

**FROM ABSENCE TO INVISIBILITY: A CLINICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE LOSS
OF FAMILY PLACE
FOLLOWING EARLY SEPARATION**

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Abstract

This article examines the enduring psychological effects of early separations occurring during sensitive periods of development. It introduces the construct of loss of family place, conceptualized as a psychological process resulting from the failure of the child's symbolic reinscription into the family system following separation. Grounded in an integrative approach articulating attachment theory, family systems perspectives, and psychoanalytic frameworks, the analysis aims to elucidate the underlying mechanisms of this dynamic. It culminates in the proposal of a five-stage developmental model, ranging from the initial separation to the stabilization of a persistent form of relational invisibility. Although well documented in the literature on attachment and family systems, this specific trajectory remains insufficiently theorized.

Keyword:

loss of family place - early separation - symbolic reinscription.

Introduction

Since the landmark contributions of Spitz (1945) and Bowlby (1951) on the consequences of early affective deprivation, the clinical literature has firmly established that separations occurring in the first years of life can significantly undermine the child's psychological development. These foundational works gave rise to a substantial body of research on attachment disorders, the effects of maternal deprivation, and the long-term sequelae of early relational instability. Yet one dimension of this problem has remained largely underexplored: the conditions under which a child's return to the family of origin takes place, and in particular the question of what occurs when that return is not accompanied by any symbolic acknowledgement of the absence that has been lived through.

It is precisely this uncharted theoretical territory that the present article seeks to address. What clinical observation reveals is that a child can return physically to the family and never psychically reclaim the place that should have been his or hers. The child is present, visible, yet does not experience being recognised as occupying a legitimate and stable position within the family group. This

disjunction between physical presence and psychological belonging—between being there and feeling in place—constitutes the central thread of this reflection.

To account for this phenomenon, this article proposes a new theoretical construct: *loss of family place*. This is neither abandonment in the classical sense, nor explicit rejection, nor any identifiable form of neglect. It is rather a silent, gradual psychological process through which the child comes to efface itself from the family's relational economy, not by choice, but because the place that should have been reaffirmed for it has not been. This process takes root at the intersection of an unprocessed early separation and a return that carries no reparative function.

Theoretically, this article draws in an integrative manner on three major intellectual traditions. Attachment theory, as developed by Bowlby (1969/1982) and subsequently by Ainsworth et al. (1978), provides the conceptual tools to understand how early relational discontinuities affect the internal representations the child constructs of itself and others. The systemic family approach, represented notably by Minuchin (1974) and Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973), sheds light on the ways in which a family reorganises itself in the absence of one of its members, and the difficulties this reorganisation can create upon the member's return. Finally, psychoanalytic frameworks, in particular those of Winnicott (1965), Green (1983), and Lacan (1966), allow for the theorisation of the symbolic dimension of recognition and its role in the construction of the subject's sense of existence.

2. Early Separation as a Period of Psychological Vulnerability

2.1 A Decisive Period in the Construction of Attachment

Between the ages of three and five, the child constructs the foundations of its relationship to the world. It is during this period that what Bowlby (1969/1982) termed the *internal working models* become stabilised: the stable mental representations that the child elaborates from repeated experiences with attachment figures. These models are not mere memories; they organise the child's perception and interpretation of future relationships. In other words, they communicate to the child whether others are trustworthy, whether the child itself is worthy of being loved, and whether the relational world is predictable or threatening.

A separation occurring at this stage does not simply interrupt the relationship; it introduces a rupture in the very logic of these models. If the attachment figure disappears without adequate explanation, the child risks internalising an implicit and destabilising idea: that the bond can continue without

it, that its presence is not indispensable. This idea, even if it is never consciously formulated, becomes inscribed in the child's psychological organisation and can durably shape its relational expectations.

2.2 Separation and the Conditions of Trauma

It would be reductive to regard every early separation as necessarily traumatic. The work of Rutter (1981) clearly demonstrated that the effects of a separation depend less on the event itself than on the conditions in which it is embedded: the quality of alternative care, the presence of stable figures, and above all the manner in which those around the child help it to make sense of what is happening. A separation that is supported, explained, and contained within a benevolent family narrative can be integrated without lasting consequences.

When the absence occurs in silence or in vagueness, however, when no adult takes care to speak of it with the child, matters become considerably more problematic. Stern (1985) reminds us that the young child does not yet possess the cognitive capacities necessary to distinguish an external constraint from an affective withdrawal: for the child, the other's absence is readily experienced as a disengagement, even as evidence that it does not deserve to be kept. It is this silent, uncorrected interpretation that constitutes one of the starting points of the process of *loss of family place*.

2.3 Narcissistic Fragility and the Continuity of Being

At the intrapsychic level, an unprocessed early separation can undermine what Freud (1914) called primary narcissism, that is, the fundamental sense of having value for the other. Winnicott (1965) demonstrated with precision that the child constructs its sense of existing through the sustained gaze and investment of its environment. When this gaze turns away without being restored, the child may internalise a sense of non-necessity: the feeling that its existence does not truly matter to others.

This kind of fragility does not always manifest visibly during childhood. It can remain latent, like a wound close to the surface, reactivating only when the conditions of the family's return come either to confirm or to refute the idea the child has formed of its place in the relational world.

3. The Family as a System of Places: What Happens in the Child's Absence

3.1 Place: A Notion That Is Both Structural and Symbolic

In the systemic approach, the family is not simply a grouping of individuals sharing a biological bond. It is an organised system in which each member occupies a position defined simultaneously by generational standing, by the

relational functions the member fulfils, and by the manner in which others perceive and invest in them. Minuchin (1974) showed that this organisation is not static, but is governed by implicit rules that structure exchanges and maintain a certain equilibrium. A child's place within this system is therefore not a natural given; it is the product of a set of repeated relational recognitions.

Bowen (1978) emphasised that individual identity is always forged in interaction with the family system: a child who knows it holds a stable and recognised place within its family possesses a solid identity support. Conversely, a child whose place is ambiguous, unasserted, or subject to unexplained reorganisations may develop an instability in its sense of belonging, with repercussions for the development of its identity.

3.2 The Reorganisation of the System in the Child's Absence

When a child is absent for an extended period, the family system does not remain static. In keeping with the principle of homeostasis described by Minuchin (1974), the family adapts: roles are redistributed, alliances are reconfigured, and other members gradually come to occupy the affective and relational functions that the absent child previously fulfilled. This reorganisation is in itself natural and functional; it allows the group to maintain its coherence and to continue operating.

Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) drew attention to the often silent and implicit character of these adjustments. What they term *invisible loyalties* refers to the body of unformulated commitments that bind family members to one another and orient their behaviour without their awareness. In the case of a prolonged absence, these loyalties reorganise themselves around the new configuration, and the absent child's place gradually becomes vacant, not deliberately, but through the ordinary workings of family equilibria.

3.3 Return and Positional Indeterminacy

When the child returns, it does not necessarily recover the place it held before its departure. The system has reorganised itself during its absence, and its reintegration is not automatic. If no one takes the care to explicitly redefine its place within the group, the child can find itself in a paradoxical situation: physically present, yet relationally peripheral. Bowen (1978) described well how this indeterminacy of relational boundaries can be a source of chronic anxiety, difficult to name and to address precisely because it is not associated with any identifiable traumatic event.

4. The Return as a Decisive Moment: Symbolic Reinscription and Its Failures

4.1 The Return: A Developmental Juncture in Its Own Right

The literature on early separations has long privileged the study of the separation itself, at the expense of the moment of return. Yet the return constitutes, as the analysis proposed here suggests, an important juncture—one as determinative as the initial absence. From the standpoint of attachment theory, the reunion reactivates the child's *internal working models* and puts them to the test (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Without conscious awareness, the child observes and perceives its place through the affective responses and attitudes of those around it; through these perceptions, the child comes to understand whether it was awaited and whether its absence was felt.

When this is the case, the return can serve a reparative function and even reinforce the sense of affective security. When, on the other hand, the child returns to a family environment that has continued to function without it, with no one explicitly marking its return or reaffirming its place, the effects can be paradoxically more destabilising than those of the separation itself.

4.2 Symbolic Reinscription: A Conceptual Clarification

The notion of *symbolic reinscription* designates the set of processes through which a family communicates to the returning child that it is recognised, awaited, and that its place still belongs to it. This reinscription can take many different forms: the manner in which the child is welcomed, the narratives constructed around its absence, the rituals put in place to mark its return, or simply the act of speaking to it about what happened and explaining what has changed during its time away.

Winnicott (1965) argues that the child needs to feel actively retrieved for its development to resume on a secure footing. This idea converges with that of Lacan (1966), according to whom the subject constitutes itself through the symbolic recognition granted by the Other: to be named, addressed, assigned a place in the family's discourse is to accede to a stable psychic existence. The absence of this recognition does not leave the subject indifferent; it creates a symbolic void that tends to organise itself into a durable form of identity uncertainty.

4.3 The Failure of Reinscription and Its Psychological Effects

When the return is not accompanied by this symbolic reinscription, the child undergoes what might be called a *presence without inscription*: it is there, but not truly recognised as being so. Green (1983) described with precision how psychic

experiences that can be neither represented nor verbalised—what he calls *the negative*—do not thereby disappear from psychic life; they remain within it as active absences, organising forces that structure the subject's relationship to the world in a silent and enduring manner.

In this register, Van der Kolk (2005) reminds us that significant trauma is not reducible to spectacularly violent events, but may result from an accumulation of repeated experiences of non-recognition and progressive invisibilisation, experiences whose effects on affective regulation and self-representation can be just as structuring as those of an acute trauma. The non-reparative return belongs to this category: it does not wound abruptly, but confirms and prolongs an already-present experience of not truly mattering.

5. From Absence to Invisibility: A Clinical Elaboration

5.1 Relational Invisibility: A Progressive Construction

Relational invisibility is not a condition that descends upon the child from outside. It is a gradual psychic construction that the child elaborates as an adaptive response to an environment that does not confirm its place. In this sense, it is not the product of a failure of love, but of a failure of recognition: an absence of clear signals indicating to the child that it is seen, awaited, and necessary.

Erikson (1968) showed that identity construction rests in large part on the social and relational confirmation of subjective experience. When this confirmation is repeatedly absent, the child may develop an *identity diffusion*, an inability to experience a stable and coherent sense of who it is and what place it occupies in the world. This diffusion does not necessarily manifest in disruptive behaviour; on the contrary, it may express itself through excessive discretion, a tendency not to draw attention, a minimisation of one's needs and desires.

5.2 The False Self and Strategies of Self-Effacement

Winnicott (1965) describes how a child confronted with an insufficiently responsive environment may develop what he calls a *false self*: a psychic organisation built not on the authentic expression of needs and emotions, but on adaptation to the expectations of those around the child. The false self is a strategy of relational survival: it allows the child to maintain the bond with its attachment figures at the cost of effacing its own subjectivity.

In the context of *loss of family place*, this organisation may take various forms: a tendency to remain inconspicuous so as not to disturb a family equilibrium perceived as fragile, a hyper-adaptation to the implicit expectations of the environment, or an affective withdrawal that, viewed from the outside, may

be mistakenly interpreted as maturity or autonomy. Kohut (1971) reminds us that these defensive organisations, while useful in the short term, impoverish the subject's psychic and relational life over time.

5.3 The Persistence of Invisibility into Adulthood

What clinical observation allows us to see is that these early configurations tend to reproduce themselves well beyond the family context in which they were first constituted. The internal working models described by Bowlby (1969/1982) orient the adult towards relationships in which his or her place remains uncertain or poorly recognised, not because this is a conscious choice, but because it is what the person has come to expect, and what, unknowingly, he or she contributes to reproducing. This repetition compulsion has been extensively documented in the literature on adult attachment and complex relational trauma (Schoré, 2003; Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 2008).

At the neurobiological level, Schoré (2001) demonstrated that early relational experiences leave traces in the affective regulation systems of the right hemisphere, well before language becomes available to represent them. These traces constitute what is referred to as the *implicit memory of attachment*: they orient the adult's relational behaviour without conscious awareness, rendering these patterns particularly resistant to simple insight-based work.

5.4 The Psychological Costs of Invisibility

In this domain, Schoré (2003) underlines that the capacity to recognise, name, and regulate one's own emotions develops through contact with an environment that responds attentively to the child's affective states. When this responsiveness is chronically absent, the child may develop a tendency to inhibit the expression of emotions, in order to avoid the painful experience of not being heard. This inhibition, in turn, reinforces the child's invisibility: the less the child expresses itself, the fewer opportunities others have to see and recognise it.

Lyons-Ruth and Jacobvitz (2008) described in children with disorganised attachment mental states they characterise as *hostile-helpless*: a profound ambivalence between the need for attachment and the conviction that this attachment will be disappointed. In the context of *loss of family place*, this ambivalence frequently manifests as an oscillation between discreet attempts to be recognised and a protective withdrawal, a dynamic that contributes to the perpetuation of the condition of invisibility.

6. *An Integrative Model and Its Clinical Implications*

6.1 *A Five-Stage Model*

The elements developed in the preceding sections allow for the proposal of a processual model of *loss of family place*. This model does not seek to establish a mechanical causal relationship; rather, it aims to account for a dynamic in which multiple factors accumulate and interact to produce, progressively, a durable condition of relational invisibility. Five moments may be identified within this process.

The **first moment** is that of early separation. It occurs at a period when the foundations of the attachment bond and the nascent identity are still in the process of consolidation. Without being necessarily traumatic in itself, it introduces a relational discontinuity that weakens the internal working models and prepares the ground for subsequent difficulties (Bowlby, 1969/1982).

The **second moment** is the reorganisation of the family system in the child's absence. Places are redistributed, alliances reconfigured, and the absent child's position is progressively emptied of its relational substance (Minuchin, 1974; Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973).

The **third moment**, the pivot of the model, is the return without ritualisation or symbolic recognition. This is the moment at which the process truly crystallises: the child is physically back, but no one clearly signals that its place has been reaffirmed, that its absence was felt, that it was awaited. This symbolic silence constitutes a failure of reinscription (Winnicott, 1965; Green, 1983).

The **fourth moment** is the internalisation of an uncertain or illegitimate place. Through repeated experiences of presence without inscription, the child ultimately integrates the implicit idea that it does not truly belong, that it is secondary, even dispensable. This internalisation is not conscious; it is inscribed in the implicit memory of attachment and organises the child's adaptive strategies (Kohut, 1971).

The **fifth and final moment** is the stabilisation of a durable relational invisibility. This pattern becomes a stable mode of functioning that tends to reproduce itself across the various relational contexts of adult life, confirming, each time and without the subject's awareness, the idea that it does not truly have a place (Sroufe, 1997; Schore, 2003).

6.2 *Theoretical Contribution: What This Model Changes*

The theoretical contribution of this work can be grasped at two levels. At the first level, it represents a conceptual reframing: by shifting attention from the

separation to the return, the model identifies a moment that the existing literature has largely overlooked. This reorientation carries direct clinical implications: the physical presence of a return to the family is not sufficient to guarantee developmental continuity. What is determinative is the symbolic quality of that return.

At the second level, the model represents a theoretical extension: by integrating the contributions of attachment theory, the systemic approach, and psychoanalysis, it offers a more comprehensive account of *loss of family place* than any of these frameworks can provide on its own. Each tradition makes a specific contribution: attachment theory illuminates the representational level, the systemic perspective accounts for the structural and group level, and psychoanalysis provides the tools to think through the symbolic and intrapsychic dimension.

6.3 Clinical Implications

From a clinical standpoint, the model draws attention to a form of psychological suffering that rarely presents in an overt manner. Those affected by *loss of family place* do not typically seek consultation for reasons directly connected to their early family history. They present instead with a diffuse sense of not belonging, chronic relational difficulties, or a persistent tendency towards self-effacement. Without a conceptual framework through which to read these presentations, the clinician risks addressing surface symptoms while leaving the underlying psychological processes untouched.

This observation converges with the proposal made by Roussillon (1999), according to whom certain forms of psychological suffering stem from deficits of symbolisation rather than from identified psychopathological structures. Loss of family place is, in this sense, a trans-nosographic phenomenon: it may underlie a wide range of clinical presentations, from narcissistic vulnerability to atypical depression, and from professional instability to chronic relational difficulties.

From a therapeutic standpoint, the work does not consist in correcting a behaviour or modifying a thought, but in offering the subject a space in which his or her subjectivity can be actively recognised. Winnicott (1965) and Kaës (1993) both emphasised the fundamental function of the therapeutic space as a site of re-symbolisation, in which the subject can have the experience of being seen and recognised in a place that is genuinely its own. This work is necessarily long and grounded in the therapeutic relationship itself, far more than in any particular technique employed.

6.4 Limitations and Perspectives

This work presents several limitations that must be clearly acknowledged. It is a theoretical elaboration, grounded in the articulation of existing frameworks and in clinical observation, but not validated by systematic empirical data. The proposed model therefore remains in the domain of the heuristic: it has explanatory and clinical value, but has not yet been subjected to rigorous research protocols.

It is important to acknowledge that the theoretical frameworks drawn upon in this work were largely constructed within Western contexts, and that their transposition to family contexts organised according to different cultural logics—particularly with respect to norms of recognition, belonging, and emotional expression—would merit careful examination. In the Algerian context in particular, this caution is warranted. The Algerian family does not function according to the same logics: each person's place is deeply tied to group belonging, to primordial lineage, and to sibling bonds.

Bourdieu (1972) demonstrated this clearly in his analysis of Kabyle society: honour, place, and belonging structure family relations from within, in ways that are often silent but decisive. This is why an early separation or a loss of place cannot be read there solely as an affective wound. It touches something deeper: the sense of existing in the eyes of one's own people. As Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) remind us, these invisible loyalties weigh heavily in the construction of the subject. Longitudinal qualitative studies, narrative analyses, and clinical research grounded in the Algerian context would therefore constitute the most necessary extensions of this work.

7. CONCLUSION

This article has sought to name and theorise a clinical phenomenon that remains, in the existing literature, largely unnamed and insufficiently conceptualised: that of a child who returns to its family after an early separation and who, despite physical presence, does not recover the psychological place that should have been its own. The concept of *loss of family place* designates this process and proposes an integrative model articulating its relational, systemic, and symbolic dimensions.

One of the central ideas of this work is that the moment of return is as determinative as the separation itself. This shift in perspective opens new possibilities for clinical practice: it invites us not to regard the physical reintegration of a child into its family as a guarantee of psychological continuity,

and to attend actively to the symbolic conditions under which this return takes place.

From a therapeutic standpoint, clinical work with these subjects cannot be reduced to symptomatic treatment. It requires the construction of a narrative around the history of the separation and the return, the active recognition of the suffering linked to self-effacement, and the rebuilding of a symbolic position that the subject has often never been able to inhabit in any stabilised form. It is this work of re-symbolisation, conducted within the therapeutic space, that offers the subject the possibility of no longer being invisible to itself.

To think the *loss of family place* is, ultimately, to interrogate the fundamental conditions of subjective inscription within primary bonds: not the failure of love, but the failure of an elementary symbolic gesture, that by which a family communicates to one of its own that they have a place, that this place belongs to them, and that their absence has been felt.

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