ Shapira, *War Inside*, 84.

⁶² Shapira, *War Inside*, 238.

⁶³ *The Times*, 1 May 1971, 3.

Even Leo Abse, veteran children's rights campaigner and a chief architect of the 1969 Act, later admitted that conflict over children was a serious downside of the general acceptance of divorce, as the young now risked becoming pawns in bitter parental battles. Up until the 1980s, Abse called for a new child-centred divorce law in which children would remain the children of two parents; in his words, 'the family should not end because a marriage has ended'.⁶⁴ Similarly, looking back reflectively a decade later on the 1969 Act, feminist and *Guardian* columnist, Mary Stott, commented that little had improved in terms of protecting children of divorce. Relatively little discussion had taken place leading up to the 1969 Act about the emotional trauma suffered by children. In Stott's view, 'it is a monstrous misapprehension that little children easily forget. It is useless for the parent in possession to try to excise from the child's mind the memory of its mother's, or its father's loving arms'.⁶⁵

Church groups too, accommodating to the new landscape of marriage and divorce, expressed concern about children. In 1979, inter-church body, Christian Unity, published a report which predicted that divorce risked ruining the lives of 5 million British children over the forthcoming decade. It urged for the appointment of a Minister for the Family to help restore stable family life, but emphasised meeting the emotional needs of children when divorces did inevitably occur.⁶⁶ Similarly, in 1983, an ecumenical working party initiated by Lord Coggan, former Archbishop of Canterbury, and prepared by Barnados, National Children's Home, Catholic Child Welfare Council and Church of England, concluded that 'for far too long the issue has been over whether the re-marriage of divorcees is right or not. . . what we are saying is that the key question, the matter of paramount concern, is how we are caring for the children'.⁶⁷

Many parents, too, also revolted against the long-standing stigma associated with children from 'broken homes'. One reader, writing to the *Guardian* in 1983, angrily announced:

My blood boils every time I see or hear a reference to the 'problem children' who come from 'broken homes'. My children. . . are in fact very likeable, able and self-confident. I see around me children who have far greater behavioural problems who come from 'normal' nuclear families. Of course, there are children from single parent families who have problems, but their problems don't necessarily come simply from their being part of a 'broken family'. One doesn't automatically follow

⁶⁴ *Daily Express*, 12 January 1982, 11.

⁶⁵ *Guardian*, 26 September 1979, 10.

⁶⁶ *Guardian*, 14 December 1979, 14.

⁶⁷ Children's Society, *Children and Divorce: Report of an Ecumenical Working Party on the Effects of Divorce on Children* (London, 1983).

the other. Their main problem is that society treats single parents badly.⁶⁸

Hendrick observes that by the late 1970s, it seemed apparent that the liberalisation of British society could not be undone. Hence, the new 'problem' which emerged was how to manage the matrix of permissiveness.⁶⁹ The aforementioned examples clearly demonstrate that divorce campaigners, parents, feminists and even church groups came to terms with divorce, perhaps reluctantly in some cases, and were now forced to consider issues such as the affected children.

In the 1970s, the ideas of American psychologist, Louise Despert, published since the 1950s but now finding receptive audiences, began to attract considerable academic and public attention in Britain and elsewhere. Despert had published a range of books including *Children of Divorce* (1953) and *The Emotionally Disturbed Child, Then and Now* (1965), both of which had been regularly reprinted and, by the 1970s, were being translated into French.⁷⁰ In the still influential *Children of Divorce*, Despert recalled how she had found, to her surprise, that youths from 'broken homes' did not feature particularly prominently among the 'disturbed children' whom she encountered in clinical practice. She described a 'discrepancy between impression and fact' and called presumptions about broken homes and delinquency to be dismantled. Despert argued that being forced to live in an unhappy family was more likely to cause delinquency than a divorce itself. She developed the idea of the 'emotional divorce', a more abstract period preceding the 'legal divorce', an indefinite time of marriage breakdown that existed until the 'legal divorce' eventually took place (if it ever did).

Despert argued that the 'spirit' of marriage, not only its legal 'form', needed attention, further helping move discussion away from the legalities of divorce towards the emotions. Among Despert's key aims was a desire to 'guide today's children toward more stable marriages in their tomorrow'. In that sense, Despert undoubtedly sought to preserve the sanctity of marriage but was willing to let unhappy marriages end to preserve the emotional well-being of involved children. While many critics saw permissive divorce legislation as a threat to the institution of the family, Despert in fact supported the institution of marriage, even marriage patterns involving individuals marrying twice or more during their lifetimes. Far from signalling the end of the family, enthusiasm for re-marrying indicated that marriage, as an institution, could withstand high divorce

⁶⁸ *Guardian*, 31 May 1983, 18.

⁶⁹ Harry Hendrick, 'Optimism and hope versus anxiety and narcissism: Some thoughts on children's welfare yesterday and today', *History of Education* 36 (2007), 747–68.

⁷⁰ Louise Despert, *Children of Divorce* (Garden City, 1962 [1953]); Louise Despert, *The Emotionally Disturbed Child: Then and Now* (Garden City, 1970 [1965]); Louise Despert, *Enfants du Divorce*. Trans. Dominique Maroger (Paris, 1978).

rates and survive intact. However, for Despert, paying attention to the emotions of involved children was crucial for the 'survival of the family as we know it, and of our way of life'. These children still needed to retain faith in the basic principle of marriage and not let parental divorce ruin their future marriages.⁷¹

Despert's research is notable for framing divorce not just as a legal process but as 'an emotional experience of explosive intensity'. She described grief, shock, fear for the future, feelings of failure, rejection, resentment, frustration, self-pity and rage. In her view, these feelings needed to be expressed and worked through, not ignored. If left buried, the consequences could be severe for both parents and children. 'Thorny as the legal decisions may be', explained Despert, 'parents can cut their way through them toward a wiser agreement if they can first assess the emotions which may arise to confound their best efforts'.⁷²

From the 1970s, Despert's ideas were regularly referred to in expert and popular discussions of divorce.⁷³ Broader recognition of the intricate affective layers of divorce forced a rethinking of emotional practices and behaviour. A new consensus emerged that divorcing parents and their children needed to take ownership, responsibility and control of their emotions, regulate how they expressed their emotions to one another and take steps to ensure that children grew into responsible, emotionally balanced citizens. It was not so much the unhappy marriage that needed saving – this was now accepted as a lost cause – but the child of that marriage. This was to be achieved by inculcating a new form of emotional literacy, involving the expression of appropriate emotional behaviour, during both the emotional and legal divorces.

Moreover, it was no longer only the caricaturised working-class, juvenile delinquent type seen as needing salvation. With divorce rates rising, any child, even one from a reputable middle-class background, could be a potential victim of emotional divorce. This realisation called for more sophisticated interventions that moved beyond simply labelling youngsters as 'delinquent'. A new emphasis emerged on better understanding the complex ways in which divorce operated as an emotional crisis in the lives of children potentially from all classes and how they might be saved from future emotional disturbance likely to manifest in the future not necessarily in crime but also in day-to-day familial life. Personality development was now considered of key importance. This new approach also indicated that families needed support and advice during the traumatic period of change and emotional stress. A child's potential for sound emotional and personal growth needed to be maintained during separation

⁷¹ J. Louise Despert, *Children of Divorce* (New York, 1953), esp. 9–11.

⁷² Despert, 27.

⁷³ Phillips, *Untying the Knot*, ix.

and divorce, opening up new possibilities and needs for expert (usually psychological) intervention.⁷⁴

Emotional Guidance

Post-war British society acknowledged that nuclear family units were not always healthy or desirable. Nonetheless, a strong belief persisted that an ideal, emotionally fulfilling childhood depended on maintaining bonds of love and respect between parents and children, even if parents themselves had shed those bonds. Popular divorce literature presumed that bonds of love between parent(s) and child still existed and needed to be openly expressed.⁷⁵ Of course, the unspoken factor might have been that few people wanted to admit that some parents might not in fact love their children all. While it was considered fairly normal for some spouses to fall out of love, the parental bond was still held to be sacred (except when issues such as abuse were involved). This links to Staub's suggestion that as social psychology increasingly probed into interpersonal dynamics, love began to be upheld as a core emotion that might protect against a range of emotional and psychiatric problems.⁷⁶

Such ideas underpinned new ideas about the emotional dynamics of divorce which stressed that the love presumed to exist between parents and children should be retained and expressed, almost to provide an emotional illusion of a 'normal' home in circumstances of divorce and, potentially, new partners being involved. The emotional dynamics of the family, whereby parents gave love to their child if not each other, needed to be maintained to help children grow into emotionally balanced adult citizens. Pressure was placed on both parents to restrain and regulate their emotions when around their children to achieve this goal. Parents needed to act maturely and responsibly and constantly re-assure their children that they still loved them. In terms of custody, leading psychologists now often recommended that the custodial parent should be the parent with whom the child had the better relationship and emotional connections: the child's 'psychological parent' (not necessarily the mother).⁷⁷ But both parents were urged to carefully consider their interactions to ensure successful emotional growth and provide family dynamics based around ongoing expressions of love.

⁷⁴ Phyllis R. Magrab, 'For the sake of the children: A review of the psychological effects of divorce', *Journal of Divorce*, 1 (1978), 233–45.

⁷⁵ For discussion of parents and child advice guidance, see Angela Davis, *Pre-school Childcare in England, 1939–2010: Theory, Practice and Experience* (Manchester, 2015); Angela Davis, *Modern Motherhood: Women and Family in England c. 1945–2000* (Manchester, 2012), chapter 5.

⁷⁶ Staub, *Madness is Civilisation*, 22–23.

⁷⁷ Joseph Goldstein, Anna Freud and Albert J. Solnit, *Beyond the Best Interests of the Child* (London, 1973).

Love has figured prominently in the history of the family since Lawrence Stone argued that pre-modern Western families were devoid of love, emotional control and self-restraint. Only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, according to Stone, did parents become 'emotionally modern'. In this model, factors such as decreasing infant mortality rates encouraged more loving bonds to form between parents and children.⁷⁸ However, in contrast, Linda Pollock and others have argued that patterns of parental love remained essentially the same over time, and that pre-modern families were certainly capable of loving their children.⁷⁹ Analysis of post-war divorce, and its implications for providing a loving environment, adds a further chronological dimension to this ongoing debate, dealing as it does with managing love in a period marked by an increase in family separation.

Hence, it seemed all the more important to keep the emotional structure of the biological family unit essentially intact, despite separation. This new emotionology sought to preserve the basic, and presumed, emotional make-up of the nuclear family unit rather than, perhaps in many instances, fully come to terms with its breakdown, vulnerability, diversity and problems. It presumed that both mother and father, and indeed children, were caring individuals actually capable of loving one another. It supposed that children having both parents in their lives was naturally healthy, without fully considering that some might well have been better off without a parent who was, say, abusive, neglectful or incapable of providing love. And it retained a moral critique of families not least by insisting that most mothers and fathers were prone to acting in emotionally neglectful and immature ways while separating.

According to the emerging popular divorce literature, worst-case scenarios of unrestrained parental emotions led to children wetting their beds, sucking their thumbs and throwing toys around or older children and adolescents acting rebelliously. Girls reportedly acquired a bossy temperament if they felt the need to become a 'little parent'. These were seen as clear indications of emotional maladjustment. But children who retained a good relationship with both parents, and a positive emotional connection so strong that it remained unchanged despite divorce, were now considered less likely to be emotionally scarred. However, according to contemporary advice, this depended on parents acting lovingly towards their children rather than, for instance, using them for emotional blackmail.⁸⁰ Such an approach still retained the primacy of the nuclear family as a social institution, in the sense that positive parent-child emotional relationships were maintained. The biological family, if not the

⁷⁸ Lawrence Stone, *Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (London, 1977).

⁷⁹ Linda Pollock, *Forgotten Children, Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900* (Cambridge, 1984).

⁸⁰ *Daily Express*, 20 September 1978, 19.

marriage, essentially remained in place. To borrow from Despert, the emotional 'spirit' of the nuclear family was to be preserved despite the dissolution of its legal form.

These new emotional expectations surrounding divorce behaviour were dispersed throughout British society through numerous initiatives, organisations and publications that guided parents and children through the emotional turbulence of divorce. Small independent groups such as People Projects emerged and published leaflets written for both parents and children which offered guidance on how to cope emotionally with divorce. People Projects advised parents to tell their children the truth from the start, to emphasise that although they no longer love each other, this in no way affected their feelings for the children and to ask children's opinion about custody and access arrangements without making them feel obliged to take sides.⁸¹ In the early 1970s, the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child, founded in 1918, renamed itself as the National Council for One Parent Families. This larger, more prominent group insisted that modern family patterns were 'varied' and that children were a low priority for many existing divorce organisations.⁸² Combined, these discussions taking place in public activism, psychological practice and legal discourse offer a snapshot of the spread of ideas of divorce as an emotional problem in post-war Britain, and the casting of affected children as emotionally vulnerable but also potentially resilient.

While considerable scope exists to assess how the new approaches to divorce played out in contexts such as the legal system, psychology clinics and, indeed, within families themselves, the remainder of this article focuses on the emerging popular divorce literature as this provides particular insight into the new emotionology surrounding divorce. Appropriate behaviour while divorcing was communicated within a new literary genre – what might be termed the 'divorce manual' – which offered guidance on emotional control and prescribed new rules for appropriate affective behaviour. From the late 1970s, these books were abundant, their constant publication suggesting high levels of public interest and receptivity. They were primarily written for adults, but many were also published for children too. This new genre was supported by increasingly open discussion of children and divorce on television and in popular magazines.

As historical sources, these books are not without their problems. Inevitably, historians can only access the emotional prescriptions offered to readers. We get little sense of how parents responded to advice. Nor

⁸¹ Discussed in *The Times*, 13 June 1988, 21.

⁸² For example, Leaflet (British Library): Rick Rogers, 'Children, separation and divorce: How schools can help', London, 1983. The organisation's archives are used extensively in Pat Thane and Tanya Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints? Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England* (Oxford, 2012).

do the voices of either parents or children predominate in most of these publications. While it is difficult to draw decisive conclusions about day-to-day practice from popular advice literature, these sources can nonetheless be read to reveal much about the changing emotionologies surrounding divorce and how these were rapidly redrawn in post-war Britain, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. They render visible a significant cultural change in attitudes towards divorce, and the children involved.

Drawing from the new trends in academic research on divorce, popular divorce literature typically urged that unhappy couples should never stay together for the sake of children but instead learn new ways to consider and manage familial emotions while separating and divorcing. They encouraged parents to develop a productive working relationship, negotiate peace and continue functioning as effective parents, if not partners.⁸³ As one 1980 advice manual suggested, 'it is not the actual separation or divorce itself which affects children in the long term but the way in which it is managed. Children need both parents even though after separation or divorce this can no longer be within the marriage. Although being married is ended by divorce, being a parent is not'. The solution was to ensure that children still felt loved to allow them to benefit, emotionally and materially, from now having two places to call home.⁸⁴

Effective emotional communication and expression was an enduring theme in the new divorce literature. As a matter of course, authors insisted that children wanted (and needed) to be consulted and involved in decisions affecting their future lives.⁸⁵ This was evident in Polish-born social worker and academic Yvette Walczak's 1984 book-length study, co-authored with Sheila Burns, of 100 children (or adults who had now grown up) from 67 different families who had divorced, intended primarily for both a popular and academic readership. The authors observed that while some families communicated quite openly, there were others in which 'hardly anyone bothers to say anything or else everyone talks at the same time. Nobody seems interested in listening to anybody but themselves. Poor communication is characterised by an inability to share, to listen and by confusion'. Walczak and Burns believed that most families fell somewhere between these two extremes, a conclusion which in itself helped to carve out a new territory for expert intervention by suggesting that virtually no British families were particularly good at communicating.

Many interviewed children reportedly felt that they had actually benefited from divorce, and now enjoyed a wider knowledge and better understanding of different people and family situations, which was

⁸³ For example, Kathleen Cox and Martin Desforges, *Children and Divorce: A Guide for Adults* (Sheffield, 1980), 5.

⁸⁴ Cox and Desforges, 12.

⁸⁵ McCredie and Horrox, *Voices in the Dark: Children and Divorce* (London, 1985), viii.

perhaps one of the main goals of post-war divorce rhetoric. However, it seemed that this applied only to those children who had been communicated with successfully.⁸⁶ This emphasis on communication was considered essential because children were believed to be capable of detecting signs of disagreements and sensitive to hidden non-verbal messages (e.g. angry looks, lack of physical contact).⁸⁷ Such advice suggests tensions between the expectation that parents would express emotion and the demand that they regulate it, raising as it does interesting questions around emotional authenticity and 'honesty'.

Verbal communication was not the only prescribed form of emotional expression. Anne Hooper's *Divorce and Your Children* (1981) advised parents, while separating, that 'a good way in which to tell something distressing is to hold your children very closely while you talk. Your body warmth will do a lot to reassure them and show them that they are not being abandoned', and 'if your children cries, don't try to make them stop, or tell them "to be brave" Crying is good for them. It is natural expression of their grief. If you teach them to bottle up their feelings and repress grief, they may later find release in an explosion that could be very harmful'. Notably, despite being a divorced parent, Hooper seemed to presume that parents had no understanding of their children's mentalities at all, as if her expert guidance was fundamentally necessary. The basic assumption was that divorcing parents were prone to neglecting their child's material and emotional needs and that the intervention of external authorities was required. More generally, twentieth-century parental advice manuals were renowned for 'mother-blaming'.⁸⁸ Harry Hendrick interprets such trends as evidence of 'neoliberal and narcissistic parenting', one which urged mother to discipline themselves, remedy their apparent parenting deficits and subject themselves to blame when things failed to turn out as planned.⁸⁹ Much popular divorce literature perpetuated similar presumptions. To provide some indication of the reach of her book, Hooper retained her popularity as a popular author and revised her book on children and divorce in 2005.⁹⁰

One striking feature about the new divorce literature was the agency it gave to children themselves. Cunningham observes that post-war research into childhood increasingly incorporated the views and perspectives of children themselves. 'The message of these studies', explains Cunningham 'was that adults should try to visualise the world through

⁸⁶ Yvette Walczak with Sheila Burns, *Divorce: The Child's Point of View* (London, 1984), 43, 108, 112.

⁸⁷ Cox and Desforges, *Children and Divorce*, 7.

⁸⁸ Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky (eds), *'Bad' Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, 1998).

⁸⁹ Hendrick, *Narcissistic Parenting*, 6.

⁹⁰ Anne Hooper, *Getting your Children through Divorce: A Parent's Guide to Separation* (London: Robson, 2005).

the eyes of children, rather than seeing in the child only the adult to be'.⁹¹ Similarly, Jennifer Crane has charted increased interest in the 1970s and 1980s among psychologists, psychiatrists and children's charities in children's experiences from the voice of the children themselves. She demonstrates that in this period, children's experiences and emotions were actively sought out and made public in relation to child protection. As Crane explains, this was a new phenomenon that marked a significant development from paternalism within child welfare. Crane also discusses the introduction of storybooks and films intended to open up direct communication with the child. Children were encouraged to express themselves emotionally within their own inner worlds.⁹²

All of this was similarly reflected in a new literary sub-genre of popular divorce books intended to be read and appreciated by affected children spoken to directly as psychological individuals. The inner world of the child was now seen as something which needed tapped into. As one 1980 book suggested, 'the reality [of separation], unpleasant as it is, is rarely as bad as the creative imagination of an upset child'.⁹³ But it was also a world in which children themselves were encouraged to understand and communicate about. Psychologist and marriage counsellor Ann Mitchell's *When Parents Split Up* (1982) resignedly suggested that most parents failed to talk openly about divorce to their children and hoped that their children would not ask questions. In her book, she decided to answer those questions to children herself.⁹⁴ Bypassing parents to speak directly to the child, such books presumed that parents were incapable of effective emotional communication. In light of this, children were encouraged to find out information themselves and discuss their feelings with others in the child world.

Literature aimed at children actively encouraged communication with other children in similar situations. The children's book *Children Don't Divorce* (1991) took the narrative form of a young girl reciting to readers her experience of parental divorce. Taking on board presumptions that parents failed to effectively communicate, the girl explained that 'one day Dad didn't come home. He'd taken all his clothes and his records'. In consequence, her brother began to bed-wet and once 'went mad' and hit a boy in her class. Only then did the children demand that mother explain the reasons for the divorce. The explanation provided was that the parents 'didn't get on anymore but they still loved me and Peter', a line

⁹¹ Cunningham, *Children and Childhood*, 194.

⁹² Jennifer Crane, *Child Protection in England, 1960-2000: Expertise, Experience and Emotion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 45-46, p. 78.

⁹³ Cox and Desforges, *Children and Divorce*, 7.

⁹⁴ Ann K. Mitchell, *When Parents Split Up: Divorce Explained to Young People* (Midlothian: MacDonald, 1982).

that emphasised the bonds of love still present towards the children in the ideal divorce.

Upon returning to school, the girl spoke to other children and came to realise how common divorce was, a recognition of its growing acceptability in post-war British society and relative decline of stigma. Finally, the parents agreed custody arrangements and the children began a good relationship with both parents, even adjusting to new partners being introduced on both sides. The healthy biological (and emotional) family was maintained, if not the actual marriage. 'Once I thought Peter and me were the only children in the world whose parents were divorced', explained the young narrator, but 'now I know there are lots of children like us. It's OK to love your mum and love your dad. Even if they don't want to live with each other, they are still your parents'. The main message of the book was 'parents can divorce, but not children'.⁹⁵ *Children don't Divorce* clearly reflected, but also reinforced the new emotionology of divorce with its emphasis on ongoing expressions of love, harmonious relations between separating parents, discussions in the playground with other children and the successful navigation of emotional trauma.

Hannah J. Elizabeth, with specific reference to *Grange Hill*, argues that the BBC sought to increase its younger audiences but also produced television shows that presented adolescents as victims of adult incompetence.⁹⁶ Likewise, television programmes such as BBC2's 1988 *Unhappy Families*, shown at 5.05 pm, were deliberately aimed at young audiences. The programme explored the effects of divorce on six children aged between ten and fourteen from a mixture of backgrounds in the Avon area. Anxious not to exploit the children or cause additional trauma within the family, the producers selected youngsters whom they considered able to look back on the experience objectively. 'I used to think it was all my fault', admitted eleven-year old Debbie, who was four when her parents separated. 'I used to think that they were rowing because of me and that if I wasn't there it wouldn't happen'. Another interviewee named Damien recalled that when his father left the marital home, he became aggressive towards his younger brother, 'I used to thump him and cry and break things...he used to make Lego models and I used to stamp on them, kick them about the room...I used to think that everybody else has got a dad and I haven't and I don't deserve one'.⁹⁷

Similarly, a 1985 six-part Thames Television series sought to bring the voices of children out into the open. The series subscribed to the popular

⁹⁵ Rosemary Stones, *Children don't Divorce* (London, 1991).

⁹⁶ Hannah J. Elizabeth, 'Private things affect other people': *Grange Hill's* critique of British sex education policy in the age of AIDS', *Twentieth Century British History* (forthcoming).

⁹⁷ *The Times*, 13 June 1988, 21.

idea about a severe lack of communication between parents and children, presuming that many children were told misleading half-truths about the reasons for separation, if given an explanation at all. It also portrayed such children as typically sad, lonely and depressed. Children explained that they wanted their relationships with both parents to continue in loving, stable ways. They resented being caught up in parental conflict, which could potentially last for years after the divorce. The programme also sought the views of children who took on responsibilities for running the home and caring for younger brothers and sisters or essentially becoming substitute partners for parents. While such situations could positively encourage independence and self-confidence, they brought new responsibilities for children expected to bear the load of their parents' marital breakdown.⁹⁸ Such programmes encouraged children to speak amongst themselves, to communicate their emotional experiences with one another, in the complete absence of parents. Children were encouraged to discuss their inner emotional lives with one another and reach their own conclusions on how they felt.

Conclusion

The post-war period saw rising levels of divorce in Britain (and elsewhere). While having obvious social and legal implications, changing divorce patterns were underpinned by a significant change in how divorce was thought about and managed. The emotional, as well as legal, aspects of divorce were now more fully considered. Emotionally vulnerable, rather than simply delinquent, children emerged as key actors in the separation process. The so-called cult of the broken home itself broke down. If a child's future well-being was to be preserved, new emotional habits needed to be configured and applied. This relied heavily on maintaining the (presumed) emotional dynamics of the biological family, characterised by love being expressed effectively in the three-way interactions between separating parents and children. A new emotionology emerged which prescribed regulating the expression of negative emotions, at least in purview of the child, to give children the chance to grow into responsible, emotionally well-balanced, citizens. Parents no doubt varied in their ability or willingness to adhere to these new standards, but nonetheless, new emotional standards had been laid out. The new consideration given to the 'emotional divorce' forced a reshaping of public discussion of divorce and the ways in which it was managed.

This important topic demands more scholarly attention. In the confines of this article, I have focused on the new ideals standards for parenting child while separating, suggesting that a shift occurred from managing

⁹⁸ McCredie and Horrox, *Voices in the Dark*, 6–8.

'delinquency' to 'emotional vulnerability'. Further research could illuminate how effectively these ideas were turned into practice not only by parents but by social workers, courts and other stakeholders. Oral history research might also bring out the voices of the children and parents more fully, rather than the experts and commentators surrounding them. Similarly, research could be undertaken into how groups such as second-wave feminists responded to these conflicts and disputes about parenthood to offer critical perspectives of the new emotional models of divorce popularised in post-war Britain. Finally, the relation of these changes to class, gender and ethnicity could be more comprehensively explored. Opening up issues of practice and experience would also help bring into play the important question of whether the new emotional dynamics were extended to all children and their families or whether there were significant differences running across lines of class, ethnicity, gender and age.