

## **DISCIPLINING CHILDREN IN DIVORCED FAMILIES: THE PROCESS OF CHANGE IN RELATIONAL FAMILY THERAPY**

### Abstract

Divorce is a long-term emotional process during which distress is often expressed within the parent-child relationship, where changes in emotional bonding with child, as well as parenting style take place. The Parent-child relationship depends on parent's interpersonal and intrapsychic experiences. Marital tension is related to the inability to create emotional security in the parent-child relationship, whereas the intrapsychic feeling of vulnerability is related to the reduced ability of bonding with child. Reduced emotional security and disconnection in the parent-child relationship increase the probability of more authoritarian methods and non-involved style of parenting. Because of that, parenting can become an additional source of tension and distress. Relational family therapy with its combination of interventions on systemic, interpersonal and intrapsychic levels enables the addressing of repetitive emotional vulnerability and a new approach to affect regulation. This article presents task analysis method based on qualitative data. Results have shown that through addressing excessive affective responses in current relationships, the dissolution of defences, the awareness of repetition on systemic and interpersonal levels, and transition to intrapsychic experience, the client learns to distinguish between past relationships and present experience, and can therefore begin to change the implicit relational perception. The connection between client's relationship with child and client's interpersonal and intrapsychic experience provide the client with a new understanding of her actions, thus opening a possibility of different parenting. Finally, the limitations of the research are presented.

*Key words: divorce, parenting, interpersonal experience, intrapsychic experience, relational family therapy.*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Divorce and Parenting

Primarily, divorce is formal and physical separation of spouses, as a rule decided upon after a long and thoughtful decision-making process<sup>1</sup>. It is followed by a significant stage in their separated lives, the so called emotional divorce<sup>2</sup>. This stage begins while they still live together, in the period of increased conflict when stress causes an emotional gap between spouses<sup>3</sup>, and continues after formal divorce, especially in coping with parental responsibilities. Long-term emotionally separating process of spouses is not only related to their being emotionally overwhelmed but also to their parental role and child raising.

Children feel the consequences of divorce primarily as stress caused by living separately with one of the parents, parents' marital conflict, the loss of important relationships and less carefully maintained parental roles<sup>4</sup>. Children of divorced parents display more prominent behavioural problems, more frequent feelings of anxiety and depression, difficulties in establishing relationships and learning difficulties<sup>5</sup>. Not only is there a correlation between divorce and poor outcome for children in direct transmission from one generation to the next; research proves that there is correlation between divorced grandparents and inadequately adapted grandchildren<sup>6</sup>. Another study of three generations points out that depressive mood is a significant factor in the trans-generational transmission of the negative impact of divorce: the very depression accompanying divorce is supposed to be the factor which determines whether or not negative consequences will be passed to the third generation<sup>7</sup>. Authors explain the transmission by poorer adaptation in relationships of the second generation. The children of divorcees are thus not success-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. C. R. Ahrons, Divorce: An unscheduled family transition, in: M. McGoldrick, B. Carter and N. Garcia-Preto (ed.) *The expanded family life cycle: Individual, family and social perspectives*, Pearson Education Limited, Edinburgh, 2014, p. 289-305.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. F. W. Kaslow, Families Experiencing Divorce, in: W. C. Nichols, M. A. Pace-Nichols, D. S. Becvar and A. Y. Napier (ed.) *Handbook of Family Development and Intervention*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 2000, p. 341-370.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. S. A. Anderson and R. M. Sabatelli, *Family interaction: a multigenerational developmental perspective*, Pearson Education, Boston, 2007, p. 285-301.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J. B. Kelly and R. E. Emery, *Children's adjustment following divorce: Risk and resilience perspectives*, *Family Relations*, 52 (2003) 4, Research Library, p. 352-362.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. P. R. Amato and J. Cheadle, *The long reach of divorce: divorce and child well-being across three generations*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67 (2005) 1, p. 191-206.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 191-206.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. E. Vousoura, H. Verdelli, V. Warner, P. Wickramaratne, C. D. R. Baily, *Parental divorce, familial risk for depression, and psychopathology in offspring: A three-generation study*, *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 21 (2012) p. 718-725.

ful in their marriages<sup>8</sup>, since it negatively affect their efforts in forming efficient parental roles. As parents, they are unable to take care of their children's needs and efficiently stop unwanted behaviours. Deregulated family stress caused by divorce (and depression) in the generation of grandparents is transferred to their grandchildren, manifesting itself in emotional and/or behavioural disorders.

The correlation between divorce and parental distress can be explained by the loss of emotional security which is transferred from spouses' subsystem to children's subsystem. Emotional security is primarily formed in child-mother relationship. Mother's sensitivity and responsiveness to child's emotional arousal creates the feeling of a secure relationship because the child experiences that his/her feelings are controllable<sup>9</sup>. The feeling of emotional security is therefore formed when mother is available for an aroused child, finding a way how to, when under stress, calm herself and therefore also her child. For the child, mother is a safe haven, where under stress the child finds appeasement and emotional security<sup>10</sup>. Emotional security in a relationship is threatened by too much stress and by conflicts which cannot be solved within the relationship. Unsolved marital conflict impacts not only emotional distance between spouses but also prevents the formation of emotional security between parent and child<sup>11</sup>.

Child raising is based on the tendency to develop child's potentials and to encourage moral and acceptable behaviour in child<sup>12</sup>, and takes place in the interpersonal space between parents and child. Parents' task in child raising is to follow and respond to child's needs and at the same time to effectively control their behaviour<sup>13</sup>. Research shows that mothers who are emotionally overwhelmed by the process of divorce show less

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. U. Mustonen, T. Huurre, O. Kiviruusu, A. Haukkala and H. Aro, *Long-term impact of parental divorce on intimate relationship quality in adulthood and the mediating role of psychosocial resources*, *Journal of Family Psychology*, 25 (2011) 4, p. 615-619.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. R. A. Thompson, A. M. Easterbrooks & L. M. Padilla-Walker, Social and emotional development in infancy, in: R. M. Lerner, M. A. Easterbrooks, & J. Mistry (Eds.), *Handbook of psychology: developmental psychology*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc. New Jersey, 2003, p. 91-112.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. M. E. Cummings, J. M. Braungart-Rieker & T. D. Rocher-Schudlich, Emotion and personality development in childhood, in: R. M. Lerner, M. A. Easterbrooks, & J. Mistry (Eds.), p. 211-240.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. M. E. Cummings and P. T. Davies, *Marital conflict and children: an emotional security perspective*, The Guilford Press, London, 2010; K. K. Hyoun, K. C. Pears, D. M. Capaldi and L. D. Owen, *Emotion dysregulation in the intergenerational transmission of romantic relationship conflict*, *Journal of Family Psychology*, 23 (2009) 4, p. 585-595.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. M. Peček Čuk and I. Lesar, *Moč vzgoje. Sodobna vprašanja teorije vzgoje*, Tehniška založba Slovenije, Ljubljana, 2009, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. S. A. Anderson and R. M. Sabatelli, *Family interaction: a multigenerational developmental perspective*, Pearson Education, Boston, 2007, p. 214.

warmth towards their children, use more severe punishment in parenting, and are less efficient in controlling their children<sup>14</sup>. Due to the fact that parenting is part of the relationship between two persons, the definition of parenting should include the statement that parenting is both intentional reaching of desired objectives<sup>15</sup> and a subconscious as well as unintentional transference of emotional contents<sup>16</sup>. During the procedure of divorce, parental role is determined by decisions about child care in the future as well as by unintentional transferences of emotional tensions originating in parent's interpersonal and intrapsychic space.

## 1.2. Interpersonal experience during divorce and parenting

The interpersonal level of an individual's experience manifests as the dynamics of longing and attraction, in internal working models of attachment, in psycho-organic states, in communication dynamics, and in the manner of affect regulation within a relationship<sup>17</sup>. During divorce, spouses can perceive their longing as unrealisable<sup>18</sup>; they can reinforce insecure attachment styles by ceasing to respond emotionally, or, on the other hand, try to gain attention by excessive emotional responses<sup>19</sup>; and in a prolonged stressful period, they can create permanent patterns of emotional deregulation and unadjusted feeling and thinking patterns<sup>20</sup>.

Stress and emotional vulnerability caused by divorce also impact parenting. During (and sometimes after) divorce, parents are emotionally overwhelmed with their own feelings of loss, failure, anger, disappointment, and as a result, they do not recognize their child's emotional needs. Irresponsiveness to these needs creates a model of child-parent attachment where the child needs to suppress his/her own emotional responses

<sup>14</sup> Cf. C. Osborne, L. M. Berger and K. Magnuson, *Family structure transitions and changes in maternal resources and well-being*, *Demography*, 49 (2012) 1, p. 23-47; J. Wallerstein, J. Lewis and S. Packer Rosenthal, *Mothers and their children after divorce: Report from a 25-year longitudinal study*, *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 30 (2013) 2, p. 167-187.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. N. J. Salkind, *Child development*, Micmillan Library Reference, New York, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. C. Gostečnik, *Inovativna relacijska družinska terapija*, Brat Frančišek, Teološka fakulteta in Frančiškanski družinski inštitut, Ljubljana, 2011, p. 101.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. C. Gostečnik, *Relacijska družinska terapija*, in: B. Simonič (ed.) *Relacijska družinska terapija v teoriji in praksi*, Teološka fakulteta Univerze v Ljubljani in Frančiškanski družinski inštitut, Ljubljana, 2015, p. 9-33.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. F. W. Kaslow, *Families Experiencing Divorce*, in: W. C. Nichols, M. A. Pace-Nichols, D. S. Becvar and A. Y. Napier (ed.) *Handbook of Family Development and Intervention*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 2000, p. 341-370.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. W. H. Berman, L. Marcus and E. Raynes Berman, *Attachment in marital relations*, in: M. B. Sperling and W. H. Berman (ur.) *Attachment in adults. Clinical and developmental perspectives*, The Guilford Press, New York, 1994, p. 204-231.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. N. L. Galambos and C. L. Costigan, *Emotional and personality development in adolescence*, in: Richard M. Lerner, M. Ann Easterbrooks and Jayanthi Mistry (ed.) *Handbook of psychology: developmental psychology*, John Wiley&Sons. Inc., New Jersey, 2003, p. 351-372.

to a certain degree; the child's internal models of experiencing are characterized by the feelings of instability, distrust and inability to form secure attachment bonds with another person<sup>21</sup>. The child internalizes inadequate emotional responses, which further destabilizes emotional bonding with the parent. Parents feel inefficient in their child raising and parental distress, a rather frequent accompaniment, increases.

Unsolved marital conflict and/or divorce transmits emotional sensitivity from the children subsystem to the spouses system. Spouses, trying to cope with their own emotional vulnerability, become unavailable for children's emotional vulnerability. Unwillingly, children thus become the regulators of emotional atmosphere between their parents<sup>22</sup>. With their behaviour they try to redirect attention, over and over again seeking emotional security from their parents, who are unable to provide this security until they solve marital conflict. In addition to difficult emotional process brought up by divorce, parents are faced by children's emotional vulnerability and instability, which often leads to parental distress. The chances to manage children's distress during divorce are limited by the degree of emotional security which parents have succeeded to create for the child: research shows that divorce brings more negative consequences for the child if prior to it there was no safe emotional space between child and parent<sup>23</sup>. It can be assumed that internal mechanisms of emotional appeasement in a child who has experienced emotional security are formed to such degree that he/she will more easily cope with stress brought up by divorce. In this case, the child does not resort to extreme behaviours, which reduces the need for parents' limitations of child's behaviour and the chances of parental stress. Emotional security is therefore a significant factor in coping with parental distress in accompanying divorce<sup>24</sup>.

### 1.3. Intrapsychic experience during divorce and parenting

An individual's intrapsychic experience can be understood through exploring object-relation mental contents, the system of intrapsychic self-images, and the internalized affective space between the individual and

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. C. Hazan and P. R. Shaver, Broken attachments: Relationship loss from the perspective of attachment theory, in: T. L. Orbuch (ed.) *Close relationship loss: Theoretical approaches*, Springer-Verlag, New York, 1992, p. 90-110.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. C. Gostečnik, Inovativna relacijska družinska terapija, Brat Frančišek, Teološka fakulteta in Frančiškanski družinski inštitut, Ljubljana, 2011, p. 87.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. K. K. Hyoun, K. C. Pears, D. M. Capaldi and L. D. Owen, *Emotion dysregulation in the intergenerational transmission of romantic relationship conflict*, *Journal of Family Psychology*, 23 (2009) 4, p. 585-595.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. S. Poljak Lukek, Predelava čustvene stiske v procesu ločevanja - proces spremembe v relacijski družinski terapiji, in: Sabina Kerec and Tadeja Horvat (ed.) *Novodobni izzivi družbe*, RIS Dvorec, Rakičan, 2016, p. 155-167.

others<sup>25</sup>. During separation process, parents can re-experience feelings from long ago, in that others behave and respond in ways similar to people in their past<sup>26</sup>; they can perceive themselves similarly as they did as children<sup>27</sup>, and in a relationship they re-experience the basic affect and specific regulation of affective states<sup>28</sup>. All these intrapsychic processes cause in an individual a physical state of vulnerability, which the individual tries to avoid, negate, overcome, or suppress by means of defence mechanisms and constructs. In this period, parenting, which is also an unwilling transference of emotional contents, is marked with personal vulnerability and feelings of helplessness.

Parental stress and family conflict predict severe and punishing parenting methods<sup>29</sup>, and precisely negative intrapsychic emotional experience in marital system can be related with a possibility of unadjusted types of attachment which include the feelings of parental rejection and even hostility towards children<sup>30</sup>. The repetition of intrapsychic wounds from early attachment patterns determines individual's interpersonal behaviours. During divorce or in times of a conflicting marital relationship parents are unable to efficiently regulate their emotional tensions<sup>31</sup> and/or become emotionally unresponsive<sup>32</sup>, which undermines the ability of parents' emotional bonding with children. In this case, parenting methods tend to limit children's behaviour instead to follow their needs, which is typical of authoritarian parenting style; or parents are unable

<sup>25</sup> Cf. C. Gostečnik, *Relacijska družinska terapija*, in: B. Simonič (ed.) *Relacijska družinska terapija v teoriji in praksi*, Teološka fakulteta Univerze v Ljubljani in Frančiškanski družinski inštitut, Ljubljana, 2015, p. 9-33.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. M. E. Cummings and P. T. Davies, *Marital conflict and children: an emotional security perspective*, The Guilford Press, London, 2010, p. 108.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. A. N. Schore, *Relational trauma and the developing right brain: an interface of psychoanalytic self psychology and neuroscience*, *Self and Systems*, Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, New York, 2009; D. J. Siegel, *Mindsight: The new science of personal transformation*, Bantam Books, New York, 2011, p. 56.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. D. N. Stern, N. Bruschiweiller-Stern, K. Lyons-Ruth, A. C. Morgan, J. P. Nahum and L. W. Sander, *Change in psychotherapy: a unifying paradigm*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2010, p. 87.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. M. Pereira, M. Negrao, I. Soares and J. Mesman, *Predicting Harsh Discipline in At-Risk Mothers: The Moderating Effect of Socioeconomic Deprivation Severity*, *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24 (2015) p. 725-733.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. E. M. Cummings and P. T. Davies, *Marital conflict and children: an emotional security perspective*, The Guilford Press, London, 2010; C. Smith Stover, C. Connell, L. D. Leve, J. M. Neiderhiser, D. S. Shaw, L. V. Scaramella, R. Conger and D. Reiss, *Fathering and Mothering in the Family System: Linking Marital Hostility and Aggression in Adopted Toddlers*, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 53 (2012) 4, p. 110-133.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. K. K. Hyoun, K. C. Pears, D. M. Capaldi and L. D. Owen, *Emotion dysregulation in the intergenerational transmission of romantic relationship conflict*, *Journal of Family Psychology*, 23 (2009) 4, p. 585-595.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. M. E. Cummings and P. T. Davies, *Marital conflict and children: an emotional security perspective*, The Guilford Press, London, 2010, p. 167.

either to limit or fulfil children's needs which leads to uninvolved parenting style<sup>33</sup>. Both parenting styles stem from parents' inability to recognize child's needs and to adequately respond to these<sup>34</sup>; consequently, children in such relationships experience anxiety, fear and anger. Their internal distress increases the probability of unadjusted behaviours, which additionally increase parental distress and resorting to severe, punishing parenting methods<sup>35</sup>. Due to his/her need for security and acceptance, the child not only adapts to the parents-child relationship but also to parents' mutual relationship. Spouses and children subsystems within the family system are interrelated and impact each other, not only through direct relationships between family members but also through indirect experiencing of affect in the family system<sup>36</sup>.

#### 1.4. Parental challenges during divorce and relational family therapy

The article presents the innovative model of relational family therapy<sup>37</sup>. Therapeutic interventions in relational family therapy take place on systemic, interpersonal and intrapsychic levels of individual's experience, because the relational family therapist addresses self-images (self-psychology), the images of others (object-relation theory), and the images of relationships (interpersonal analysis). The therapist explores the basic affect, affect regulation, affective psychological constructs, the process of projective and introjective identification, and the ways of compulsive repetition of these mechanisms.

Therapeutic interventions in relational family therapy are directed to systemic level where the therapist explores the functioning of the family system, interpersonal level, where the therapist explores emotional conflict in interpersonal space (between spouses), and intrapsychic level where the therapist looks for the source of emotional vulnerability. In interventions on intrapsychic level, the therapist explores affects related to experiences in the client's primary family. Memory therefore becomes a crucial element of therapeutic interventions; specifically, we speak of

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. E. E. Maccoby and J. A. Martin, Socialization in the context of the family: parent-child interaction, in: Paul Henry Mussen (ed.) *Handbook of child psychology: socialization, personality, and social development*, John Wiley, New York, 1983, p. 1-101.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. S. A. Anderson and R. M. Sabatelli, *Family interaction: a multigenerational developmental perspective*, Pearson Education, Boston, 2007, p. 203.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. A. Grogan-Kaylor and M. D. Otis, *The predictors of parental use of corporal punishment*, *Family Relations*, 56 (2007) p. 80-91; R. R. S. Socolar, E. Savage and H. Evans, *A longitudinal study of parental discipline of young children*, *Southern Medical Journal*, 100 (2007) 5, p. 472-477; L. J. Woodward and D. M. Fergusson, *Parent, child, and contextual predictors of childhood physical punishment*, *Infant and Child Development*, 11 (2002) p. 213-235.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. C. Gostečnik, *Inovativna relacijska družinska terapija*, Brat Frančišek, Teološka fakulteta in Frančiškanski družinski inštitut, Ljubljana, 2011, p. 130.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 187.

explicit recollection of events and their experiencing, as well as implicit memory recorded in the body.

The starting point in relational family therapy is the relationship, in which – through establishing of the basic affect, affect regulation, affective psychological construct with the process of projective and introjective identification – the patterns of psychological perception are compulsively repeated. In a relationship (with a therapist, too) we can observe the basic affect manifested as body arousal related to the feelings of anger, fear, sadness, shame, disgust, or joy. Every individual tries to control these physical-emotional states, and so in relationships we see mechanisms of emotional regulation, i.e. the transmission of body arousal into emotional and behavioural response<sup>38</sup>. Individuals protect themselves from excessive emotional vulnerability by affective psychological constructs. In the process of projective and introjective identification, familiar emotional atmosphere is compulsively repeated in all relationships. Change in parenting during divorce can thus be understood as a repetition of emotional vulnerability which has not been solved in the interpersonal space between spouses, or as a repetition of familiar emotional atmosphere and an affective psychological construct from past relationships. We shall now present the relational family therapy model and therapeutic interventions which enable managing parenting challenges during divorce.

## **2. Empirical part**

### **2.1. Method**

The processing of parental distress in relational family therapy will be presented by the qualitative method of task analysis. Task analysis is a model of qualitative research of therapeutic process, aiming at determining changes within the therapeutic process<sup>39</sup>. The qualitative research method is based on the assumption that therapeutic interventions and clients' responses leading to change happen within specific sequences of events during therapy; to understand levers of change it is important to understand smaller units of a therapy session. Task analysis explores therapeutic process as a sequence of events leading to change in therapy, where we observe the sequence of events through the participant's process and the sequence of therapeutic interventions<sup>40</sup>. After a predefined

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. J. R. Schore and A. N. Schore, *Modern attachment theory: the central role of affect regulation in development and treatment*, *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 36 (2008) 1.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. B. Bradley and S. M. Johnson, Task analysis of couple and family change events, in: D. H. Sprenkle and F. P. Piercy (ed.) *Research methods in family therapy*, The Guilford Press, New York, 2005, p. 254-271.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. B. Bradley and J. L. Furrow, *Toward a mini-theory of the blamer softening event: Tracking the moment-by-moment process*, *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 30 (2004) 2, p. 236.



event in therapy, which represents the task, the researcher follows therapeutic interventions and client's responses in order to define a series of events leading to a successful solution of therapy task. By means of repeated analysis of all events within therapy, the researcher examines the baseline model of changes.

## 2.2. Participants

A case of individual therapy using the relational family therapy model is presented. The participant was a woman, 33, mother to a four-year old son; in the time of therapy, she was undergoing the divorce procedure. The therapy cycle consisted of 12 weekly sessions. The participant voluntarily consented to audio-recording of therapy sessions. After recording, the transcript was made, and then recordings were destroyed. The transcript of therapy sessions was used to define the steps of change in therapy according to the therapy tasks map based on the qualitative method of task analysis.

## 2.3. Procedure: rational analysis

Based on the analysis of five therapy cycles with various clients, we used rational analysis to define the beginning of the task, therapeutic interventions map and client's process, and the conclusion of the task<sup>41</sup>. The beginning of the task is client's excessive affective response determined by the following criteria: (1) the participant recognizes the atmosphere as crucial for her distress in current relationships, (2) the participant has no control over the atmosphere, (3) the repetition is manifested as powerlessness, frustration, distress, despair, inability, (4) emotional atmosphere is repeated in relationships which the client feels are important for her, i.e. relationships with her children and spouse<sup>42</sup>. The therapist's process consists of five steps based on theoretical concepts of the relational family paradigm, using affect regulation as a basic therapeutic intervention which enables change in relational family therapy. The client's process is characterized by her experiencing of and responding to therapist's interventions. In the interpersonal therapeutic space – a creative space where the change in therapy takes place<sup>43</sup>, the therapist's process and the participant's process mutually create the course of therapy,

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. S. Poljak Lukek, *Kaznovanje kot vzgojno sredstvo in predelave starševskih stisk v relacijski družinski terapiji. Doktorska disertacija.*, Univerza v Ljubljani. Teološka fakulteta, Ljubljana, 2011, p. 204-223.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 204-205.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. C. Gostečnik, *Inovativna relacijska družinska terapija*, p. 130; D. N. Stern, N. Bruschweiler-Stern, K. Lyons-Ruth, A. C. Morgan, J. P. Nahum and L. W. Sander, *Change in psychotherapy: a unifying paradigm*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2010, p. 145.

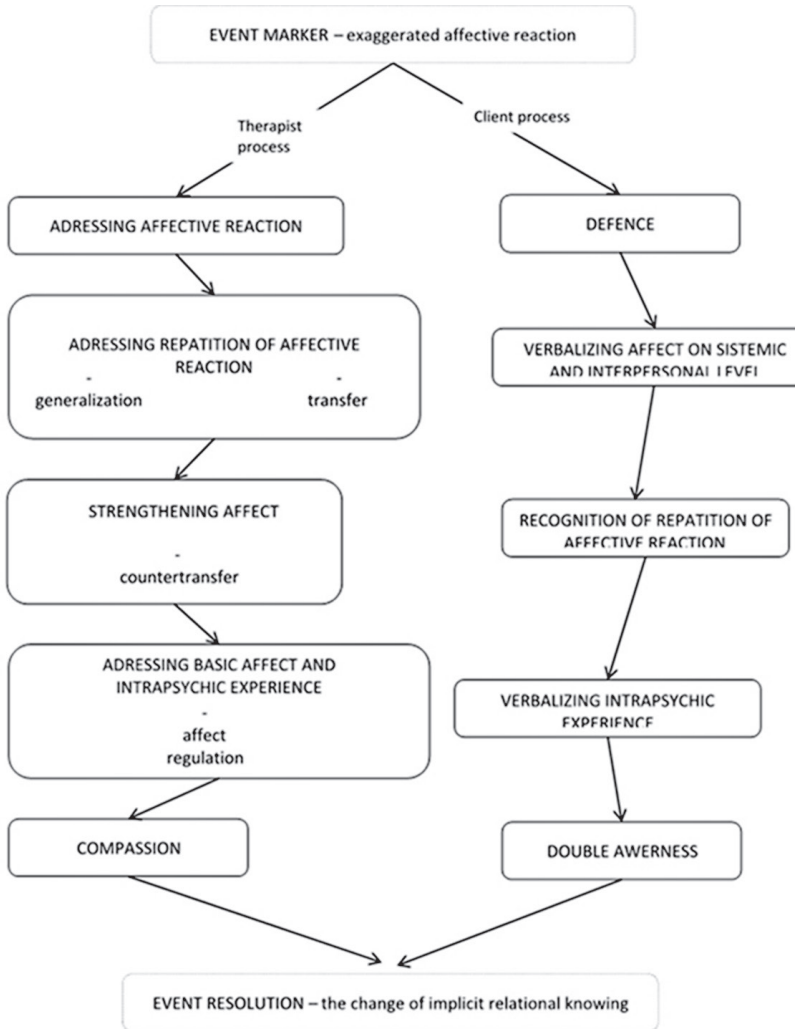


Figure 1: The map of therapeutic processing of parental distress in relational family therapy. Source: Poljak Lukek (2011)

gradually progressing towards the conclusion of the task. The conclusion of the task is a change of implicit relational perception, consisting of internal representations of relationship experiences in non-symbolic form<sup>44</sup>. Relational family paradigm understands change in therapy not only as change in cognitive awareness but primarily as the change of affective

<sup>44</sup> Cf. D. N. Stern, N. Bruschweiler-Stern, K. Lyons-Ruth, A. C. Morgan, J. P. Nahum and L. W. Sander, *Change in psychotherapy: a unifying paradigm*, p. 145.

perception in relationships<sup>45</sup>, enabled by a therapeutic relationship with verbalisation, the assessment of the affective aspects of client's experience, and the transfer of this new experience of a relationship in the relationship between spouses, with children and other significant persons.

#### 2.4. Results – empirical analysis

Below we present the processing of parental distress v relational family therapy. The fragments of therapy transcripts illustrate specific steps according to the map of therapeutic process.

##### Excessive affective response (the beginning of the task) and addressing emotional atmosphere (therapist's process)

*Ms Novak (hereinafter: MsN): I've been beside myself for a week. I don't know what is happening. I feel overwhelmed and I can't cope any more... I guess I'm a bit desperate about it all.*

*Therapist (hereinafter: Th): What happened?*

*MsN: I think it began on Saturday... My son and I were having lunch. He started to pull faces. For a while I ignored him but then I just snapped... and went mad. I started to yell, I grabbed his arm, dragged him away from the table and whacked his butt. I have no idea what possessed me: he always behaves like that. But this one time I totally lost it...*

*Th: You probably felt that your child ignores you and that you couldn't bear it any more. How do you feel when this happens?*

*MsN: True. I often feel like I just don't count. Whatever I say, he doesn't hear me; whatever I want, he doesn't care... he just continues to wreak havoc and annoy me.*

##### Verbalization of the affect on systemic and interpersonal levels (participant's process) and addressing the repetition of emotional atmosphere (therapist's process)

*Th: Do you know these feelings from your relationship with your ex-partner? Did you have the same feeling of not being heard and taken into consideration?*

*MsN: Yes, it was like that. Now that I think about that... it was exactly the same. With him, too, I kept talking, demanding, even begging... but nothing happened. He kept doing what he pleased, as if I weren't even there.*

*Th: ...and with him, too, you just waited, patiently, and then you suddenly snapped and couldn't hold back and the only thing you could do was yelling. And when the storm was over you wondered what was wrong with you to react like that.*

*MnS: I always blamed myself. I thought I had to be more patient, I had to wait, and some day, things will change...*

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. C. Gostečnik, *Inovativna relacijska družinska terapija*, p. 130.

Th: And over and over again, in such situations you feel deep sadness which nobody understands. Even you want to silence it.

MsN: Yes, sadness is not for me.

Facing the repetitions of emotional atmosphere (participant's process) and affect reinforcement and addressing of the basic affect (therapist's process)

Th: Can you describe the sadness we are now talking about?

MsN: I have no words for sadness. Or tears.

Th: You had to part from so many things in life, and yet you must not even feel sad. What would happen if you felt sadness?

MsN: In that case I would feel sorry for myself, as would others. And I don't want that. What's the use of sadness? Well, I can weep, but it won't change anything. Everything will still be the same. Sadness is no good.

Th: And when you feel bad and you are left alone with all these feelings, you do everything in order not to feel sadness. And the more you avoid it, the stronger the feelings of despair and helplessness. Nothing can be done. Nothing will change. You cannot part with anything.

Verbalization of intrapsychic experience (participant's process) and addressing intrapsychic experience (therapist's process)

Th: When you were a child, what did your parents do when you were sad?

MsN: I don't know. Nothing.

Th: Can you remember an event when you were sad?

MsN: I guess I was often sad with no particular reason when I was a child. I was just sad. The same as my mother, I guess. She, too, was whining all the time. I think that she was and still is very dissatisfied, very unhappy. But she never noticed when I was withdrawn and probably sad, too. I always had this feeling that it was harder for her than for me. My father was at work, anyway. It was even worse when he came home. He only knew how to be violent.

Th: Nobody found words for your feelings. You didn't know what the reason was, and nobody told you what those feelings meant. And even today you experience how you have no reason for sadness and that to feel sadness does not bring solace. Back then you couldn't afford being sad because there was no one who would try to understand and wipe off your tears. Everything that was left was loneliness and abandonment. This child should have been noticed and according to what was going on, she should have been noticed and comforted. But everybody was so busy that you weren't even noticed. And when you were noticed, they were violent towards you...

Double awareness (participant's process) and empathy (therapist's process)

Th: Your son is sad, too, because he has lost his family. Besides anger, this is a totally natural child's response to divorce. And all the tension that

*sadness causes in him is hard and tedious for you. But today, you can let your child be sad, and you can find words for this feeling. It is only sadness. Only a feeling of pain because something has gone.*

*MsN: For me, this is the most difficult part. The feeling that my son is sad and that it's my fault.*

*Th: It is only sadness and you can handle it regardless of who has caused it. Just as you had only needed to be noticed by somebody, now your son only needs you noticing him. In his need for attention, however, he sometimes goes too far, but he is unable to help himself. He wants you to respond. And today you are not helpless as you were helpless noticing your mother's sadness and not being able to console her; today as a mother you have all the power to find the words of comfort for your son and at the same time for yourself. And your raging father is not here anymore. You could not stop him; today, though, you can stop the violence.*

*MsN: I would really want to do things differently.*

## 2.5. Discussion

Parental distress in relational family therapy is processed through affect regulation in a therapeutic relationship and through the connection of present distress with intrapsychic experience (or primary family experience), by means of which client's implicit perception changes<sup>46</sup>. To cope with emotional sensitivity during divorce, the therapy process addresses double awareness by means of which relational family therapist assesses present affective arousal as an expression of past experiences<sup>47</sup>. Even though current relationship with child arouses emotional pain, the cause of the pain lies in the past. The case presented in this article shows the processing of distress in relational family therapy. The relational family therapist understands severe punishment described by the client as an excessive affective response. Exploring emotional atmosphere she examines deeper causes of specific feelings. By talking about the repetitions of this emotional atmosphere, both the therapist and the client begin to understand and experience the basic affect, in this case sadness. Due to addressing early (intrapsychic) experiences by the regulation of sadness, the client gets the insight into her multi-layered present perception. She understands that her feelings belong to the past and hopes that today she is able to change these feelings. Therapeutic relationship offers a new experience of a relationship, one in which distress is manageable and assessed, and simultaneously with affect regulation provides emotional security, so that the participant can relate her feelings to past experiences. This fresh perception of a relationship changes

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. S. Poljak Lukek, *Kaznovanje kot vzgojno sredstvo*, p. 293-298.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. C. Gostečnik, *Relacijska paradigma in travma*, p. 123.

client's implicit awareness, by means of which she forms new images of herself, others, and relationships<sup>48</sup>, and is a crucial element of change in relational family therapy. This case study confirms efficiency of the therapeutic process map, since the client, following therapeutic tasks in her process, reaches a new understanding and experience.

## Conclusion

This research offers an insight into complex emotional dynamics within therapeutic process in case of divorce. It emphasizes multi-layered emotional experiencing of divorce. The Parent-child relationship is the interpersonal space where emotional vulnerability manifests most prominently. The distress in parent-child relationship is thus related to interpersonal dynamics, because an unhealed emotional wound from the relationship between spouses is transferred to their relationship with the child<sup>49</sup>, as well as in intrapsychic dynamics, because the atmosphere of early relationships is repeated in the relationship with child<sup>50</sup>. In relational family therapy, the transition from systemic level (relationship with child) to interpersonal level (relationship with spouse) and then to intrapsychic level (relationship with parents) enables a new understanding of present experience, by means of which the individual can better control his/her thinking, feeling and behaviour.

Finally, the limitations of the article should be mentioned. For more credible generalization of the results, more therapeutic processes conducted by various therapists should be included in research. Also, we should additionally verify the task map generated through task analysis, which would require a standardization of coding system suitable for relational family therapy and include numerous therapeutic processes with different symptomatology and approaches. Moreover, for better under-

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. D. N. Stern, N. Bruschiweiler-Stern, K. Lyons-Ruth, A. C. Morgan, J. P. Nahum and L. W. Sander, *Change in psychotherapy: a unifying paradigm*.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. W. H. Berman, L. Marcus and E. Raynes Berman, Attachment in marital relations, in: M. B. Sperling and W. H. Berman (ed.) *Attachment in adults. Clinical and developmental perspectives*, The Guilford Press, New York, 1994, p. 204-231; N. L. Galambos, and C. L. Costigan, Emotional and personality development in adolescence, in: R. M. Lerner, M. A. Easterbrooks and J. Mistry (ed.) *Handbook of psychology: developmental psychology*, John Wiley&Sons, Inc., New Jersey, 2003, p. 351-372; F. W. Kaslow, Families Experiencing Divorce, in: W. C. Nichols, M. A. Pace-Nichols, D. S. Becvar and A. Y. Napier (ed.) *Handbook of Family Development and Intervention*, John Wiley & Sons, New York, 2000, p. 341-370.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. A. N. Schore, *Relational trauma and the developing right brain: an interface of psychoanalytic self psychology and neuroscience*, *Self and Systems*, Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, New York, 2009, p. 1159; D. J. Siegel, *Mindsight: The new science of personal transformation*, Bantam Books, New York, 2011; D. N. Stern, N. Bruschiweiler-Stern, K. Lyons-Ruth, A. C. Morgan, J. P. Nahum and L. W. Sander, *Change in psychotherapy: a unifying paradigm*, p. 112.

standing of the efficiency of relational family therapy in coping with emotional distress, a comparison with a control group who does not receive any treatment is required.

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