

FAMILY, RELIGION, PEDAGOGY AND EVERYDAY EDUCATION PRACTICE

EDITORS

BEATA PIETKIEWICZ-PAREEK

RAFAŁ WŁODARCZYK

INSTYTUT PEDAGOGIKI
UNIwersytetu Wrocławskiego

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BEATA PIETKIEWICZ-PAREEK

University of Wrocław

ORCID: 0000-0001-8450-1707

PARENTAL IMAGE IN THE PERCEPTION OF CHILDREN FROM DIVORCED MARRIAGES IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

ABSTRACT:

The issue of the family and its dysfunctions has been at the centre of interest of various social sciences for many years, despite the fact that it is an extremely difficult subject to study. The phenomenon of divorce is rarely presented from the point of view of children. Hence, the aim of this research was to unveil this cognitive perspective and to determine the image of parents in the perception of children from divorced families. The key task concerned how a child in a divorced family perceives herself or himself and other family members. Fritz Schutze's method of narrative interview analysis was used in the study.

KEYWORDS:

children, divorce, family structure disruptions, single-parent family

In Poland and worldwide, divorce has become an established phenomenon of social reality, which results in the increasing number of children from single-parent families. For this reason it has become important to move away from the view that a divorced family is a dysfunctional family

and to consider it as a different kind of family system. In some cases, divorce is the only solution to maintain a homeostasis in the family so that it can continue to function under new rules. One speaks then of the transformation of the system, not of its disintegration.

Undoubtedly, divorce is the most disruptive for children. Both the process that precedes it, and the divorce itself, are highly stressful situations for them, which leave a mark on their psyche for the rest of their lives. Growing up in a single-parent family implies a number of negative consequences for the child's psychological development. The phenomenon of divorce is perceived from the perspective of adults, rarely is it explored from the point of view of children. Therefore, the aim of the study was to present this cognitive perspective and to determine the image of parents in the perception of children from divorced families.

FUNCTIONING OF CHILDREN FROM DIVORCED MARRIAGES

Parental divorce is one of the most stressful situations in a child's life. The functioning of children from divorced marriages depends primarily on the functioning of the parents. "The atmosphere in the divorcing family is described as abnormal, tense, full of nervousness and inducing anxiety. It results not only from domestic conflicts but also from the psychological condition of the parents"¹.

A theory developed by psychologists called "the syndrome of an individual's response to traumatic events", assumes that there are 3 phases occurring in succession²:

- Initial stage: an individual lives under the pressure of the constant presence of the stimulus. He/she constantly reproduces past events in all types of activity. Loss of previously formed habits may occur. Dependent behaviour and excitability increase. Awareness of the threat may lead to a development of a sense of responsibility for the loved ones.

¹ *Encyklopedia Pedagogiczna XXI wieku*, vol. v, ed. T. Pilch, Warszawa 2006, p. 478.

² E. Jackowska, "Modele odpowiedzi człowieka na wydarzenia traumatyczne", *Edukacja Humanistyczna* 2002, no. 1-2, p. 73-82.

- Middle stage: an individual has impaired interpersonal relationships, avoids challenges and new experiences.
- Long-term response: long-term patterns of behaviour are established, on the basis of which an individual builds defence mechanisms, strategies for coping with difficult situations. Personality development disorder occurs.

The severity of the stress that a child experiences in relation to family breakdown and its effects depend on the child's perception of the home situation prior to the divorce and the extent of the child's attachment to each parent and siblings, the child's age at the time of the divorce, the child's gender, and, most importantly, the child's psychological resilience. Of the situational factors, the most important include: the child's degree of preparation for what is to come, the course of the event, the frequency and type of contact with the parent who has left, and the extent of change in the child's life³.

It is believed that children who have felt happy in the family are most at risk from divorce stress. According to Ewa Wideł, there are a number of factors that can increase the child's vulnerability to divorce stress or serve as a source of crisis mitigation. These include: "the child's perception of the quality of the parents' marriage before the divorce, the quality of the parents' relationship after the divorce, the child's pre-divorce contact with the parent leaving the family, the repressiveness of norms regarding divorce, and the child's age and gender"⁴. Wideł writes that "the child's accurate interpretation of the quality of the parents' marriage before the divorce prepares the child for the divorce crisis from the beginning. Inadequate perceptions of this relationship deepen the child's psychological trauma associated with family breakdown"⁵. The leading concept in divorce stress theory, then, is the definition of the situation, or the degree of importance assigned to the crisis⁶.

Parental expectations of children implicate them in a myriad of roles designed to vent anger at the other parent. Following the Belgian

³ See *Encyklopedia Pedagogiczna XXI wieku*, vol. v, op. cit., p. 480.

⁴ E. Wideł, "Przystosowanie dziecka do rozvodu rodziców", [in:] *Rodzice i dzieci a psychologiczny obraz sytuacji problemowych*, ed. Milewska, A. Szymanowska, Warszawa 2000, p. 51.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 52.

⁶ See M. Beisert, *Rozwód. Proces radzenia sobie z kryzysem*, Poznań 2000.

researcher, there are typically three types of children's roles in a conflicted or divorced family⁷:

- The 'messenger' child serves a link between parents who cannot communicate except through an intermediary. The child expends too much energy adapting to the ever-changing conditions of life, making it impossible for him or her to fulfil other age-specific social roles. This type of behaviour is illustrated by the example: "When you go to Daddy's house tell him..."
- The 'scapegoat' child is often unconsciously blamed by the parents for the breakdown of the relationship and it is the child on whom all their anger is focused. In extreme cases, the child may be excluded from the family.
- The 'avenger' child is forced to take part in the war between their parents while being torn between them. He or she feels alienated in his or her needs, breaks off previously established relationships with peers.

A study conducted by Jadwiga Izdebska in 2003 found that 57% of children experience stress after their parents' divorce. They also feel anxiety and the need to turn back time. 47% experience loneliness, emptiness and grief, while 6% of respondents feel relief. Almost all children (97%) felt lonely in families broken by divorce, they said they were very sad, cried, expected visits from their father, and at the same time experienced feelings such as shame and jealousy⁸. According to Henryk Cudak's study, despair, fear, and anxiety were the most common emotions manifested by the youngest children aged 7 to 9 years. Feelings of sadness, lack of security and sense of life were most often indicated by 10-12 year old children, and in the highest percentage they expressed anger, malice, aggression towards the separation of their parents⁹.

Cudak classified four main types of feelings that occur in children upon hearing about their parents' divorce as negative reactions: indifference, or apathy, external aggression or even self-aggression, a sense of helplessness, and instability of emotional moods. The child ceases to be interested in anything, feels emptiness and boredom, idly spending

⁷ P. Vangysegheem, J. Appelboom, "Repercussions psychologiques du divorce parental chez l'enfant", *Rev Med. Brux* 2004, vol. 25, p. 421-482.

⁸ See J. Izdebska, *Dziecko osamotnione w rodzinie*, Białystok 2004.

⁹ See H. Cudak, *Funkcjonowanie dzieci z małżeństw rozwiedzionych*, Toruń 2003.

leisure time. Having learned about the divorce, the children limit their own activity and give up on many of their earlier occupations. They demonstrate a fear of the future, predicting many disasters and failures in their further lives. They experience lowered self-esteem and self-confidence, as well as a large amplitude of emotional moods, from euphoria to sadness. They develop a sense of emptiness and meaninglessness of life, which only intensifies their emotional dysregulation. External aggression manifests itself in them through violent and aggressive reactions to people closest to them or to people functioning outside the family. Cudak's research allows us to state that parents inform their children about alleged or actual betrayals, dishonesty, go as far as bribery and undermining the authority of the other party, sometimes they even try to break the bonds between them and the child. The child becomes stubborn, lies, and shows aggression towards the environment, including parents¹⁰. It can also be expressed in the form of silent aggression, that is, resistance, rebellion, malice. If the aggression in a child can't be solved by different forms of negative activity or destructive behaviour, it can transform into self-aggression, which is expressed in destroying one's own person, self-mutilation, suicide attempts, as well as alcoholism and drug addiction¹¹.

The impact of divorce on children varies at different stages of development. At the same time, depending on the age, a child attributes different degrees of importance to the crisis in the family.

Judith Wallerstein places divorce in the developmental cycle of the family and treats it as one of the ways of solving the family crisis. The process of coping with divorce by children and adolescents is described by the author as a series of tasks in a hierarchical time order¹². The process of reorganizing one's life consists of 6 stages: awareness of marital breakdown, detachment from conflict, coping with losses, anger management, accepting the permanence of the breakdown, new relationships.

1. Awareness of the breakdown of the parents' marriage: the child must acknowledge this fact and try to understand the cause. He or

¹⁰ See H. Cudak, "Sytuacja emocjonalna dziecka w trakcie procesu rozwodowego rodziców", [in:] *Rodzina polska u progu XXI wieku*, ed. H. Cudak, Łowicz 1997.

¹¹ See H. Cudak, *Funkcjonowanie dzieci z małżeństw rozwiedzionych*, op. cit.

¹² See M. Farnicka, "Jak sobie radzić z rozwodem rodziców. Według koncepcji Wallerstein", *Problemy Rodziny* 1991, no. 1, p. 67-71.

she has trouble understanding his or her parents' behaviour, and a lack of information about what is happening can foster blame or fantasies about a happy family.

2. Separation from the parents' conflict and resumption of normal pursuits: a child should gain a psychological distance from the parents' problems, which is facilitated by all group extracurricular activities and support in the peer group. An important role is also played by the school counsellors, who should help the child to release negative emotions connected with parents' separation.
3. Coping with the losses resulting from the parents' divorce: a child experiences intensely the loss of material security, support from both parents, as well as status and prestige. Due to the change of residence, he/she loses friends and school. According to Judith Wallerstein, one way to help compensate for these losses is to maintain a relationship with both parents.
4. Dealing with anger and self-blame: a big danger at this stage is that a child distances himself/herself from the parent with whom he/she feels particular anger. The solution is letting go of the guilt and forgiving the parent.
5. Acceptance of the permanence and irreversibility of divorce: a child should by this point have regained his or her emotional stability and overcome the stress of leaving a parent. However, he or she does not stop dreaming about his or her parents reconciling.
6. Achieving realistic hopes for interpersonal relationships: the final stage involves a readiness to enter into relationships with others. A child defines his or her relationships with parents and, in time, with their new families, and gains confidence and trust in his or her own competence in maintaining relationships with other people¹³.

According to Judith Wallerstein, when determining the order in which the stages occur, it is not possible to talk about the length of the stages. It will depend primarily on the quality of the emotional bond with the parents, the age of the child, external help and many other factors that determine the child's psychological development¹⁴.

¹³ See M. Farnicka, "Sposoby radzenia sobie z rozwodem przez dzieci", *Problemy Opiekuńczo-Wychowawcze* 2000, no. 1, p. 6-8.

¹⁴ See J. Wallerstein, "Children of Divorce: The Psychological Tasks of the Child", *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 1983, no. 53, p. 230-243.

METHODOLOGY

The phenomenon of divorce is usually examined from the perspective of the causes, effects, or people to whom it happens. It is rarely explored from the children's point of view. Hence, the purpose of this research was to reveal this cognitive perspective and determine the image of parents as perceived by children from divorced families. The key task concerned such issues as: the way in which a child in a divorced family perceives him or herself and other family members, the place of significant people, significant life moments, and key decisions in sustaining the argument.

Operationalisation of the research objectives made it possible to formulate the following research questions: What is the image of parents in the perception of children from divorced families? How does the child perceive the relationship between the parents? How has divorce affected the perception of the mother and what feelings dominate the relationship with her? How has divorce affected the perception of the father and what feelings dominate the relationship with him?

Qualitative research methods were used in this study. The methodological framework of the research is set by the rules of grounded theory. The study also made use of Fritz Schutz's method of narrative interview analysis, which is based on elements such as theoretical comments, argumentative comments and background constructions. These have been collectively referred to as glosses. They are divided into three groups: relations with the mother, relations with the father, and relations between parents. The quotations attached to the glosses helped to show the image of the family and the way of thinking about parents¹⁵.

Given the purpose and method of the study, it became important to select a sample that met the following requirements: coming from divorced families with parents living separately, being at least 18 years old, and giving consent to record the interview. As a result, consent was obtained from 3 people meeting these criteria. All respondents are students at the University of Warmia and Mazury and voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. The average interview time was one hour.

¹⁵ See K. Konecki, *Studia z metodologii badań jakościowych. Teoria ugruntowana*, Warszawa 2000.

According to the procedure, the interview was recorded on a voice recorder. The audio recordings were used to understand how the participants organize their speech¹⁶. Subsequently, they were transcribed. During the transcription, the length of pauses occurring during the narrative (silence, sudden breaks), various paraverbal signals (e.g., laughter, sighs), emphasized spoken words, etc. were marked in the text using various symbols¹⁷. The use of the narrative method made it possible to collect rich biographical material, which was subjected to qualitative analysis.

ADULT CHILDREN OF DIVORCED PARENTS – A SKETCH FOR A PORTRAIT

The participants of the study are female students between the ages of 21 and 26 and come from the Warmińsko-Mazurskie Region. They have not yet started their own families and live with their mothers. In the future, as they say, they intend to get married and have children, and a professional career is not a priority for them. They are studying pedagogy and administration. The girls come from families whose parents have university degrees. Each of them has experienced the family structure disruption, although it occurred at different stages of their lives. The family breakdown left a permanent mark on their psyche and influenced their future life choices and the way they perceived their parents. The youngest, Ania, was only four years old at the time of the divorce and, as she says, no longer remembers that moment. Dominika was eighteen when her father left her for another woman and, according to the girl, waited until her daughters came of age. Karolina, on the other hand, was twenty-one years old, and she says that she fully understood what was going on in her parents' marriage.

Karolina's parents divorced 3 years ago, in 2005. Her father "had been in a stable relationship with a woman for 8 years". The atmosphere in Karolina's family home can be characterized as traumatizing. Since childhood she was raised by perpetually bickering parents. Her father

¹⁶ See D. Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data. A Guide to the Principles of Qualitative Research*, London 2011.

¹⁷ See K. Konecki, *Studia z metodologii badań jakościowych*, op. cit.

was constantly absent, and poor communication was evident even before the divorce.

When I went to elementary school, things started to break down between my parents. They started arguing, bickering, something was wrong [...] Often, when I was little, my father would go to Sweden for a few months and when he came back everything was fine, and then after some time it was bad again, they argued. They bickered.

The psychological defence mechanism of denial masks the deep and painful trauma she experienced even before the divorce. After several years, growing tensions in her parents' disintegrating marriage led to a disruption in Karolina's sense of security. She emphasizes her helplessness in the face of family problems:

And I watched it all from the side [...] The arguments, that. I wanted all this to be next to me, but unfortunately it didn't work out, as I was watching it, it definitely affected me. I always said so, that it doesn't affect me, that it's their life. But I was deceiving myself, it wasn't true [...] I was suppressing everything somewhere inside me.

Anna was the only one who experienced her parents' divorce when she was a small child, she was four years old and does not remember this event. The cause of the divorce was alcohol, not infidelity as in the previous case.

They divorced when I was four years old. I was very little, and frankly speaking I don't remember it very well. [...] Later my mother told me that my father used to drink, and I think that's why my mother divorced him. Because she didn't want an alcoholic husband and a troublemaker at home. Of course my parents argued, but that was when my dad would come home drunk and make fuss about something. [...] It has always been a normal situation for me.

According to the girl, at the moment their contacts are relatively good.

Dad comes to visit us, visits us, lives with us. Then he moves out to his apartment. Well. We still keep in touch. [...] We always worry about each other. We think about what's going on over there. I can say it's a bit strange, because my parents are divorced, but they still keep in touch, sleep together, meet up.

Dominika also comes from a dysfunctional family, conflicted and arguing. Her father left in 2001 for another woman.

My dad separated from my mom 7 years ago in 2001. At first because of some infatuation with another woman. [...] My mom was very upset as it was after 20 years of relationship that he separated. [...] Once they said that my father left because he was waiting for us to come of age. And that was true because I was 18 and my sister was 17. And so he left.

It can be assumed that before the divorce a certain coalition was formed between the daughters and the father, a subsystem that excluded the presence of the mother. Dominika rationalizes her mother's decision to stay home during vacations with the fact that she was tired of taking care of the children.

Dad was a big sportsman all his life. He played sports. [...] we took all the vacations with dad, mom stayed at home. She was more of a homebody. Before, when they were going out together, of course they travelled together. Then I think she got tired, because she took care of us all her life. Well, dad was always at work, as a man always is. He used to come [...] and go to trainings.

After the separation from her husband, Dominika's mother shifted her aggression from her husband to her daughter, whom she also turned against her father.

Mom was very upset. And that had an impact on me, you know. I was so unaccepted by my mother. [...] All my life I only liked my daddy. My mother told me so when he had just split up with my mother. [...] At first, right after the breakup, mom hated me. She blamed me for everything. She couldn't look at me because she knew I looked like him. Every face, every behaviour, you're like daddy. You're like daddy. [...] For a long time I resembled my dad

very much. But with time our relations started to rebuilt somehow. Then I started to support my mom.

An intergenerational coalition was formed between the mother and the daughter against the father. Dominika became entangled in the divorce process because she wanted to meet her mother's expectations in order not to lose her.

[...] But as time passed and she saw my attitude towards all this, the fight for child support became necessary. And when it came to the court hearing, it was hard for me too, I cried. My dad disowned us completely, saying some very ugly things in court [...] My dad completely pushed us away, he didn't want to see me or my sister, he didn't want to talk to us. He didn't pay any money for us. It was as if he didn't know us. He didn't say good morning to my mom on the street.

The fighting between Dominika's parents led to the destruction of her relationship with her father. The mother, being an obsessive estranger, made the girl stop relying on her own opinions, taking on the negative image of her father from her betrayed mother. She became a tool in the fight during the trial.

Well, my mom fought for that money for us. Good thing the judge called me. Because I think that only my sister, who's a year younger than me, would have been more affected by it. Well, I'm glad that didn't happen, because she still has that love for her father. She respects him. And it kind of made a big impression on her, I don't know. But she still values him, still wants to keep in touch, still wants [...] him to be there. She really cares about it, she really needs it. I also need it, but on a completely different level. As a friend. For example to get advice.

As a result of the division of property after the divorce, the flat where Dominica's mother lives was divided between the spouses. This is another reason that prevents the homeostasis of the family system.

It's a strange situation, because my dad is currently living [...] with my grandfather, his father. [...] he is 98 years old.[...] his sister got the whole

apartment after the grandfather and he will have nowhere to go. And he will come home. My mom will live in one room and my dad will live in the other room, God forbid with his woman. I don't wish my mother such a life. For today, I want my dad to live the life he's chosen. He's chosen this path.

All three girls have developed the defence mechanism of fantasizing. On the one hand, they are happy that their parents have separated, because they were fed up with the arguments between them, but at the same time one gets the impression that they still dream of being together again. This is evidenced by the number of statements about their parents getting back together.

(Ania): I would certainly prefer us living together, having a family, but I think that if we were to be together and our parents were to quarrel, argue, call each other names and do other things, I would rather they split up. [...] It would certainly be easier financially and emotionally. But I also say that if [...] my parents were to quarrel and still be together I would rather they were apart.

(Dominika): Right now, I wouldn't want him to come back. I just want her to have peace and quiet. I just want her to have her own place.

(Karolina): I said right away that if you want to get back together, I won't live there, I'll move out. Because I don't want to go through that again. And I decided that there was no point in them being together if they were to argue and I had to go through all that and so on, it was really tiring, sometimes you can't stand it anymore. For example, I said that if they got together, I wouldn't want to be there in that house. Because I know that everything will be super fine between my parents, and then there will be arguments again, yelling.

In Karolina's opinion, it seems that her parents' post-divorce relationships are quite good, thus setting the right example for her daughter. Despite some dysfunction, there has been an apparent homeostasis in her family. They are still able to care for each other and relate to each other with respect. The girl observes her parents closely and draws conclusions about what is good.

(Karolina): Relations between us are stable now [...] We meet occasionally. [...] He comes for every women's day, he tries to remember, he comes with flowers. [...] He asks how mom feels, when mom is sick he always brings some medicine. [...] He treats mom like a woman, not like an object. Even though he divorced her.

The study found that none of the girls currently have a good relationship with their father. Their contacts are rare, which is influenced by many factors. For each of them the reason for this state of affairs is different. At the same time, all three declare that they would like to have a better relationship with their father, to be able to hug and talk to him. In this case, the denial mechanism is at work.

(Karolina): I also, for example, say that somewhere I don't need a father and so on, but I am fooling myself. Everyone needs both parents. Both mom and dad. And somewhere in there I definitely miss my father [...] My mother asked me once if I miss my father and I said that I don't, but somewhere deep inside I just feel a longing.

Even though her father hurt Karolina, she still misses him, but she carefully hides her feelings. Similar suppressed emotions are manifested by Ania and Dominika.

(Ania): I'd rather he hugged me and stroked me than gave me this 50 PLN.

(Dominika): I might want a hug, but it's so...

Karolina has never had a good relationship with her father, there has never been a well-developed daughter-father subsystem.

He always complained to me about why I needed this or that, a new jacket or shoes, and there was always a problem arguing about it. [...] When he lived with us when I was younger, it was terrible. We argued about everything all the time. [...] He used to nag me for everything. I mean he oppressed me. He picked on me for various things. We argued all the time.

The emotional bond with the father was upset.

I was just so nervous. At times, I really couldn't stand it anymore. Dad has no patience for children. I remember when he was teaching me math at school, it was really hard, he used to shout at me, I don't know, call me names. [...] he's not fit for a family. [...] he's not really mature enough to have a family and I don't know if he will. He shouldn't have started a family. It seems that her father always had exaggerated ambitions for her, which the girl was unable to fulfil. He's also made up his own ideal of a little daughter.

Anna also does not have a good relationship with her father. In her opinion, he is a boozier and a troublemaker.

There is a distance between them. My relationship with my dad is a little bit worse [...] he is so haughty [...] there is a big distance between us. [...] Dad is such a man that he wouldn't accept any boyfriend. of mine [...] Dad also likes to drink sometimes. And recently when he came and my mom didn't want to let him in because he was drunk and she doesn't want to talk to him when he's drunk, he just wanted to get in the door, broke off the handle and we had to call a locksmith. She resents her father for not being able to show her affection. It always hurt me that my dad would say I love you because I give you so much money. And that's not what it was about. That's what I'd like to mention as the relationship between me and my dad, because he always said I love you because I give you this much and that much money, and I'd rather he just hugged me, stroked me, than gave me that 50 PLN.

Dominika was the only one who was the so-called daddy's girl, she idealized her father, considering him her authority. At first she formed a coalition with him. Everything changed when she was about fifteen and caught him cheating on her. This was a pivotal moment in their relationship. From that point on, their relationship changed. Her father never talked to her about what happened. He did not try to explain to the child what she had witnessed. The girl personifies her father's rejection through the fish.

Before that, I was maybe 15, 14 years old. We once came home from a vacation from a shared lake house and found my dad with his lover. I mean mistress. With a young girl in bed together. Mom said something and told

dad to pack his things. And told him to think it over. I thought they'd split up, but they didn't. Dad arrived with a bouquet of flowers. He apologized to Mom. After a week of being apart, I guess. He never talked to us about it. I was keeping an aquarium at that time. And I came home, and the first thing I saw was all the fish floating on top, cooked [...] the aquarium had been neglected. I don't know. I guess he didn't feed them or some hot water splashed all over there. So at first, it was a big experience for me, then when I entered the room and saw a young girl in bed, I started to call her names. I started using ugly words. I insulted her there. And I remember that my uncle brought us from the summer house that day, because my dad supposedly didn't have time, and my uncle explained to us that this happens in the movies and in real life it's the same. I'll never forget that; it happens in the movies and it's the same in real life.

The decision about divorce changed her father's image in her eyes. The girl stopped talking to him and said that he was not an authority figure for her anymore.

Then when one day he came up to me and said that Dominika didn't want to talk to me at all anymore and I said that she was no longer an authority figure for me.

This statement is indicative of the father's attempts to establish a relationship with his daughter who created an emotional distance between them, excluding him from the family system. She stopped perceiving him as an ideal father. The account shows that only her sister, who was not involved in the trial, still preserved the image of a loving daddy who could be relied upon, and thus did not become a party to the conflict. Dominika was filled with anger for what had happened. She shifted the blame for the divorce onto her father, and the love, care, and devotion of her parent was forgotten. This is a stage called de-idealizing the father, characterized by aggressively questioning his authority.

We had nothing in common. There was an everlasting war between us. [...] Dad criticized me a lot for that. And we both called each other names. We were unkind to each other. It was like that. From such great love to such great hatred.

On the other hand, Karolina's family is characterized by a lack of communication, alienation of individual members of the system. The unannounced departure of Karolina's father had a devastating effect on her psyche and became a turning point in their relationship. Even though she had previously sensed that her parents were not happy with each other, neither she nor her mother expected her father to file for divorce.

My dad didn't talk about the divorce at all, we were surprised by it, the summons came for the divorce hearing. I was surprised in general, but I even wanted them to get divorced. [...] Dad didn't say anything. It's always been typical of him that he doesn't say anything, he just does it by surprise. When the petition for divorce came, I was completely shocked. A day after we received it, I was on my way to school and on the bus I was crying, because it had come to me, somehow I was surprised and I couldn't, I was driving and crying, it was a shock. Even though I wanted them to get a divorce, it was a shock [...] it wasn't pleasant for me or my mom. When I met him a few days later, I told him off and my dad said: Say what you want, after all you wanted us to get divorced. Well, yes, but you could have warned us that you were filing for divorce, not all of a sudden [...] And he didn't say anything, he just laughed.

She was also shocked to learn that her father had remarried without informing either his daughter or his ex-wife. Karolina heard about it from her mother and afterwards she called her cousin who lived in the same block as them. It turned out that her father had forbidden the whole family to talk about the incident. During that conversation she also learned that she would have a half-sister. This indicates a very poor emotional relationship between her and her father.

Anyway, my dad got married to that woman. That year in February. He didn't say anything either. I found out by complete surprise. By accident. Mom found out in time. Through some random, indirect source. When she told me, I took it easy, too. Well, he made a life for himself, O.K. That's his business. He has the right to it. [...] But after half an hour it hit me that he had got married and hadn't told me anything, his own daughter. I was simply shocked. I couldn't stand it. [...] My father even didn't allow anyone

to talk about the fact that he'd married. It killed me completely. He simply outdid himself.

Initially, Karolina did not want to meet her father's new wife, even though he had been involved with her for eight years. The father was striving for this, but the daughter was reluctant. Perhaps that was the main reason for the fact that the father decided to conceal his wedding from her. He knew perfectly well that his daughter did not accept him and there was no point in insisting further.

Karolina changed her decision only when she found out that she would become a sister. I met Aśka, dad's wife. After that I didn't want to know her. Although a few times my dad tried to get us together, but I didn't want to. But finally I found out that she was pregnant and I thought that if I was going to have siblings, it would be a good idea to meet her. So we met. And it wasn't so bad.

Perhaps the girl thought that if she liked her father's new family, it would be equivalent to betraying her mother. So she preferred to dismiss her father's new partner, which is a certain defence mechanism. The father formed a new family, and the girl entered into a coalition with her mother. They created a certain homeostasis by excluding her father from the system.

Karolina, like Dominika, rationalizes the problems between her parents and sees her father as a womanizer who left her mother for a younger woman. It is easier for her to shift the blame to her father than to destroy her mother's ideal image. At the same time, at the very beginning of the interview she emphasized that even before the divorce her father had been in a steady relationship with a woman for eight years. Karolina's conclusion that her father was a womanizer was not based on her own opinions, but on her mother's. This is evidenced by her statement, which emphasizes that her mother felt he had been cheating on her.

Even though my father had such a penchant for women, he was a ladies' man, and my mother said that she felt that he had had some women there, but they were fleeting relationships. They were kind of, how shall I say, that kind of thing. Just to get in the sack and that was it.

Dominika's father has become an example of promiscuity and lack of stability in his feelings. Just like Karolina she calls him a womanizer.

The man I knew until then was my dad I loved him very much, he was the ideal of every little girl's dad and everything just changed so dramatically. Now I know my dad as a womanizer. I know him as a grown up man with a kid inside him all the time. Now he's currently been with a girl, probably for 4 years, who is 25 years younger than him. He doesn't really have any plans. He doesn't live with her. She has a son. It just kind of happened. I suspect it was only to get laid.

As a result of the presence of dysfunction in each of the families, the girls had a disrupted mother-daughter relationship. In the family system, after the father's departure, the roles played by each family member changed. All three rejected their fathers outside the family system, forming intergenerational coalitions with their mothers, with whom they have a friendly relationship. They can talk to each other about anything and confide in each other.

(Dominika): She is my friend. We confide in each other about everything.

(Karolina): I have always had better contact with my mom than with my dad. [...] We don't keep secrets from each other. [...] You know, when two women are under the same roof, sometimes there's some tension [...] and there are arguments.

(Ania): I can talk to my mom about everything, I can tell her everything. [...] I have a really good contact with my mom. We are like friends. I can ask her anything and I know she will do it for me.

In the case of Karolina and Dominika, after forming a coalition with their mother, the role played by the girls in the family was disturbed, and the mechanism of projection of their mother's problems by their daughters occurred. The girls became their mothers' therapists, supporting them at every step. Karolina feels emotionally obliged to support her parent. She prefers to conceal her own feelings or lie hoping to comfort her. She tries to protect her mother

because she knows that she suffers because her husband left her for another woman.

Even for a moment I was reassuring my mother that the divorce petition had finally come.[...] So that I would try to reassure my mother and myself. Then I come home and don't tell my mother this, because it still hurts her, because she was involved with my father for almost 30 years. [...] For my mother I am still an only child.

Although she is happy to have a younger half-sibling, she pushes these feelings out of her consciousness, thinking that revealing them could cause her mother pain.

I am a half-sister and I am really happy about it [...] although I try not to say that I love my sister in front of my mother, because it might hurt her. This is her ex-husband's child with another woman. I try not to talk about it too much because it hurts her. Sometimes she tries to say okay, stop saying things like that.

Because the family is a self-regulating system, it strives for homeostasis, or balance. Both Ania's and Karolina's mother found a new partner to replace her husband in the family system. This led to the girls' rationalization mechanism. Both believe that their mothers did this out of fear of loneliness. This is confirmed by Karolina's statement:

My mother [...] seems to have someone, but it is a sick relationship, so to speak. Mom does not love this guy, she just does not want to be alone. Mom sometimes misses dad.

At the same time they both downplay the value of these new partners.

INTERPRETATION AND RECOMENDATIONS

Families in the 21st century are forced into a constant struggle to maintain homeostasis in the system. They can achieve it through transformation or by one member leaving the system, which is sometimes the

only chance to maintain balance. Therefore, the number of divorced families, not necessarily dysfunctional, in which more and more children are being raised, is increasing. This phenomenon affects their further functioning in the society, which inspired us to undertake research on this topic, for which we selected three children from divorced families. The research conducted on the children's perception of their parents from divorced families revealed that they have only seemingly a good opinion of their parents.

Divorce can have a positive or negative impact on child's development, with the way conflicts are resolved in the family playing a crucial role. It can be resolved positively, leading family members to grow and challenge their love. In the case of a negative resolution of the crisis in the family system, an individual falls into depressive states, seeks to justify his or her behaviour by activating defence mechanisms such as rationalization, projection, fantasizing, isolation, regression, repression, or resignation. This results in a developmental decline, which entails further changes in behaviour and experiences.

The conducted research shows that none of the respondents has dealt with the consequences of their parents' divorce. The effects of this traumatic event can be felt even many years after the divorce, and affect many aspects of their lives, mainly interpersonal relations and perception of themselves and the surrounding world. Children from divorced families often blame their parents for their failures in life. They are afraid of entering into permanent emotional relations with other people for fear of rejection. As in the case of Urszula Sokal's work, the research shows that the girls were unable to establish intimate contacts, for fear of their partner's betrayal. They also avoid conflict situations, which stems from their experiences from a divided family. They prefer to live with only one parent rather than risk participating in subsequent quarrels. A similar thesis can be found in the works of Henryk Cudak, Jadwiga Izdebska and many other researchers. They emphasize that divorce cannot be considered only as a negative experience, because children strive for peace and improvement of the family atmosphere.

Research has shown that children from divorced families have better relationships with their mothers than with their fathers. Similar suggestions were also made by Józefa Pielkowa. According to her research, 2.5% of children had a negative attitude towards their mothers,

while 81.1% towards their fathers. This, however, is not related to the syndrome of one parent being isolated, contrary to what Richard A. Gardner argues in his research. He believes that the mother's actions alienate the father and worsen his relationship with the child. In the case of the examined subjects, the bond between them was broken due to a lack of effective communication, but this cannot be seen as a negative role of the mothers. It turns out that they care about good relations between their children and ex-husbands¹⁸. Only in one case was the child drawn into the conflict surrounding the divorce, but the child stopped idealizing the father even before the divorce. In the case when the divorce was caused by the father's departure to another woman, the mechanism of depreciation of his new partner occurred, as well as the mechanism of rationalization in the form of perceiving the father as a womanizer.

In all cases the daughters had friendly relations with their mothers, formed coalitions with them and became their therapists, while idealizing them. Mothers who lack emotional support in their husbands seek it in their children, which is consistent with the research conducted by Józef Rembowski¹⁹. In such situations the emotional bond, though strong, is marked by emotional possessiveness. Although problems have been transferred from mothers to daughters, the girls can only rely on their assessment of the situation in the family.

The following conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the study:

1. There are no institutions and places of pedagogical and psychological care, which would help children to construct anew the family system and to cope with emotions. Many negative effects of divorce can be avoided by proper work with children.
2. It is necessary to spread the knowledge that divorce causes harm to all members of the family, not just the spouses. Oftentimes parents unknowingly hurt their children. Among other things, this information should also be provided in the process of teacher training.

¹⁸ See R. A. Gardner, "Parental Alienation Syndrome vs. Parental Alienation: Which Diagnosis Should Evaluators Use in Child - Custody Disputes?", *The American Journal of Family Therapy* 2002, vol. 30, p. 93-115.

¹⁹ See J. Rembowski, *Rodzina w świetle psychologii*, Warszawa 1986.

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