Simulated Divorced and Remarried Families: An Experiential Teaching Technique

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Helping professionals and educators need to understand the emotional and psychosocial impact of divorce and remarriage on the populations they serve. This article describes and reports the evaluation of an innovative teaching technique designed as a semester-long exercise in which simulated families experience divorce and remarriage. Participants were 23 master's students. Results from quantitative and qualitative data suggest that the technique was successful in sensitizing students to the experiences of post-divorce families.

With the dramatic increase in divorce and remarriage that began in the 1970s, it is important that helping professionals and educators be aware of the impact of these family transitions on the populations they serve. This article describes an innovative response to this need—the use of long-term simulation to help students and professionals understand the variety of emotional and psychosocial difficulties that family members can experience during divorce and remarriage. In addition, with one exception, empirical evaluation of simulation as a technique for teaching about families could not be found in the literature. The semester-length simulation described in this article was evaluated both qualitatively and quantitatively. Given the prevalence of divorce and remarriage in our society, this technique could be useful for teachers of: couple and family therapy, family life education, medicine, mental health, classroom teaching, school counseling, school psychology, school social work, child care, and related professions.

Simulation has been used as a teaching technique in a variety of settings for many years and for many purposes. It has been used to familiarize students with life in mental hospitals (Claiborn & Lemberg, 1974) and in prison (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973). It has been used to train students in consultation (Engin & Miller, 1975), in the diagnosis of individual patients (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1976), and in counseling techniques (Stone, 1975).

Teachers of undergraduate family courses have used simulation as a teaching technique for many years. The early use of simulation for teaching about families is exemplified by Osmond's (1979) use of a simulation game to show family sociology students how the varying of roles and resources influences the interaction between partners. Similarly, using family simulation to change students' *affect*, Weingarten (1979) included participation in a 12-week-long simulated family as part of a course in family theory that was designed to facilitate empathy for families with problems, including two biological-parent families and single-parent families. The 29 students were helping professionals and police officers. At the end of the course, the evaluation included rank ordering all of the course activities. The simulated family experience was judged to be more useful than the seven other course activities: class readings, class discussions, handouts, exercises in class, interviews with the simulated families in class, a term paper, and a group report of the simulated family experience. The students' subjective reports of the family simulation in journals of the experience supported the high ranking of the experience.

An attempt to have family therapy trainees experience developmental changes in families was made by Fulmer (1983). In a one-day workshop format, Fulmer first formed the participants into simulated families. Then, throughout the day, the simulated families proceeded through a series of structured exercises that were designed to help them experience transitions that families experience during the traditional family life cycle (e.g., marriage, birth of first child). A transition through divorce was not included. No evaluation of the workshop was reported.

Simulated families have been used extensively for the clinical training of family therapists (Bardill, 1976; Berg, 1978; Ferber & Mendelsohn, 1969; Jessee & L'Abate, 1981; Lee, 1986; Raasoch & Laqueur, 1979; West, 1984; West, Hosie, & Zarski, 1985). In this setting the main purpose is to give trainees an opportunity to practice and improve their assessment and intervention skills in a safe situation. An additional benefit of the use of simulation is the opportunity for the trainer or the trainee to call a "stop action" to ask questions or make a particular point during the role play. A typical scenario follows: The simulated family members are played by classmates, and the simulated family and/or the trainer designates one family member as the identified patient with a particular problem. The trainer generally gives corrective feedback to the trainee. Frequently, the students who play family members also give feedback to the student therapist about the impact of his/her interventions. In some instances class members who observed the simulation of family therapy share their observations, as well.

In all but two of the reports on the use of simulation in the training of therapists, there was no evaluation of the simulation experience. Jessee and L'Abate (1981) did solicit written qualitative reports from the trainees; all of the reports quoted in their article were positive. West et al. (1985) conducted a study in which they assessed the trainees on three occasions over time. The assessment included testing the *knowledge* of structural-strategic family therapy and the *application* of this knowledge. Their results showed that the students' knowledge of family therapy increased after the simulation, but their skills did not. In addition to the lack of evaluation in most of the above reports, each family simulation, with one exception, lasted for only one session. Raasoch and Laqueur's (1979) simulated families maintained their roles for the entirety of a 2- or 3-day workshop.

In sum, simulated families have been used to enliven family theory, to sensitize students to family difficulties and to traditional family developmental changes, and

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to train family therapists. However, most of the simulations have been short-term and none have dealt with divorce or remarriage. Given the high rates of divorce and remarriage today, the promise of the usefulness of simulated families for learning, and the lack of empirical evaluation, the present study was undertaken.

This study is different from reports in the literature on simulated families in the following ways: (a) The exercise was designed to sensitize students to the emotional and psychosocial experience of normal, well-functioning people like themselves as they proceed through the transitions involved in divorce and remarriage, and (b) the exercise was empirically evaluated. The following main hypothesis was tested: Participants who experience the simulated family will report more emotions that family members feel when they experience divorce and remarriage, than participants who do not experience the simulated family.

Furthermore, it is assumed that playing a particular family role will generate empathy especially for persons in that role. The small number of research participants in each particular family role precluded the possibility of stating a hypothesis for each individual family role. Therefore, all children's roles were aggregated and all adults' roles were aggregated. The following secondary hypothesis was tested: Participants who play children's roles will report more emotions that children feel, than participants who play adults' roles; conversely, participants who play adults' roles will report more emotions that adults feel, than participants who play children's roles.

Method

Participants

Twenty-three second-year master's students in counseling and two second-year master's students in school psychology in a large Midwestern university participated in this study. Ages ranged from 24 to 43 years; the median age was 28. Sixteen of the students were enrolled in a course on families that was offered in the counseling program; they formed the experimental group. Nine counseling students were enrolled in a practicum, in which they worked with individual and family clients; they formed the matched comparison group. For obvious reasons, students could not be randomly assigned to the two courses, precluding the possibility of a study with a true experimental design.

The only three males happened by chance to be in the experimental group. All but two of the students were European American (white); there was one Native American in the experimental group and one African American in the comparison group. Fifteen (60%) of the participants had no experience with divorce or remarriage in their personal lives. Five (20%) of the participants were adult children of divorced parents; three of those with divorced parents had also experienced parental remarriage. None of the participants were children of never-married parents. Four (16%) of the participants were divorced and remarried themselves; two other participants were married to divorced parents. Only two participants had experienced divorce in both their families of origin and their families of procreation.

Instrument

An assessment form was created specifically for this evaluation. At the top of the form were the following directions: "This is not a test. Please list feelings that the various family members may have as they experience divorce and/or recoupling. Do not feel compelled to fill in all of the lines, just name the feelings about which you are confident, based on your present understanding of these families." The directions were followed by a list of family roles in post-divorce families. These were: biological custodial parent, biological noncustodial parent, stepparent, adolescent (step)daughter, adolescent (step)son, daughter (child), and son (child). Under each role were two headings, "Feelings" and "Reasons," followed by half of a page of lined space for the responses. The participants were asked to include the reason for each feeling in order to avoid their simply creating a list of feeling words. At the end of the form were items asking: the participant's sex; if the participant had lived in a never-married, divorced, or remarried family as a child or in a divorced and/or remarried/recoupled family as an adult; and what role he/she played in the simulated family exercise (experimental group post-experience form only). A space for a pseudonym of the participant's choice was included (for purposes of matching the pre- and postdata).

The number of feelings reported for each family role became the participant's score for that role. For each participant a mean of the preintervention scores for all roles and a mean of the postintervention scores for all roles were also computed for each participant. The following criteria were used to decide if a feeling reported by the participant was to be counted: (a) The feeling had to be distinct from other feelings. For example, "angry" and "mad" were counted as one feeling. (b) The feeling could not be a cognition that had no feeling component. For example, "hope," "wishing," and "wondering" were deemed not to be feelings. The two authors independently reviewed the lists and identified words in question. The authors then jointly made decisions based on the criteria.

Procedure

As part of the initial orientation on the first day of class in a 15-week semester, the instruments were distributed by the course instructors to the students. The participants were told that Professor _____ was "doing a study," that participation was voluntary and would not affect their grade, and that the pseudonyms would protect their anonymity. No student refused to participate. Completed instruments were collected by the course instructors. The participants completed the instruments again at the beginning of the next-to-the-last class meeting of the semester.

During the semester the experimental group studied cognitive-behavioral approaches to counseling families. They also had one class each on divorced families, gay families, African American families, Native American families, Mexican American families, and Puerto Rican American families. The comparison group of practicum students counseled individuals, couples, and families during the semester.

A major part of the course on counseling families was their participation in the semester-length simulated family, in which each student role-played the same person for the entire semester. These simulated families met outside of class for one hour each week at a location of each family's choice. During the course of the semester, the families "divorced" and "remarried." The students were required to keep a journal of this experience. The journal included brief summaries of what happened each time the simulated family was together, an analysis of the family dynamics based on one of the family theories they had studied, and anything else they wanted to include. The final entry was to be a summary of the experience. They were graded on attendance at the simulated sessions and the analysis of the family's changes and experience.

The simulated families were formed as follows: At the end of the first day of class the purpose and process of the simulated family exercise was explained. The students were told that if they took the exercise seriously and stayed in their roles, they would probably learn a lot about family members' feelings. They were encouraged to choose a family role that they wanted to understand better, even if it was the opposite sex, and to be themselves in that role as much as possible. Initially, the families consisted of two

biological parents and a child or children. In this class of 16 students, four families were formed. The instructor wrote the family roles (i.e., mother, father, child/adolescent) for four intact families on the blackboard, varying the number of children in the families. The students chose the roles that they wanted, and the "children" were allowed to decide what age they were to be.

During their first meeting as a family group outside of class, the students were directed not to be in their simulated family roles, but to share with each other some information about their own families of origin. This self-disclosing exercise was designed to build group cohesion. The directive for their second meeting was to be in their roles and celebrate a child's birthday; for the third meeting the simulated families celebrated the couple's anniversary. The fourth week the families were told that the oldest or only child did not come home one night. This created enough conflict in the families that they did not need a new agenda for the fifth week. The sixth week they were told to find a reason to divorce. The sixth and seventh week they dissolved the first marriage and tried to agree on custody issues. During class on the eighth week the adults were matched with new partners. For the rest of the semester, the simulated families did not need directives; they had many issues to address that arise as part of living in complex divorced and recoupled families.

Each simulated family also received "counseling" during class meetings once or twice during the semester while the other students observed. During the "counseling sessions" the instructor demonstrated a few basic intervention strategies, but the main purposes of the "counseling" were to teach all of the students to assess family dynamics and to explore the perceptions and feelings of the family members in various family roles. Therefore, during each "counseling session" each family member was asked for her/his ideas and feelings about what was "going on" in the family. After the "counseling session," the simulated family members stepped out of their family roles and, with the rest of the class, discussed the family.

Results

A series of descriptive statistics were calculated on the preintervention data. For the entire sample, the Pearson product-moment correlations between the number of feelings reported for the various family roles (i.e., stepparent, daughter, etc.) ranged from $r = .3$ to $r = .9$. In other words, there was much variability in the number of feelings listed for the many family roles. The higher correlations were between the children's roles.

Additional statistics were calculated in order to identify any systematic differences between the participants in the experimental group and the comparison group, since the participants could not be randomly assigned to the groups. A Chi-square revealed that there were no differences between the groups on the basis of experience with divorce or remarriage in one's personal life. A t test between the mean of the preintervention scores of the men as compared to the women revealed no sex differences either. However, the mean of the preintervention scores (i.e., number of feelings reported) of the experimental group ($\bar{X} = 4.05$) was significantly lower than the mean of the preintervention scores of the comparison group ($\bar{X} = 5.60$), $t(23) = 2.66$, $p < .01$. Examination of the raw data revealed that this difference between the groups in the preintervention data was a result of two comparison-group participants who reported a large number of feelings. They were both children of remarried parents.

Due to this significant difference between groups in the preintervention scores, the main hypothesis was tested in two ways. First, a two-factor repeated measures analysis of variance was computed, using experimental versus comparison group as a between-group factor and the mean of the preintervention scores and the mean of the postintervention scores as the within-group repeated measure factor. The experimental group scores (mean number of feelings reported) increased (preintervention $\bar{X} = 4.0$; postintervention $\bar{X} = 5.5$) and the comparison group scores decreased (preintervention $\bar{X} = 5.6$; postintervention $\bar{X} = 4.1$), $F(1) = 24.3$, $p < .001$.

Second, a t test for paired groups was computed with only the experimental group's scores. The mean of the postintervention scores ($\bar{X} = 5.5$) was significantly higher than the mean of the preintervention scores ($\bar{X} = 4.0$), $t(15) = 4.1$, $p < .001$. Both of these analyses support the main hypothesis, that participants in the experimental group will report more feelings after the simulated family experience.

The qualitative data from the students' journals support these findings.

> ... the significant emotionality that was tied to our roles, even though we all knew it was fabricated. The emotions were real. Our family experienced happiness, anger, resentment, confusion, guilt, and a range of others ... Overall, I would say this exercise really opened my eyes to the issues and emotions faced by stepfamilies.

The secondary hypothesis, that those who played children's roles will increase their scores on the children's items more than those who played adult roles, and vice versa, was tested using only the data from the experimental group. First, a two-factor repeated measures analysis of variance was computed, using "played child's role" versus "played adult's role" as a between-group factor, and the mean of the preintervention scores on the children's items and the mean of the postintervention scores on the children's items as the within-group repeated measure factor. The scores of participants who played children's roles increased (preintervention $\bar{X} = 3.6$; postintervention $\bar{X} = 5.7$) more than the scores of the participants who played adults' roles (preintervention $\bar{X} = 4.5$; postintervention $\bar{X} = 5.0$), $F(1) = 3.8$, $p = .07$. While the results were not statistically significant (only six participants played children's roles), the trend was in the expected direction and worth noting, given the following qualitative data from participants who played children's roles.

> Being the oldest and a son, I felt a great sense of responsibility when the separation took place. I felt like I had to be angry at our dad for what 'he did to our mom.' This anger was extremely real to me. I was caught off-guard when my emotions surfaced about the break-up. After a time I found myself grieving the loss of our family the way it was. I no longer felt angry towards my dad, and instead, genuinely missed him. It felt like a homecoming when he stopped in for a visit late in the semester. We were all glad to see each other but no one really knew what to say.
>
> I also learned how confusing and anxiety-provoking a divorce can be for an 8-year-old child. Even though these were only simulations, in my character I felt a sense of loss when I knew that I wasn't going to get to see my dad, and when my mom decided to get married again.
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> I became more aware of the child's position in the recoupling process. I was especially struck with the feeling of alienation I experienced in this role as my parents went through the process of separating ... I am more aware that there are *separate issues* that need to be addressed for the adults and the children in recoupling families.

The analogous analysis, comparing the responses of those who played adults' versus children's roles on the adult items revealed no differences at all between those playing adults' roles and those playing children's roles. Based upon these analyses, the secondary hypothesis was rejected.

Post hoc exploratory analyses with the experimental group data were also computed. To discover if the intervention was more effective for males or females, a two-factor repeated measures analysis of variance was computed, using male participants versus female participants as a between-group factor, and the mean of the preintervention scores and the mean of the postintervention scores as the within-group repeated measure factor. There was no sex difference.

A series of two-factor repeated measures analyses of variance revealed that the roles played in participants' real lives did not interact significantly with the intervention. That is, those who were children of divorced or remarried parents or who were involved in a divorce or remarriage themselves as adults did not respond to the intervention significantly differently from those who had no experience with divorce or remarriage in their real lives. Although there were no statistically significant differences, results were in the expected direction. Those who had experienced divorce or remarriage in their personal lives reported more feelings in their preintervention scores; therefore, the increase in the number of feelings was smaller for that group.

Discussion

The evaluation of the simulated family exercise lends support to the belief that this teaching technique can sensitize students to family roles that they may not have experienced in their own lives. The findings are consistent with prior studies, but go beyond the present literature. First, the evaluation lends validity to this teaching technique. Second, the study supports the notion that the technique can be used successfully to teach students about the differential emotional and psychosocial impact of divorce and remarriage as it is experienced by family members of varying ages and sexes. Third, the extended time period (i.e., the entire semester) of the simulation may allow for a deeper internalization of the family role and the ramifications of it.

The finding that playing a particular role did not increase the number of feelings reported for that role as compared to other roles can probably be accounted for by the sharing of perceptions and feelings by students in all of the roles. Much of the qualitative data support this interpretation. For instance,

> Role playing has provided an excellent avenue for actually getting to know each other, and this has made the experience more real than it would have been to read about case examples, or simply to role play in class. I mean that by meeting together we have had experience with each other's needs and the personal interplay that that takes on within the family hierarchy. I am adamant about the fact that the life of these model families—I should say I know this to be true of my model family and others I talked to—took on a meaning all their own because we spent time together and had the opportunity to share, squabble, enjoy each other, and negotiate needs. The working on a common task within a splintered family has clarified and objectified certain issues for me.

Therefore, it appears that the use of simulated families can facilitate students' understanding of the experiences of persons in many family roles. The increased understanding and empathy is not limited to the particular role played by the student, even though the trend reported above suggests that the experience of playing a child's role may be more powerful. Replication is needed.

Limitations

The role-play experience of the experimental group was not the only difference in the experience of the two groups of students. The experimental group also briefly studied *conceptual* issues in post-divorce families; however, the emotional experiences of these families were purposely not covered in the didactic part of the course. The qualitative data, however, support the idea that the simulation, not the didactic aspect of the course, was the key factor in the students' abilities to identify feelings. It is not suggested, however, that this experiential technique is, in any way, as powerful or profound as experiencing divorce or remarriage in one's own family.

The results may not be generalizable to students who are not in counseling, or at least not in the helping professions or education. Perhaps students in these professions are more sensitive to people's feelings in general and are primed for the process and/or the content of this exercise.

Future directions

This exercise could be expanded in a variety of ways. It could be altered to make more explicit the ways in which ethnicity, social class, and geographic region can have an impact on the divorce and remarriage experience. For example, students are encouraged to "be themselves' in the simulated family. Later, in the processing of the simulated family experience, students could discuss explicitly how the family dynamics and values of their own families and communities interact with the divorce and remarriage process. Similarly, if there are gay students who are "out" in a class, they could also share some of the considerations that have an impact on the family life of divorced and recoupled gay families. A quote from the qualitative data supports this idea:

> ... the awareness of my cultural bias which includes limited emotional expression, a strong work ethic, and an emphasis on independence. I saw this in the difference between my own and other member's emotional expression, my task orientation and my tendency to "hold my own" while others were more expressive of their feelings.

The exercise could be used with family structures other than post-divorce families. For example, the growing numbers of never-married mothers are likely to marry or couple later with adults who are not the biological fathers of the children. These stepfamilies will have unique dynamics that helping professionals need to understand. In addition, the exercise could be used to help students understand the family dynamics of the variety of family structures in families of ethnic heritage different from their own.

Finally, this technique could be used to help students understand the emotional and psychosocial experiences of families who experience unexpected changes, for example, unemployment, the death of an adolescent, the birth of an abnormal or unwanted child, or the onset of mental illness in a family member. Clearly, the use of simulated families shows the promise of enriching the training of helping professionals and educators. To quote the participants:

> This experience will have a lasting effect on me with respect to my profession. I now realize more than ever the complexity and complications post-divorce families possess.
>
> With all the built-in limitations of the simulation, I believe it gave me a lot of information in a personal experiential way that is helpful to me as a therapist. I believe I will have more empathy and understanding of people who bear the wounds of family disruption and separation.

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