

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING IN FAMILY TRANSITIONS IN THE LIGHT OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Abstract

The article¹ focuses on transformative learning during significant family life transitions demanding from family members to learn new roles, habits, operating modes, relating, and feeling. Transformative learning explains how one changes/learns by transforming the meaning of one's experiences. In many cases, these experiences are painful and stressful for the learner, and the existing skills, knowledge and ways of coping are no longer sufficient. In one's life cycle, either predictable or unpredictable events present the opportunities for transitional and transformative learning, where the transformation of the individual, his skills, knowledge, habits, identity, and patterns takes place. Many significant events occur within the nuclear family, in the creation of a new family, the so-called family of procreation, or in the reorganization of the family such as the loss of a family member. Given the increasing number of divorces in Europe we have examined divorce as an extremely stressful trial for all family members, which brings change in the family structure charged with very strong emotions; considering the religious dimensions of an individual's experience we have also presented opportunities for transformative, transitional learning from the perspective of religious education.

Key words: *transformative learning, transitional learning, religious education, divorce.*

Introduction

Learning² is the most intensive in a family which is subjected to major changes in the modern world³. The common scenarios of life events in the

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² Learning is understood as the combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses) experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person. P. Jarvis, *Towards a Comprehensive Theory of Human Learning*, Routledge, London, New York, 2006, p. 134.

³ Cf. N. Ličen, *Triptih o družinskem življenju*, Filozofska fakulteta, Ljubljana, 2017.

past, when, for example, marriage was followed by childbirth and its timing was quite predictable are gone. Moreover, there is a growing number of various forms of coexistence, while some practices are becoming common phenomena in our culture. Individuals, families and spouses face new challenges; they need to learn new patterns of integration, functioning, habits, values, social roles, etc. It is not enough, however, to merely adopt the existing forms: they need to learn how to live in new relationships. In the last few decades, divorce rates in Europe have increased (bringing about a higher number of reorganized families), so we shall focus on learning during this particular life event.

1. Challenges During Transition in a Family

In its lifetime, each family faces various transitions during which the family members learn intensely. Family transitions are explored in detail by the family life cycle theory, which focuses on family experiences in transition as they progress through phases of development such as a family with infant children, toddler, early childhood, latency, adolescent, emerging adult, and mid and later periods. The authors⁴ describe a transition within family life cycle theory as a shorter time period, as a chronological movement from one direction to another, which is marked by a period of rapid, often dramatic change. Transitions are generally known and recognizable and may require a change in roles, rules and relationships. During each transition, which can be either predictable or unpredictable, the family system reorganizes – adapting the operating rules, roles, responsibilities, communications processes and boundaries in order to meet the changing developmental needs of individual members and the family as a whole, and to adapt to the ever-changing community and larger sociocultural systems. Transitions have been conceptualised as periods of elevated risk for individuals within a family system in that they require reorganisation of core family structures and involve changes in normative stressors further to any concurrent non-normative stressors.⁵ Intensive learning occurs.

More recently, reflecting modern trends in Western European families, family researchers have added stages representing separation/divorce and partnership.⁶

⁴ Cf. M. McGoldrick, B. Carter, N. Garcia-Preto, *The Expanding Family Life Cycle: Individual, Family, and Social Perspectives*, Pearsons, Cambridge, 2015.

⁵ Cf. M. P. Levine, L. Smolak. Adolescent transitions and the development of eating problems, in: *The Developmental Psychopathology of Eating Disorders: Implications for Research, Prevention, and Treatment*, ed. Linda Smolak et al., New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996, p. 207-233.

⁶ Cf. R. Dallos, A. Vetere, *Systemic Therapy and Attachment Narratives: Applications in a range of clinical settings*, Routledge, London, 2009.

2. Transitional learning in families

Transitional learning appears when individuals are faced with predictable or unpredictable changes in the dynamics between their life course and the transforming context. Transitional learning also takes place when they are confronted with the necessity to (learn to) anticipate, handle and reorganise these changing conditions. This situation triggers a continuous process of constructing meaning, making choices, taking up responsibilities and dealing with the changes in the personal and societal context.

In modern times, separation and divorce are frequent transitional events; from the perspective of the life cycle they belong among unexpected disruptive events.⁷ Nobody marries or enters a partnership with a vision that the marital (or extramarital) relationship will deteriorate. During transition, i.e. in a period when one faces relatively unpredictable change in one's life course, one learns consciously as well as sub-consciously.

Transitional learning occurs by two dimensions. Horizontal dimension relates to action and reflection dealing with tensions between societal demands and personal demands (needs, values, aspirations). Vertical dimension is about the subject's perception of the extent to which the areas in which s/he operates can be altered in view of individual or social expectations, plans and projects.⁸

Learning takes place according to four strategies: adaptation, growth, distinction and resistance.⁹ *Adaptation* means that one adapts to cultural patterns, i.e. to social expectations about one's role and identity. It is a kind of 'loyalty' to socio-cultural requirements when one develops the skills and knowledge that are expected from one's environment.

The second strategy is *growth*, which is typical of individuals who feel that they can affect their own change, being able to change their interpretation, perception and conception. Even though they experience a part of their situation as unchangeable, they see themselves as free people who

⁷ Cf. A. P. Greeff, B. Human, *Resilience in families in which a parent has died*, *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 32 (2004) 1, p. 27-42. Abraham P. Greeff, S. van der Merwe, *Variables associated with resilience in divorced families*, *Social Indicators Research*, 68 (2004) 1, p. 59-75. F. Walsh, *Family transitions: Challenges and resilience*, in: *Textbook of child and adolescent psychiatry*, Washington, ed. Mina Dulcan, DC: American Psychiatric Association Press, 2012, p. 675-686. G. Gorell Barnes, *Divorce transitions: Identifying risk and promoting resilience for children and their parental relationships*, *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 25 (1999) 4, p. 425-441.

⁸ Cf. D. Wildemeersch, V. Stroobants, "Transitional learning and reflexive facilitation: the case of learning for work" In *Contemporary Theories of Learning*, ed. Knud Illeris, London, New York: Routledge, 2010.

⁹ Cf. D. Wildemeersch, V. Stroobants, *Transitional learning and reflexive facilitation: the case of learning for work*, in: *Contemporary Theories of Learning*, ed. Knud Illeris, London, New York: Routledge, 2010, p. 219-232.

have the ability to decide and choose for themselves.¹⁰ This strategy is related to the holistic development of individual in the sense of developing all aspects and potentialities of the whole person and in the sense of caring for the well-being and recovering of the self in order to personally cope with the society-in-transformation.¹¹ Apart from negative consequences, the change of the family structure due to separation or divorce brings opportunities for positive change on the identity level, i.e. personal growth.

Distinction is the third strategy, meaning the development of an alternative life style in view of finding a personalised way out of societal demands that are experienced as oppressive. One does not adapt to the social environment due to its oppressiveness, so one learns by developing new habits, patterns and rules which are significantly different from the previous ones¹². For example, after divorce one may move abroad.

The fourth strategy, *resistance*, includes action related to changing one's environment. One chooses actions explicitly focused on influencing and possibly transforming the demands of society. Various activities are conducted to raise the awareness of the environment and to change societal expectations. There are educational programs for divorcees, articles and presentations of case studies on the work of divorcees, good examples of cooperative parenting after divorce, etc., which are changing societal expectations towards individuals from dissolved marriages and partnerships. These strategies have been also noticed in divorce studies in Slovenia.¹³

As mentioned above, learning accompanying transition does not only encompass the transmission of knowledge or information but the change of identity as well.¹⁴ The emphasis is therefore on transformative learning.

¹⁰ Cf. N. Ličen, *Triptih o družinskem življenju*, Filozofska fakulteta, Ljubljana, 2017.

¹¹ Cf. D. Wildemeersch, V. Stroobants, Transitional learning and reflexive facilitation: the case of learning for work, p. 219-232.

¹² Cf. N. Ličen, *Triptih o družinskem življenju*.

¹³ Cf. D. Ganc, *Izzivi očetovstva po ločitvi*, Družinski inštitut Zaupanje, Sevnica, 2015. B. Simonič, N. Rijavec Klobučar, *Experiencing positive religious coping in the process of divorce: a qualitative study*, Journal of religion and health, 55 (2016) 3, p. 1-11. N. Rijavec Klobučar, B. Simonič, *Risk factors for divorce in Slovenia: a qualitative study of divorced persons' experience*, Journal of family studies, (2016) doi: 10.1080/13229400.2016.1176592.

¹⁴ Cf. K. Ecclestone, G. Biesta and M. Hughes, *Transitions and Learning through Life Course*, Routledge, London, 2010. N. Ličen, *Triptih o družinskem življenju*. N. Rijavec Klobučar, *Rojstvo otroka: priložnost za duhovno učenje*, Bogoslovni vestnik, 75 (2015) 4, p. 771-780.

3. Transformative Learning during Transition in a Family

Transformative learning theory describes learning among adults. Jack Mezirow, the most prominent proponent of transformative learning theory, explained how adults change on the basis of experience, finding new meanings, and critical reflection. Learning takes place along with changing frames of references, a culturally conditioned 'filter' through which one perceives and interprets the world, oneself, and others. Frames of reference selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings.¹⁵ The affective dimension is especially apparent in the family relations.

The frame of reference is composed of two dimensions: the habits of mind and a point of view. "Habits of mind are broad, abstract, orienting, habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting influenced by assumptions that constitute a set" of cultural, political, religious, social, educational, and economic codes.¹⁶ It includes the dimensions of sociolinguistic, moral-ethical, epistemic, religious, philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic perspectives, which include sets of immediate specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgments. The habits of mind get expressed in a particular point of view to include the constellation of beliefs, value judgment, attitude, and feelings that shape a particular interpretation.¹⁷

What the transformative learning theory seeks to understand is "how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others – to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear thinking decision makers".¹⁸ Transformative learning is therefore a process in which one changes one's frames of reference. This is done in four ways: by elaborating on existing frames of references, by learning new frames of references, by transforming habits of mind or transforming points of view.¹⁹ Learning takes place within relations to others, in testing what one

¹⁵ Cf. J. Mezirow, E. Taylor, *Transformative Learning in Practice*, Jossey Bass, San Francisco, 2009.

¹⁶ Cf. J. Mezirow, *Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice*, in: *Transformative Learning in Action: Insights from Practice. New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, ed. Patricia Cranton, Ca: San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997, p. 5-12.

¹⁷ Cf. J. Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*, CA: John Wiley & Sons, San Francisco, Inc, 2000. J. Mezirow, *Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice*, p. 5-12.

¹⁸ J. Mezirow, (2012), *Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformative learning theory*, in: *Handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research and practice*, eds. Edward Taylor, Patricia Cranton, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012, p. 73-96.

¹⁹ Cf. J. Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation*, p. 21.

has learned in the so-called *rational discourse*.²⁰ Transformative learning is fostered through trust, encouraging relations with others, empathy, and solidarity.

4. Phases of Transformative Learning

Not all types of learning are transformative. Learning can be simple, or it can be transformative. Simple learning merely elaborates the learner's existing paradigm, systems of thinking, feeling, or doing, relative to a topic. O'Sullivan's view is that transformative learning involves a deep structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions. It is a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world. Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-location: our relationships with other humans and with the natural world.²¹ The concept of transformative learning comprises all learning that implies change in the identity of the learner.²²

According to Mezirow²³ transformative learning involves "critical self-reflection, which results in the reformulation of a meaning perspective to allow a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative understanding of one's experience"²⁴ and often follows the following phases:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.

²⁰ Cf. N. Rijavec Klobučar, Rojstvo otroka, p. 771-780. N. Rijavec Klobučar, *Transformativno učenje v partnerskih odnosih na prehodu v starševstvo*, Andragoška spoznanja, 17 (2011) 3, p. 31-39.

²¹ Cf. E. O'Sullivan, *Bringing a perspective of transformative learning to globalized consumption*, International Journal of Consumer Studies, 27 (2003) 4, p. 326-330.

²² Cf. K. Illeris, *Contemporary Theories of Learning*, Routledge, London, New York, 2014, p. 4.

²³ Cf. J. Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation*, p. 21-22.

²⁴ J. Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1991, p. xvi.

These phases are adapted according to each individual's transformation and do not always follow the same sequence.

Transformative learning usually results from a *disorienting dilemma*, which is triggered by a life crisis, an incident or major life transition, although it may also result from an accumulation of transformations in 'meaning schemes' over a period of time. The disorienting dilemma begins as a stressful situation, a life event or an incident which a person experiences as a crisis that cannot be resolved by applying previous problem-solving strategies. As a result, the person engages in self-examination often accompanied by unpleasant or undesirable emotions that lead to a critical assessment of assumptions. One finds oneself in a position where one has to explore options for forming new roles, relationships, or actions followed by a plan of action. This plan consists of acquiring knowledge and skills, trying out new roles, renegotiating relationships, and building competence and self-confidence. Finally, the re-integration process is completed when the individual fully incorporates the new learning, that is, the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours into her or his life that develop into a new transformed perspective.²⁵

Disorienting dilemma is accompanied by strong emotions. In the phases of transformative learning, one can recognize parallels with the phases of bereavement, which we shall discuss later on.

5. Learning during Divorce

Divorce, one of the most stressful life events, affects various areas of one's life and triggers transformative learning in adults who leave the partnership on their own initiative, as well as in those who are left behind.

Divorce is synonymous with loss: the loss of partner, social network, financial security, the image of family and the ideal of love. In learning during divorce intense emotional processing takes place; one grieves for old patterns of acting, relating, loss, but also explores and forms new behaviours, beliefs, etc. Generally, grieving is an individualized process consisting of the following phases:²⁶

Shock and denial – For some people it is almost impossible to believe that the loss truly happened, or they completely deny reality, still searching for their spouse's attention

Sadness – Sadness can be accompanied by a feeling of emptiness, despair, yearning, deep loneliness, a lot of crying, and / or emotional instability.

²⁵ Cf. J. Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions*. J. Mezirow, *Learning as Transformation*.

²⁶ Cf. E. Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying. What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and their Own Families*, Scribner, New York, 1969, 2014. F. Walsh, M. McGoldrick. *Living Beyond Loss: Death in the Family*, W. W. Norton & Co, New York, 2004.

Guilt – A sense of guilt can emerge in connection with what was said (or not) and what was done (or not); one's thoughts are focused on the question if the relationship really could not have been saved.

Anger and bargaining – A person is focused on ex-spouse, on oneself or on a third person (also on God or life) as a response to the injustice he / she feels was done to him/her.

Fear – The loss triggers concerns and fears, anxiety and feelings of helplessness, uncertainty about the future increases.

Acceptance – At one point, one realizes that the loss really happened and cannot be undone. He / she stops trying to maintain the relationship. The new frames of reference are formed.

Divorce also brings loss for children: not only the loss of a secure family structure but often a loss of friends, grandparents, and in case of the change of residence also a loss of schoolmates and a wider social network.²⁷

Most of the findings²⁸ on the effects of separation note that the negative effects of separation are especially strong, long-lasting and complex for children. Divorce affects emotional and social development, physical and mental health both in childhood and in adulthood, and consequently educational and socio-economic achievements.

Different circumstances and so-called protective factors determine how the adjustment will take place after the dissolution of marriage and how the child will accept a new lifestyle. These factors are primarily the quality of parental relationship and cooperative parenting which father and mother can either maintain or create anew after divorce. Here they often change their frames of reference. Research shows that in the case of connecting parenting children experienced fewer negative consequences than in cases where parents were not able to draw the appropriate distinction between partnership and parenting, and they 'pulled' children in their conflicting relationship. The child's efforts to unite parents, strong feelings of guilt or conflicting feelings regarding loyalty to one or the other parent can lead to long-term emotional problems.²⁹

²⁷ Cf. J. Wallerstein, J. Lewis, *The unexpected legacy of divorce: Report of a 25-year study*, *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 21 (2004) 3, p. 353-370. P. Amato, *Research on divorce: Continuing trends and new developments*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72 (2010) 3, p. 650-666.

²⁸ Cf. A. Clarke-Stewart, C. Brentano, *Divorce: Causes and consequences*, CT: Yale University Press, New Haven, CT: 2006. J. Wallerstein, J. Lewis, *The unexpected legacy of divorce: Report of a 25-year study*, *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 21 (2004) 3, p. 353-370. P. Amato, *Research on divorce: Continuing trends and new developments*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72 (2010) 3, p. 650-666.

²⁹ Cf. B. Hohmann-Marriott, P. R. Amato, *A comparison of high- and low-distress marriages that end in divorce*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69 (2007) 3, p. 621-638.

It should be noted that in cases of violence between the parents, the conflict can be reduced after divorce which is actually a positive solution since in certain situations it can even save a child's life.

Learning during divorce is associated with adjustment to a new life situation, not only in adhering to their fate, but by creating a variety of activities that help children as well as parents cope with hardship, obstacles and stress accompanying the reorganization of life. Parents frequently experience a lot of distress after the dissolution of their partnership, and sometimes because of trying to regulate their own pain, they overlook the child's distress and his negative emotional states that are either internalized or (possibly) expressed through misconduct.³⁰ Encouraging transformative learning among parents also encompasses the formation of a supportive community, educative, counselling, therapy, and other groups, where parents are not only informed about the importance of their role in helping their children but with sufficient support change their habits of mind, points of view and (albeit slowly) reshape their frames of references. A wider supportive social network consisting of grandparents, schoolmates, teachers, and pastoral workers proved a significant protective factor in preventing negative consequences for children who need counselling, as well as education and other forms of help that enable them to process their distress.

6. The Contribution of Religious Education to Learning during Divorce

Religious dimension is one of the dimensions of man's frames of reference which starts to take shape in the first years of life in the intense child-parents relationship. Parents contribute to shaping beliefs about whether divorce is one of the options in modern relationships. From the perspective of some psychological studies, children from divorced families have higher probability of choosing a partner with similar experience (divorced parents), and their marriage has three times higher probability to dissolve in comparison to those from non-divorced families.³¹ The idea that divorce is a way of solving problems is more readily accepted in divorced families.

³⁰ A. Clarke-Stewart, C. Brentano, *Divorce: Causes and consequences*, CT: Yale University Press, New Haven, CT: 2006. J. Wallerstein, J. Lewis, *The unexpected legacy of divorce: Report of a 25-year study*, *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 21 (2004) 3, p. 353-370. P. Amato, *Research on divorce: Continuing trends and new developments*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72 (2010) 3, p. 650-666. C. Ahrons, *Family ties after divorce: Long-term implications for children*, *Family Process*, 46 (2007) 1, p. 53-65. G. Mette Haugen, *Children's perspectives on everyday experiences of shared residence: time, emotions and agency dilemmas*, *Children & Society*, 24 (2010) 2, p. 112-122.

³¹ Cf. N. Wolfinger, *Understanding the divorce cycle: The children of divorce in their own marriages*, Cambridge University, New York, 2005.

The twelve-year study of the intergenerational transfer of parents' religious views and attitudes and divorce showed that more religious offspring are less tolerant of divorce.³² People who are more religiously active are less likely to have positive attitude regarding divorce. Divorce in religious families can trigger transformative learning in a form of changing religious beliefs and experiences in several dimensions, such as God image, religious attendance, scepticism towards parents' faith, doubts about God, and attendance of religious services.³³ At the same time, religion can be a powerful source of help for an individual coping with stressful situations brought up by divorce.³⁴ Many distressed individuals turn to religion and use religious strategies of coping to regulate difficult affects.³⁵

Unprocessed emotions and stress after divorce can lead to serious health problems. Religious involvement is discussed as having protective effect including preventing and reducing unhealthy lifestyles.³⁶ It is also argued that religiousness affects individual's health through facilitating social support by and for religious group members, and providing coherent frameworks of meaning that provide comfort, coping, and understanding in the time of difficult transitions in life³⁷. In the process of coping with divorce, people mostly use positive forms of religious coping like praying, personal rituals or various forms of worship (important for transforming the feelings of anger, pain, and fear); searching for spiritual purification or forgiveness for eventual wrongs in the dissolved relationship (it helps reduce the feelings of guilt or reinforce the feeling of integrity); searching for possibilities to increase the feeling of connectedness with God (it reduces the feeling of being abandoned).³⁸ This is related to personal, identity, and spiritual growth – transformative learning takes place. Religious coping transforms frames of reference a part of which are religious dimensions.

³² Cf. C. A. Kapinus, L. A. Pellerin, *The Influence of Parents' Religious Practices on Young Adults' Divorce Attitudes*, Social Science Research, 37 (2008) 3, p. 801-814.

³³ Cf. C. Ellison, A. Walker, N. Glenn, E. Marquardt, *The effects of parental marital discord and divorce on the religious and spiritual lives of young adults*, Social Science Research, 40 (2011) 2, p. 538-51.

³⁴ Cf. B. Simonič, N. Rijavec Klobučar, *Experiencing positive religious coping in the process of divorce: a qualitative study*, Journal of religion and health, 55 (2016) 3, p. 1-11.

³⁵ Cf. K. Pargament, *Spiritually integrated psychotherapy*, The Guilford Press, New York, NY: 2007.

³⁶ Cf. E. Rippentropa, E. M. Altmaierb, J. Chena, E. Founda, V. Keffalaa, *The Relationship between religion/spirituality and physical health, mental health and pain in a chronic pain population*, Pain, 116 (2005) p. 311-321.

³⁷ Cf. H. Koenig, D. King, V. Carson, *Handbook of Religion and Health*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, USA, 2012.

³⁸ Cf. B. Simonič, N. Rijavec Klobučar, *Experiencing positive religious coping in the process of divorce*, p. 1-11.

Religious education during divorce is closely linked to transformative learning. As mentioned above, social networking support and safe environment – the so-called rational dialogue – is an important factor in adapting to the reorganization of family structure after separation. An important supportive social environment is provided by our religious communities and their activities, which contributes to reduce distress and, by providing incentives for transformative learning, helps individuals to improve their quality of life.