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Parental addiction, conflicts and marital disruption: perception of adult children of divorced parents¹

Abstract

Divorce is a stressful event often combined with spouse conflict which significantly affects the way children experience the consequences of family reorganization. Various factors contribute to the impact of divorce on child development, one of the most decisive being the quality of parental relationship prior to, during and after divorce.

The article addresses one main question how spouses' conflict during the process of divorce is intertwined with a child's experience.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 adult children (7 men and 13 women) from divorced families. Adults ranged in age 21 to 42 years old. Five to twenty years passed from their parents' divorce.

The results show that in the cases of violent parents' relationships or family relationships with addiction prior to divorce, the participants experienced relief when the nuclear family dissolved; however, in most cases conflict between parents persisted after divorce, the child being torn between both parents. When the conflict between the parents is combined with various addictions, the consequences for the child are even more devastating. In most cases, children were left to themselves.

The findings of this study can therefore contribute to creating various forms of educational, consulting, or therapeutic help.

Keywords: Divorce, addiction, conflict, parenthood, consequences.

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1. Introduction

Research and statistics show a high number of divorces in the European Union in last decades. The number of spouses who want to divorce is either on the rise or staying high (Eurostat 2020). The number of couples who separate is certainly higher if we take into consideration that those who are not married or registered in a civil union are not included in the official statistical analyses.

Various addictions are also on the rise, which is a big problem in modern society. The consequences of addiction are multifaceted and long-term, and affect various aspects of an individual's life, especially in cases where parental addiction is one of the causes of divorce.

Children often experience many negative consequences of their parents' divorce, as shown by numerous studies examining various aspects of divorce (Ahrons 2007, pp. 53–60, Cummings, Davies 2010, pp. 53–154, Jackson, Rogers, Sartor 2016, pp. 451–460). We were interested in addiction, distress, and conflict faced by divorced parents' children, so we focused on these children's perception of parental conflict during the process of divorce.

2. Parental conflict in the process of divorce

2.1. Children trapped in parental conflict

Numerous studies confirm that parental conflict affects child experience, perception, emotions, and development in general (Baker, Chambers 2011; pp. 56–75, Cummings, Davies 2010, pp. 53–78, Jackson, Rogers, Sartor 2016, pp. 451–458). The distinction between destructive and constructive conflict is crucial (Cummings, Davies 2010, pp. 5–22). A constructive way of solving conflict is a positive model for a child who, through observing parents, learns the skills necessary for successful dealing with conflict. Parents who are in conflict teach their children how they should communicate with others whom they are in a relationship with.

Prior to, during and after divorce, spouses experience tension in their relationship, often using destructive patterns of conflict and problem solving. Among these are behaviours where parents, knowingly or not, include the child in their interpersonal relationship: the child either becomes the one who 'keeps' them together, or parents use the child as a means for their infighting, the child being trapped between them. Sometimes the child takes on the role of a culprit

so that parents release, solve and regulate their interpersonal tensions through him/her with the so called triangulation (Ganc, 2015, p. 72).

Covert conflict, marked by insulting the ex-spouse in front of the child, or involving the child in parental conflict, causes distress in the child (Visser 2016, pp. 17–18), which can be traumatic and long-lasting. According to some data (Ahrons 2007, pp. 58–60), even 60% of couples are thought to experience destructive anger and interpersonal conflict in the years following divorce; in 20–25% of couples, intense conflict can be seen as long as 6 years after divorce.

Children's relationship with their parents is correlated with the level of conflict. With a high level of conflict, children are close with one or neither of parents; with a low level of conflict, they have close relationships with both parents (Amato 2005, p. 84) regardless if conflict is overt or covert. In many cases, all family members are included in conflict.

In families where alcoholism in one of the parents is associated with conflict and violence, the consequences for the child are always traumatic. Parental intoxication and their own problems (Rogmno, Torvik, Ildstad, Tams 2013) cause irreparable harm to children, as parents are often unable to take care of the child's needs.

3. Negative effects of divorce and conflict with children

Negative effects of divorce are complex and linked with various circumstances and the so called protective factors, such as marital quality, parental conflict and social support network. Generally, research shows that in comparison to their peers, children from divorced families experience various changes in their emotional and social lives (Amato 2005, pp. 76–78, Kushner 2009, pp. 470–515). Divorce triggers several negative emotions which children either express or internalize; internalization frequently causing issues with their physical health. The consequences of divorce can be noticed in mental health as well; children from divorced families generally have more emotional issues, including depression, anxiety, aggression and delinquency, which often continue in their adult lives (Kushner 2009, pp. 470–515, Wallerstein, Lewis, Blakeslee, 2000).

The children of divorcees have twice as many problems in social and intimate relationships. Social network often changes after divorce, thus increasing the feelings of loneliness and being uncared for in children. Children from divorced families are often deprived of educative and socio-economic incentives and achievements, in childhood as well as later, as adults. Change has been noticed in their adult family and intimate lives, since experiences in the family of or-

igin contribute to one's choice of a spouse, to the formation of one's concepts about intimate life and the way of connecting between two people, and are a risk factor for divorce (McLanahan, Tach, Schneider 2013, pp. 405–425). Studies that control for familial history of alcoholism, however, still show robust associations between child adversity and adult risk for alcohol use disorders and specifically, associations between parental divorce and lifetime alcohol dependence (Thompson, Alonzo, Hasin 2013, pp. 296–306).

The level of conflict before and after divorce is one of the crucial factors contributing to the child's disturbances and difficulties beginning in the time when family members still live together as well as after the dissolution of the nuclear family. Various studies (Amato 2005, p. 79; Visser 2016, pp. 87–111) point out that children who are exposed to parental conflict develop emotional and behavioural issues more frequently than other children.

Conflict can involve negative reactions to ex-spouse and can include verbal and physical violence; this causes anger, poor emotional and cognitive functioning, the risk of fear, shyness, worrying, aggression, and hyperactivity in children (Lebow, Newcomb Rekart 2007, pp. 79–80). Specific dimensions of conflict, such as physically aggressive or child-directed conflict, are especially harmful to child adaptation, since they cause strong feelings of guilt which the child cannot successfully regulate (Pedro-Carroll 2010, pp. 47–70). The risk for these dimensions of conflict increases when one or both parents are addicted.

Children perceive conflict as if they are responsible for it, feeling as if their behaviour caused unbearable atmosphere between their parents which they were not able to change, as well as not being able to prevent divorce. These feelings deepen their sadness, depression and anger (Kushner 2009, pp. 300–306). The ways in which conflicts affect the child may include all or some of the following: fear and depression, hiding their feelings, the loss of focus, failure at school or drop in grades, drugs and alcohol, and dangerous relationships.

Intense, destructive, lingering and unsolved conflict creates additional stress for children, contributing to long-lasting and wide-ranging consequences of divorce for child development. In cases where parental conflict decreases with divorce, children can adapt faster than in cases where conflict continues or even escalates after divorce (Amato 2005, p. 84). Divorce can therefore improve children's well-being where parents' interpersonal relationship was conflicting and violent, and where mentioned circumstances end with the re-organization of the family.

4. Quality parenthood vs. Conflict

Quality relationship between parents and children is an important protective factor for children. In cases where the relationship between ex-spouses is based on quality parenthood, such relationship positively influences child development. Parents' attitude to children therefore has a major impact on how these will adapt to the new situation. Consequently, the work with parents prior to, during and after divorce – in regard to quality parenthood where the so called positive parenthood plays a major role – is extremely important. Positive parenthood is supported by empirical research and proven to reduce the harmful effects of parental conflict on children (Amato 2015, pp. 83–84) and negative consequences for child development. In cases where parents are connected, supporting each other in their parental roles and solving conflict and disagreement with negotiation and compromise instead of hostility, children have fewer behaviour problems. The inclusion of a parent in a child's life after divorce is not necessarily related with the level of conflict between ex-spouses; however, positive parenthood and cooperation between parents eases their adaptation after divorce (Amato 2015, p. 83).

During the stressful period of divorce parents often neglect their children's needs, especially when the conflict is so severe that communication related to the contacts with a child is no longer possible. When developing positive parenting, however, ex-spouses are able to set appropriate boundaries between spouse and parental sub-systems and develop their parental roles for the child's benefit (Amato 2015, p. 84). The child will develop well if they find an appropriate balance between cooperation and healthy boundaries within and between their respective homes. Various forms of help and support in social environment can contribute to this process.

5. Educative support, consultancy and psychotherapeutic help for parents and children

5.1. Helping parents

Help for parents consists of different forms of empowerment, psychoeducation and psychotherapy, using various methods to teach parents how to manage problems and situations with their children. In most cases these are short, 2- to 4-hour programmes, including techniques to reduce spouse conflict, enhance parenting skills, informing parents of the negative effects of conflict for their

children, informing about the sources of help for children, and developing constructive conflict-solving. The programmes also include topics covering personal adaptation to divorce (Pedro-Carroll 2010, pp. 211–220).

One of the structured models is psychoeducation, which aims at normalizing children's perception of their lives and developing positive parenting. Psychotherapy is a crucial form of help, addressing and regulating emotional states, therefore contributing to psychological well-being and development of parenting competences.

5.2. Helping children

Interventions used with children often aim at creating an environment in which children can share their experiences e.g. support groups for children in a safe environment, such as school. In programmes of various lengths, children get emotional support and develop skills which help them to better cope with change brought about by divorce. By means of children-friendly techniques such as games, specific cartoon topics, observation of images, etc., they learn how to relax, regulate and express emotions, solve conflicts and communicate effectively. School prevention programmes are often the only source of appropriate information and explanation of misconceptions, and it has been proven that they contribute to easier adaptation with primary school children, positively influencing their social and academic changes (Pedro-Carroll 2010, pp. 211–215). Consulting and educative help at school can reach a lot of children at the same time and is given by individuals whom children know. During as well as after divorce, specific psychopathology manifests in some children (Lebow, Newcomb Rekart 2007, p. 87), demanding in-depth treatment by appropriately trained professionals.

6. The method

6.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 20 adult children of divorcees, 7 men and 13 women, 21 to 42 years old. Five to 20 years passed from their parents' divorce. After divorce, all participants continued living with their mothers. After the process of divorce had been over, 8 participants had regular or occasional contacts with their fathers, 12 participants had no contact with their fathers, in 4 cases they desired contacts but these were not an option, in 6 cases children had no wish to see their fathers because of their violence or inappropriate behaviour prior

to divorce (e.g. alcohol), in 2 cases their response was neutral; these two participants reported that they did not care for contacts with their fathers.

We were interested in their perception of parental divorce; specifically, we focused on parental conflict prior to, during and after divorce.

6.2. Obtaining data

In order to obtain the insight into the participants' experience, we used semi-structured interview. The questions which followed general demographic questions were based on the following starting points:

- How do you experience your parents' divorce?
- Do you remember your parents' conflicts? How did you experience these and what did you do?
- What was the period prior to, during and after divorce like as far as conflict is concerned?

Other questions were added during the interviews.

6.3. Procedure

We found our participants by a written invitation at the centre for helping families; before interviews were conducted, we had appropriately informed the participants with the purpose of the study, the processing of their personal data (codes were used) and the ethical aspect of our research. The study was approved by the National Medical Ethics Committee in Ljubljana, Slovenia. Prior to recording interviews we had obtained their written consent; after data processing, recordings were destroyed.

6.4. Analysis

We processed acquired data according to the principles of content analysis, a qualitative research method. Recorded interviews were transcribed. They were independently analysed by both researchers, who read the text with necessary sensitivity, not mechanically, compartmentalized it to code units and independently attributed concepts to these units (coding). During this process, the authors followed research questions. During initial coding, the authors discussed problems, dilemmas, and unsolved issues.

Further on, the researchers compared coded texts, chunking those with the same code, and coordinated coding with the rest. Furthermore, related, similar codes with related meanings were chunked in wider categories which bear the

meaning of all chunked codes. The researchers were led by the following questions: Can I relate certain codes together under a more general code? Can I organise codes sequentially (for example, does code A happen before code B)? Can I identify any causal relationships (does code A cause code B)? (Miles, Huberman, Saldana 2014, pp. 69–93). This was followed by analysing categories, i.e. identifying their characteristics, interrelations, and peculiarities. At the end of data processing, the authors critically reflected on their own role within the data collection process, and demonstrated their awareness of this, and how it may have impacted their findings, to the reader. They also combined the analysis with findings from different data sources.

7. Results and discussion

The participants had identified parental conflict already prior to divorce; conflicts were either related to everyday situations such as parents being absent, not fulfilling family obligations, not taking responsibility, or to specific issues such as alcohol, infidelity, violence, and squandering money.

7.1. The period prior to divorce

The participants said that they did not know the reasons of parental conflict.

“As long as I can remember, there were conflicts. They quarrelled every single day. It was insufferable. I don’t even know what the reason was; they yelled, hurling at each other every conceivable insult.”

“A few years before they separated, the atmosphere was gloomy and turbulent all the time. One lives in ongoing tension and fear, impatiently waiting for something to happen. To end all this. In one way or another.”

A question asked by numerous researchers is whether it is better for a child to live with lingering parental conflict or in a dissolved post-divorce family.

Some authors point out that the consequences of long-lasting parental conflict affect the child’s development in more negative ways than divorce itself (Amato, Hohmann-Marriott 2007, pp. 622–625, Ganc 2015, p. 71). However, the consequences of divorce depend on the way of carrying out the separation as well as on the child’s age.

Some participants witnessed intense conflicts related to violence and alcohol addiction. Amato and Previti (2003) found that the partner’s alcohol or drug use was the third most common reason for divorce in women, but only the eighth most common in men.

“Father was coming home drunk. Every evening I was afraid what he would be like and what would happen then; if he was going to make a racket, demolish things around the house, or if they would fight physically.”

“I grew up in violence and alcohol; my father and granddad. My granny drank, she tried to commit suicide; my mother tried to kill herself, too. Conflicts were horrendous, they tried to kill each other.”

“I heard yelling and quarrelling, and how things were smashed. And the smell of alcohol. I did not know details though. In such moments I retreated to my room and wrote in my diary.”

“I witnessed violence, my father beating my mother, I watched this and tried to help. No wonder I haven’t left it behind till this day.” In families where violence prevails, children watch, horrified, what is happening between parents and with other family members; and they feel that they are either to blame for conflict or that they triggered it with their behaviour. A child is especially hurt when he or she tries to protect, physically and psychologically, one of the parents in violent encounters (Ganc 2015, p. 70). In such cases, their childhood is marked by trauma.

In some cases, ‘loud’ conflicts began some time before divorce, while the time before conflict was experienced as *“unremarkable; normal; quiet; without great upheavals.”* Some children perceived tension in the air while parents were not communicating. *“The silence was killing me,”* a woman said, adding that *“outbreaks of conflict and rage were very rare.”*

“Until they divorced, I had no clue what exactly was going on. Mom cried sometimes; I thought that was because of me.”

Many children report having had no idea that their parents were considering divorce prior to their actual separation.

“My father was absent a lot; some weeks passed when I didn’t see him at all. We were together on Sunday and during holidays. They didn’t quarrel, there was never any wrangling, which made it all the more shocking.”

Many divorces are preceded by relatively little overt conflict between parents.

A participant said, *“Just prior to divorce they blamed each other, quarrelled all the time. Mother cried a lot. She and father threw insults at each other, swearing at each other, another woman was mentioned frequently. As a child, however, you didn’t know that father did something nasty. On one hand, he was so miserable; on the other hand, mother’s tears moved me, and I didn’t know how to comfort her.”*

Children become comforters in the family, encouraging and monitoring the parent for whom they feel is wronged or in an inferior position (Ganc, 2015, pp. 71–73). Parents should think about their roles and needs, they should learn how to take care of themselves and their emotional contents, if they want to

truly see their child's pain when he/she is torn between the two most significant persons in his/her life. Boundaries in marriage are a significant element of marital quality.

7.2. Experiencing the period after divorce

The participants described their life after divorce as less conflicting: due to separation, the level of conflict situations as well as violence dropped.

"There was no more conflict, it was more peaceful, but it was a new life." After divorce, the quantity of conflict often decreases; in these cases, the change in family structure brings positive consequences (Amato 2010, pp. 655–661).

The following statements show how children perceived their being trapped between both parents.

"This was the most horrible period of my life. My parents wanted me to take sides all the time. Mother cried, father spoke badly about her."

"When I told mother I wanted to visit father, she scolded me. Now I have normal relationship with him. At that time, however, I didn't know whom to believe. When I was younger, I believed all mother's lies about him."

"When they separated I had the role of a messenger. Through me, mother and father wrote to and provoked each other."

"They manipulate you. You simply believe them. And you are scared. If you take mother's side, father beats you up; if you take father's side, mother doesn't speak to you."

A child's dilemma about the loyalty to one of the parents causes additional distress (Pedro-Carroll 2010, pp. 47–63). A child needs both parents and all covert or overt demands that he/she has to choose between can cause a traumatic experience. Every child in a divorced family deep down hopes that parents with their will never force them to make this impossible choice; sometimes parents, consciously or subconsciously, try to gain their child's support and loyalty (Ganc 2015, pp. 72–73).

The following statements show how children perceived parents' taking care of them after divorce:

"After divorce things calmed down; no more yelling, shouting, beating. It was better. Physically."

"Nobody explained why they had divorced. Other problems arose, because I was not allowed to visit father. You think it's your fault. I blame my mother that I was left to myself."

"You don't know what you did wrong. You are alone, not knowing if you really tried hard enough to do everything so that they could stay together. You feel so helpless. Only later you understand what it was all about; when you are a child, you don't know."

Children often feel responsible for the dissolution of parents' relationships; they bear a heavy burden of their perception that they somehow contributed to divorce, and they experience great pain because their efforts to keep the family together failed.

A child's feelings of guilt are even more intense when they are the cause for parents' quarrels (Baker, Chambers 2011, pp. 57–72) after divorce is formally over.

As children, participants often felt trapped in conflict persisting after divorce.

“Only after divorce, father showed his true colours. When they quarrelled about me. I was so tormented by these conflicts. I felt guilty.” Covert conflict, characterized by speaking badly about the ex-spouse to the child, or including the child in parental conflict, causes distress in the child (Acquah, Sellers, Stock, Harold 2017, p. 26) which can be traumatic and long-lasting.

When parents use a child to convey information and emotional contents, this burden creates additional pain and fear how the message will be understood and reacted to.

It is therefore an especially heavy and harmful burden when a child feels trapped between both parents, when he/she is forced to choose between them, or becomes the messenger of critical and emotionally charged message between parents.

7.3. Searching for help

The following statements illustrate that our participants did not have appropriate support and help to cope with divorce:

“You are alone, you don't know what exactly is going on. I kept a diary, before as well as after divorce. This was how I helped myself.”

“I was ashamed. I told nobody. When I had to fill forms about my family at school I was terribly distressed.”

“Mom and I grew even closer. She was so sad. Therefore I was a good, strong girl and had excellent marks so that I didn't cause her more suffering.”

“For a long time – several years – I had psychological issues, nightmares and attacks of fear. Mother was taking me to doctors, but only gradually – it took years – it got a bit better. Even today I am not OK yet.”

A male participant who sought for help as an adult said, *“You live in violence, alcohol and daily threats with suicide, you learn certain patterns; I became violent in my relationships and only then I searched for help. It was not because of divorce but because of violence preceding it.”*

Some authors (Bacon, McKenzie 2004, pp. 86–88) claim that parental conflict is the best predictor of maladjustment in a child's later life.

Children experience distress, various emotions – often emotionally taking care of one of the parents – and are left to themselves; they also experience pronounced symptoms in need of professional treatment. Findings show that children who were given plenty of support from their parents, grandparents, relatives, teachers, counsellors and other professionals reported fewer adaptation problems than children who did not receive such help (Bacon, McKenzie 2004, pp. 89–95). Appropriate social support for children and their parents prevents negative impact of divorce. Psychoeducation often lists the normalization of experience among its goals, since children still feel stigmatized in their environment.

7.4. Significance ascribed to divorce

Nearly all participants experienced positive change brought about by divorce, in spite of months and years of adapting to a new life.

“After divorce it was quieter; no more violence.”

“Looking back I can see it was the most positive thing my mother could do; I can't imagine living in such conflict any longer. At the time I suffered, of course, and nobody helped. I would prefer, however, to have a 'normal' family.”

“You grow up quickly, become independent, you take care of your brothers so that mother is not too overwhelmed since parents kept sued each other for a long time. You become a kind of a surrogate mother. And of course, you don't have a father anymore.”

A female participant from a non-conflicting family regretted that her parents had not sought help to solve their problems. *“They divorced too quickly, they could save their marriage since their situation wasn't all that bad; I don't know though how many therapists and counsellors were available back then. I would like it to turn out differently, although I am quite fine today and don't blame their divorce for my problems.”*

Our participants perceive divorce as an important breaking point when they were forced to quickly become independent and responsible; the dissolution of a violent family is perceived as a positive parental decision; and the life before and after divorce is seen as a period when they were left to themselves. Divorce is a positive solution in case of intense parental conflict, better than persisting in a destructive marriage; the quality of parental relationship of one or both parents, however, continues to be important after divorce (Ganc 2015, p. 70).

There is clearly a lack of accessible educative, counselling and other forms of help for families prior to, during and after divorce. Our findings are consistent

with other authors (Ganc 2015, p. 55) emphasizing the importance of development of such programmes.

8. The limitations of the study

The study included a small sample of individuals who were willing to take part and we used a qualitative method of data gathering; therefore, the results are only valid for this sample and cannot be generalized. The participants perceived themselves as having dealt with or dealing with the effects of divorce; it would be interesting to include individuals with whom less time has passed since divorce. The study is also limited by asking questions: there is a dilemma if we would have obtained different answers if questions or the person asking questions had been different.

9. Conclusion

Divorce is a positive event in case of conflicting relationships if these change after divorce, especially where parents cannot offer quality parenthood, involving the child in their conflicting relationship. Therapeutic, counselling and educative work can be a suitable support for developing skills necessary for constructive conflict solving and establishing appropriate, quality parenthood, as well as significant support for children who have to deal with their parents' divorce.

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