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**PHD THESIS**

**Summary**

**POST-DIVORCE FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS. THE PARENTAL CONFLICT AND ITS  
IMPACT ON THE WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN**

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## INTRODUCTION

Family crises that culminate in divorce are a global, ever-expanding social phenomenon. In Romania, divorce rates have swelled considerably between 2010 and 2020, with an average of 31,000 divorce cases / year. The fact that such rates still remain high, points towards the need for specialized psychological interventions, both for former couple partners and especially for their children.

The PhD thesis entitled *“Post-Divorce Family Relationships. The Parental Conflict and Its Impact on the Well-Being of Children”* takes the psychological problems identified in the counselling sessions addressed to divorced families as a starting point and brings consistent research evidence towards ensuring the support children need, post-divorce.

The first part of the thesis, *“Post-Divorce Family Processes”*, is structured in three chapters, namely *“The Evolution of Divorce Rates in Romania and the Specific Needs of Children”*, *“Coparenting and Parental Conflict”* and *“Post-Divorce Psychological Interventions”*.

The second part of the thesis, *“Research Evidence in Post-Divorce Processes”*, contains three studies, a qualitative one (a pilot-program of an intervention, addressed to three conflictual families, with children) and two quantitative (validating the Coparenting Relationships Scale on the Romanian population, as well as identifying the factors that influence post-divorce coparenting).

In *the first part*, statistical data and legislative benchmarks in the field of divorce are presented, as well as an exhaustive analysis of the scientific literature on the impact of divorce on the child and parents. The risks conflictual divorce has on the psychological well-being of the child are also highlighted, as well as its the consequences on the participating adults. Highly conflictual divorce, the one which has a devastating impact on its protagonists, is approached as a distinct topic, as are the factors (research evidence) which facilitate the post-divorce coping of partners and children. *Optimal coparenting* is addressed both as a *factor in post-divorce coping* and as an *intervention objective* in highly conflictual divorces. The following are presented: coparenting types; personal and relational factors involved in the conflict and in the quality of the coparenting process; the particularities of parental alienation; the markers of optimum parenting competence

and the impact of parental conflict on the child. Another section of the first part of the thesis is comprised of discussions on the role of the psychotherapeutic intervention when coparenting – successful psychotherapeutic models, are analyzed alongside their advantages and limitations, with emphasis on the integrative model of intervention. This model takes into account: the need for a multilevel understanding of families (especially the psychosocial foundations of the partners' behavior), the personological peculiarities of parents (the presence/ absence of psychiatric pathology) and provides the key constructs of the specific intervention.

The *second* part of the thesis includes: a qualitative research (three case studies) and two quantitative research studies, respectively:

► **Study 1**, “*A Model of Psychotherapeutic Intervention in Conflictual Coparenting – Three Case Studies*”, has the objective to test the psychotherapeutic intervention in three divorced families, with moderate levels of interparental conflict, in which there is a refusal of child-parent contact. The intervention was aimed exclusively at the parental dyad, and its purpose was to obtain a cooperative coparenting relationship, in which contact between the child and the rejected parent would be restored. For the parents’ assessment, four psychological questionnaires were applied, in addition to an exhaustive interview guide on parental history, a structured interview on the child's rejection behaviors towards the parent and the frequency of interpersonal contacts, and a checklist of alienating behaviors. Six interviews were conducted in each case: one with each parent, one with the parental dyad, an interview with the child and an interview in the parent-child dyad, each one hour and a half in length. Ten individual one-hour long intervention sessions and ten two-hour long sessions were held with each parental dyad. In total, there were 150 hours of psychological intervention sessions in the three cases, which completed the program with favorable results;

► **Study 2**, “*The Validation of the Coparenting Relationship Scale on the Romanian Population*” (*Coparenting Relationship Scale*, Feinberg *et al.*, 2012), was one of the proprietary methodological contributions. The need for an instrument to evaluate coparenting surfaced during the development of the psychotherapeutic intervention program. This measure is widely used in international studies, and has been validated in most western and northern European countries. No such measure had been previously adapted to the Romanian population, which justified a robust validation approach on our end. The sample included 504 participants (287 female and 217 male),

aged between 25 and 64, with between one and four children. All researchers in the field as well as clinical psychologists who conduct legal and court assessments can now avail of this scale;

► **Study 3**, *An Investigation into Intra- and Interparental Factors that Influence Post-Divorce Coparenting*, aimed – and succeeded – to identify *individual characteristics that can influence the quality of coparenting relationships after divorce* (dysfunctional cognitive schemas, parental competencies, cognitive-affective coping strategies) and the *interaction factors* (grounds for divorce, the experience of divorcing and pre-divorce relationships). The sample of the study consisted of 169 participants, aged between 24 and 61 years. These psychological variables that predispose former partners to dysfunctional behaviors were examined. The results indicated associations between *dysfunctional cognitive schemas* and *dysfunctional coparenting behaviors*. The schemas of punishment, negativity, subjugation, vulnerability also showed significant associations with the dysfunctional aspects of coparenting, even if these correlations were smaller. Schemas of abandonment/instability, inadequacy/shame, protectiveness, subjugation, seeking approval and negativism were more pronounced in people who divorced after an infidelity.

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This extensive research in the field of assessment and intervention in divorce cases is the first endeavor of this kind in Romania. It is both an exploratory venture as well as an innovative one. It offers a new measure, the Coparenting Relations Scale, adapted to the Romanian population, which can then be used in research and practice.

The pilot program of multilevel intervention, carried out within the research framework of integrative psychotherapy and its methods and techniques of intervention, proved its effectiveness – it had positive effects both at the individual level and in terms of the interaction between parents and the relationship between the child and the rejected parent.

In the quantitative study, the proposed hypotheses were supported by the data. Identifying post-divorce conflictual factors (individual, relational and environmental) and how they influence the relationship between parents facilitates the creation of effective parental intervention programs, both individual and addressed to the parental dyad.

**PART ONE**  
**POST-DIVORCE FAMILY PROCESSES**

**CHAPTER 1. THE EVOLUTION OF DIVORCE RATES IN ROMANIA AND THE  
SPECIFIC NEEDS OF CHILDREN**

In the grand web of interpersonal relationships weaved throughout the life of any individual, family and parental relationships stand out, in their sheer complexity. They are related to the dynamics of the parental couple and the relationships established by each parent with their child or children. When the family unit is split by divorce, both types of relationships are disrupted. Divorce, a phenomenon with a major impact in today's society, causes family members to have to adapt to a series of profound changes, mobilize all the resources at their disposal and redefine existing relationships with their former partner and children. In the scientific literature, divorce ("*the legal dissolution of a marriage/official ties between husband and wife*" – DEX) is a potential crisis-generating factor (Vrasti, 2012).

Divorce rates are dependent on the cultural values of the society it takes place in (Iqbal *et al.*, 2021). There are higher divorce rates in individualistic societies compared to socialist ones (Dion & Dion, 2005; Toth & Kemmelmeier, 2009).

Research evidence shows that divorce has maladaptive consequences, impacting parents and children on a physical, psychological, and social level, over an indefinite period of time (Hetherington, 2003; Bauserman, 2012; Langton & Berger, 2011; Amato, 2010). Maladjustment is heightened when the child is raised by only one of the parents and is more common in mothers, where it also takes on economic implications, such as having to adapt to a lower standard of living (idem).

**1.1. Statistics and Legislative Benchmarks**

Family dynamics have undergone changes in all the countries that were exposed to the process of industrialization. If, before industrialization, the legal barriers against divorce were strong, and the divorce rates low, in the middle of the twentieth century, the legislative framework turned lenient and facilitated the dissolution of many marriages.

The impact of radical legislative changes (which defined the so-called *divorce revolution*) on the evolution of divorce rates was examined in scientific studies. Some highlight a long-term increase in divorce rates (Binner & Dnes, 2001; Brinig & Buckley, 1998; González & Viitanen, 2009; González-Val & Marcén, 2012), while others note only temporary increases (Gruber, 2004; Wolfers, 2006). Beyond the conflicting results, the scientific literature acknowledges that divorce rates started to increase before the legislative relief, which implies that the changes in the regulatory framework would be a consequence of the increase in the number of divorces, rather than a cause of this growth (Allen, 1998; Coelho & Garoupa, 2006; Sardon, 1996).

Divorce is a growing phenomenon worldwide, and our country is part of this global trend, as captured by the data of the National Institute of Statistics (INS). Between 2010 and 2020, Romania recorded an annual average of 31,000 divorces, of which 13,000 were divorces in families with one to five children. The International Institute of Statistics data highlights the following as causes of divorce: marital infidelity, alcoholism, physical violence, agreement of the parties, and a mix of these causes (2020). Other causes of divorce are attributed to the increase in working time, to the detriment of the time spent in the couple and to the relational estrangement. Divorce involves two fundamental areas of support – legislative, legal, and psychological

Although Romania has a growing divorce rate, there is little data on its effects. Moreover, we do not have adequate support and intervention strategies at our disposal, nor public policies aimed at supporting divorced families. We also lack a "healthy" divorce culture.

## **1.2. The Impact of Divorce on the Child**

Depending on the stage of development the child is in, there are a number of aspects where divorce can have an impact—cognitive, emotional, social, behavioral and somatic. The sum of all these influences reflects *the psychological impact divorce has on the child*. Both during the process of parental separation and afterwards, post-divorce, problems may arise in the areas mentioned.

### **1.2.1. Divorce and the Psychological Well-Being of the Child**

In a meta-analysis on the long-term effects of divorce on mental health and substance addiction among children, Auersperg *et al.* (2019) indicates associations between parental divorce and the following symptoms in children, listed in order of their bearing, or weight: depression, anxiety, suicide attempts and suicidal ideation, mental tension, alcohol, nicotine, and drug use. It



is necessary to direct the efforts of specialists towards programs through which the resilience of children impacted by parental divorce is developed, concluded the cited authors.

Children develop psychological problems especially when there is a chronic conflictual relationship between the parents before, during and after the divorce (Roizblatt *et al.*, 2018). In general, parental conflict is more pronounced immediately after divorce and decreases over time. But there are also cases in which the parental conflict becomes habitual after the divorce, more specifically when the parents do not agree on the child's future living home and personal relationship schedule. Yet, there is also research which revealed that the problems children from broken families have are not significantly more serious than those of the children from whole families (Ruschena *et al.*, 2005). As they are not directly involved in the actual parental conflict, children should not be affected by divorce directly, but by the consequences the divorce produces in the intra-familial dynamics up to that point, are the arguments of Amato (2010) and Salem *et al.* (2013). Research also shows that most children develop resilience and emotionally bounce back some time after the divorce (Wagner & Diamond, 2016; Davidson *et al.*, 2014), yet some of them still continue to have adaptation problems (Davidson *et al.*, 2014).

### **1.2.2. Family Breakup and the Child's Academic Success**

The studies point towards a negative association between the divorce of the parents and the academic success of the children (Amato, 2001; Jeynes, 2002).

School-age children are at greater risk. They develop depressive symptoms, of fear, loss and withdrawal, of anger and shame, they consider themselves responsible for the separation, as well as a possible reconciliation, they face conflicts of loyalty and decreased school performance. This impacts their emotional stability, their social interactions, and their behavior as a whole (idem).

Some studies examine the moderators of the association between parental divorce and child academic success, including the gender of the child. Neighbors, Forehand & Armistead (1992) argue that the negative effects of parental divorce on the success of children are stronger for girls than for boys.

Other researchers, however, do not report any interaction between gender and divorce in terms of the prediction of academic performance (Amato, 2001; Lansford *et al.*, 2006; Sun & Li, 2001).

The evidence is also mixed when it comes to the moderator role of children's age regarding the effect of parental divorce on the child's academic success. Amato (2001) and Jeynes (2002) posit that divorce has a stronger negative impact on the school performance of children in elementary school than on those enrolled in high school.

### **1.3. The Impact of Divorce on the Parents**

Divorce is a complex event and a turning point not only for the children, but also for the adults involved (Symoens *et al.*, 2014; Reed *et al.*, 2016; Russell *et al.*, 2016). Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1999) note that, following a divorce, the partners develop irritability, impulsivity, anxiety, and depression, which decreases their receptiveness and availability towards the child – who is subsequently deprived of essential affective resources and becomes vulnerable to environmental stressors (Anderson, 2020; Hardesty *et al.*, 2016). It is only after the parents restore balance in their personal lives, that their mental health and parental skills improve (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

How well former partners are able to adapt to the divorce would also depend on the quality of their relationship. The greater the post-divorce conflict, the higher the levels of depression they experience (Anderson, 2020).

Other post-divorce partnership issues concern separating of the role of parent from the role of partner and managing one's own feelings, in terms of negative affectivity resulting from previous unresolved conflicts (Wagner & Diamond, 2016).

Wallerstein (2005) noted that adults who have gone through a divorce situation may exhibit a regression of the Ego, which manifests through aggressive or sexual impulses, and is associated with moderate depression and feelings of inner emptiness, a perceived lack of personal value, all of which can degenerate into an identity crisis.

In most cases, the separation of partners involves a series of logistical and financial changes, emotional problems, including psychological mourning after loss, restructuring of self-identity, restoring the social network, managing the feeling of loneliness and reforming parental practices that lead to this major stress (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

In all cases, the ideal goal is to keep a harmonious relationship with the former partner, in order to facilitate the well-being of the parents and the child (Anderson, 2020). When parents cope

with the separation in a healthy way, the differences between children from divorced families and those from whole families disappear (Amato and Keith, 1991; Ruschena, 2005).

#### **1.4. Post-Divorce Adaptative Factors**

Issues with externalising and internalizing, academic success and the quality of social relations are frequent indicators of the quality of post-divorce adaptation, in the scientific literature of the field (Van Dijk *et al.*, 2020). Studies that lean on these indicators provide evidence that children of divorced parents have more emotional and school-related problems in addition to more problematic social relationships, than those in whole families (Demir-Dagdaz *et al.*, 2018). Størksen *et al.* (2005) reveals several difficulties children may face when having to adapt immediately after the divorce, but they tend to diminish or disappear after the initial adaptation period. The distress associated with divorce starts to improve after 18 months, and up to 2 years after the event, where the impact of divorce on the child alleviates or disappears completely at 5 year-mark (Qu *et al.*, 2014; Chase *et al.*, 1990). Among the factors involved in the adaptation of the post-divorce child are: the *age of the children* (Lansford *et al.*, 2006), *their adaptive capacity before divorce* (Chase-Lansdale *et al.*; 1995; Kasen *et al.*, 1996) *family income* (Hughes, 2005; Grall, 2007), *optimal coparenting* (Feinberg, 2003), *parental well-being* (Patterson & Forgatch, 1995; Hetherington, 1993; Simons, 1996), *parental skills* and *the support strategies the parents use* (Amato, 2000; Hetherington, 1999; Kelly & Emery, 2003; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000), and *the child's secure home environment and their own network of close ties* (Weaver *et al.*, 2015).

## CHAPTER 2. COPARENTING AND PARENTAL CONFLICT

### 2.1. Types of Coparenting and Possible Scenarios in the Parent-Child Relationship

Feinberg *et al.* (2012) define coparenting as the degree of coordination between the partners in terms of caring for and educating the child/children. An important aspect of this construct is how parents support each other in the exercise of parenthood. Sigal *et al.* (2011) view the parents' coordination during childcare as one of the basic features of coparenting. Coparenting does not include the sexual, romantic, friendly, emotional, financial, and legal aspects of the adults' relationships, but only those aspects that have to do with raising children.

Conflict in coparenting relationships is negatively associated with children's good school and social skills, while agreement between parents in the coparenting relationship is positively associated with children's great school and social skills (Cabrera *et al.*, 2012).

#### 2.1.1. Coparenting Assumptions

There are several perspectives on coparenting – effective, conflictual, cooperative coparenting, etc. Even though the parents are no longer in a couple relationship after the divorce, if their efforts are directed towards the proper development of the child, the chances of an effective coparenting increase (Symoens *et al.*, 2014; Wagner & Diamond, 2016; Jamison *et al.*, 2014).

Baum (2004) puts forth the model of coparenting as an either cooperative, individualized, or conflictual process. *Cooperative coparenting* is the highest-quality approach to coparenting after divorce and its markers are an increased parental functioning, moderate use of compromises and less frequent use of attack as a means of conflict resolution. *Parallel coparenting* is a mix between the cooperative and conflictual styles. This type of coparenting is characterized by the active involvement of the father, who aggressively exercises his paternal role, and by the mother's ability to compromise and avoid conflict. *Conflictual coparenting* is of the lowest quality approach – it is distinguished by an ineffective exercise of parental functions and inadequate conflict management, from both parents.

Coparenting, i.e. adequate, high-quality parenting, is an essential protective factor for the child both before, during and after the divorce (Birnbaum & Saini, 2015; Anderson, 2020; Stevenson *et al.*, 2013; Lamella & Figueiredo, 2016; Sandler *et al.*, 2013).

### **2.1.2. Coparenting in Divorced Families**

Studies on divorce have empirically documented that children exposed to a high level of parental conflict are at a higher risk of developing emotional and behavioral problems than children in non-conflict families (Emery, 1999, apud. Bornstein, 2019). In divorce, the fight between the parents is both for gaining authority and for the exercise of parental authority. In this struggle, the needs of the child are no longer in the foreground, but passed into the background, which prevents a cooperative coparenting relationship, which is vital for the healthy post-divorce adaptation of the child (idem).

### **2.1.3. Components of Coparenting**

A first component of coparenting is the *degree of consensus* among parents on child-related issues, which include moral values, behavioral expectations, disciplinary methods, ways to respond to the child's emotional needs, educational standards, and other priorities (Feinberg, 2002). Another component of coparenting is related to the *sharing of duties, tasks and responsibilities regarding the daily routine of child upbringing/care and home maintenance*, as well as *to legal, medical and financial issues related to the child*. The third component of coparenting is the *mutual support/undermining* continuum. In its positive facet, it implies the ability of each partner to support the other, through their attitudes and actions – statements about the competence of the other as a parent, respect for the contribution of the other, support for the decisions and authority of the other parent in front of the children (Belsky *et al.*, 1996; Feinberg, 2003). *Shared family management* or *joint management of family interactions* is the fourth dimension of coparenting and involves *controlling parent-parent behaviors and communication, establishing boundaries and limits, and a balanced contribution to interactions within the family*.

### **2.1.4. The Parent-Child Relationship According to Coparenting and Interparental Processes**

In an analysis of post-divorce coparenting, Lamela and Figueiredo (2016) revealed the association between conflictual coparenting and symptoms specific to children's behavioral disorders. Conflict is associated child internalization and externalization problems, with the mental health of the parents and with a strenuous process of adapting to the change implied by the divorce. Amato (2000) puts forth the *divorce-stress-adjustment perspective*, according to which the impact of this event on the child can be alleviated by the parental abilities of the mother and those of the

father. The careful and empathetic way in which parents relate to the child can increase their well-being and ability to adapt after the separation. Haugen (2010) describes the adaptive nature of appropriate post-divorce coparenting, in which the child is free to divide time equally between the residence of the father and that of the mother.

## **2.2. Parental alienation**

One of the most common types of post-divorce relationships are those characterized by conflict and a total or partial loss of contact between the child and one of the parents (Amato, 2000), as a result of their defamation by the other parent or by other people (i.e., parental alienation). Clemente *et al.* (2019) shows that between 1% and 5% of parents in post-divorce conflicts are willing to use their child to take revenge on their former partner, starting from requesting custody only to be exempt from having to pay alimony to the other parent, and even up to the physical or sexual abuse of the child for revenge.

To avoid confirmation error (Zapf & Dror, 2017), parental alienation is interpreted both through the filter of the research that supports it (Harman *et al.*, 2019; Verrocchio *et al.*, 2018; Balmer *et al.*, 2018; Tavares *et al.*, 2021), as well as that which challenges it (Lubit, 2019; Simring & Milchman, 2019; Mendes & Bucher-Maluschke, 2018). This approach is also justified in the light of the fact that parental alienation syndrome lacks demonstrated construct validity (Simring & Milchman, 2019). Nowadays, parental alienation is no longer conceptualized in its diagnostic form, as a syndrome, as Gardner originally suggested (1999), but as a phenomenon of varying intensity (Harman *et al.*, 2018), which disrupts family relationships after divorce and constitutes child abuse and a form of violence directed against the partner (Harman *et al.*, 2018; Harman *et al.*, 2019; Verrocchio *et al.*, 2018). Sometimes the child may reject a parent because of the abuse they subjected the child to, and not because of parental alienation (Lubit, 2019; Smith, 2016; Simring & Milchman, 2019) and it is crucial that this differentiation is achieved (Clemente & Padilla-Racero, 2016).

## **2.3. Parental Conflict Post-Divorce**

Davidson *et al.* (2014) define parental conflict as a spectrum that could start from a very low level, and reach high ones, with various aspects in between. It is hard to define increased conflict because most couples are highly conflictual in the time between the separation and the legal fulfillment of the divorce. The high degree of conflict would, in fact, be a *manifestation of*

*the hostility of the partners*, which continues after the divorce and spreads on several levels (economic, familial). It produces psychological symptoms or accentuates existing psychopathology (anxiety, depression or substance abuse) and often leads to an ineffective exercise of coparenting (idem).

## **2.4. Personal and Interparental Factors Involved in the Conflict and in the Quality of coparenting**

Johnston (1994) is the author who formulated the first (and only theory) that attempts to explain the factors/mechanisms through which conflictual post-divorce relationships arise and are maintained. According to his theory, conflictual relationships would be the result of the interaction of three categories of factors, located at three levels: *individual, interactionist and external*. At the *individual level*, vulnerabilities (of the parents' personality) interact with the emotionally difficult experience, generating feelings of helplessness, rejection and loss. To individual factors are added those of *interaction*, such as past separation experiences, how the current marriage/relationship went, the previous ones, etc. *External* factors, such as demographic characteristics (intercultural differences between parents, socio-economic aspects), as well as the involvement of others in the dispute (relatives, friends, new life partners) fuel the disagreement between partners and turn the separation into an extensive conflict, which the child is most often the center of (idem).

### **2.4.1. Maladaptive Cognitive Schemas**

An established taxonomy of maladaptive cognitive schemas is the one put forth by Young (1999). Schemas are persistent and dysfunctional patterns of thinking about oneself and about the world, which contain memories, emotions, physical sensations, developed especially during childhood and adolescence and strengthened throughout life (Young *et al.*, 2006). They are formed as a result of the fundamental needs of childhood not being met – of safety, autonomy, of freedom of expression of emotions and needs, of spontaneity, acceptance and attention, of validation, of love, etc. (idem). Depending on the neglected needs, five areas or categories of schemas have been proposed, which group eighteen specific maladaptive schemas: *separation and rejection, autonomy and performance, unclear boundaries, orientation towards others, hypervigilance, and inhibition*.

#### **► *The Relationship Between Maladaptive Schemas and Parental Conflict***

In the context of family relationships, *separation and rejection* schemas (schemas of abandonment/instability, distrust/abuse, inadequacy/shame, emotional deprivation, social isolation/estrangement) produce the most pronounced negative effects. Celsi *et al.* (2021) associates the schema of emotional deprivation with a higher probability of people to exhibit abusive behaviors in virtual romantic relationships, to be the victim of control of the partner or, on the contrary, to impose excessive control on them (Celsi *et al.*, 2021). The schema of emotional deprivation occurs, generally speaking, as a result of the emotional availability of parents (lack of empathy, protection, etc.) and generates a paradoxical approach to relationships. People want closeness and emotional intimacy to satisfy the need that was neglected in childhood, yet they feel uncomfortable in intimate relationships, for fear of the emotional unavailability of others (Zeigler-Hill *et al.*, 2011). This paradox can create difficulties between coupled partners and prevent a healthy approach to conflict.

#### **2.4.2. Coping Mechanisms**

Coping strategies influence how former partners adapt to tense pre- and post-divorce situations (DeAnda *et al.*, 2020; Bloch *et al.*, 2014; Herzberg, 2013; Zemp *et al.*, 2017). The level of conflict between them and the activated coping mechanisms will determine the quality of coparenting (Willén, 2015; DeAnda *et al.*, 2020; DeAnda, 2018).

The scientific literature highlights the culpability of the former partner as a risk factor for the process of optimal coparenting, thus undermining the partner's authority and credibility, which also gets reflected in their relationship with the child (Demby, 2016; Willén, 2015).

#### **2.4.3. Parental Competences**

*Parental competences* are defined as systems of knowledge, skills, abilities, and habits that allow the parent to successfully fulfill their responsibilities and prevent crisis situations, in a manner that supports the child's development (Glăveanu, 2012). Parents report low parental skills immediately after the divorce, a situation that contributes to the problems experienced by the children. According to Short's observations (2002), the experience of divorce can temporarily incapacitate parents from performing activities such as monitoring and supervising children, ensuring discipline, and maintaining a warm and consistent environment. The author also points out that after the divorce, the level of parent-child conflict also increases, while the level of family



cohesion decreases. Moran and Weinstock (2011) identify three classes of general parental skills, essential for the adaptation of child the post-divorce: *upbringing*, education and *coparenting*.

#### **2.4.4. Infidelity as a Ground for Divorce**

Infidelity, "the violation of the implicit or explicit understanding between couple partners about sexual and/or emotional exclusivity" (Weeks *et al.*, 2003), is one of the most common and strong grounds for divorce or separation (Mark *et al.*, 2011). O'Connor and Canevello (2019) show that, following a breakup caused by the infidelity of the partner, the beliefs deceived one's beliefs about the world and life are deeply shaken, generating intrusive and uncontrollable negative thoughts that impact the natural unfolding of their everyday activities after separation. Activating emotional regulation strategies fuels their anger, enables the development of conflictual attitudes and generates the desire for revenge towards the former partner. Oftentimes, the child is caught up in these dynamics and becomes witness to the blame throwing and defamation the deceived parent engages in (Thorson, 2021).

#### **2.4.5. The Socio-Economic Status of the Family**

The socioeconomic status of the divorcing family, its general position in society and its access to resources are other post-divorce issues highlighted in the literature. The evolution of the socioeconomic status in families has been studied in its entirety, from the incipient stages of the couple to its breakup, as well as in the post-divorce period (Karney, 2021). The main indicators of status are educational level (people with and without higher education), income, assets held and the occupation of the spouses (Baker, 2014; Carbone & Cahn, 2014). Karney (2021) shows that poor families fall apart more frequently due to causes such as lack of money, physical and substance abuse, while in families with a high socio-economic status, due to emotional reasons that are explicitly related to the functioning of the relationship (compatibility of partners, lack of communication and love, etc.) which tend to matter more at the rupture.

Although there are a limited number of studies that investigate to what extent socioeconomic status influences post-divorce relationships, a few theories advance the idea of interdependencies between socioeconomic status and hostile behaviors/conflicting attitudes that influence the quality of coparenting: *The Theory of Relative Deprivation* (Smith *et al.*, 2012) and *The Theory of Social Causality* (Wadsworth & Achenbach, 2005). These theories are in line with the diathesis-stress model, according to which psychopathology is the result of the interaction

between one's genetic predisposition and the stressors that the person faces throughout life (Caspi *et al.*, 2000).

## **2.5. The Impact of Conflict on the Child**

The vulnerability of children is not amplified by the divorce itself, but by the factors associated with divorce – parental distress, economic difficulties specific to single parenthood, the quality of parenting (especially when a single parent raises the children), post-divorce conflictual relationships between parents or parental alienation (Amato, 2000; Esmaeili & Yaacob, 2011). According to the perspective of stress adaptation (Amato, 2000), the relationship between divorce and its consequences is mediated by all these factors.

## CHAPTER 3. POST-DIVORCE PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS

### 3.1. Intervention Models in Coparenting

The Egokitzen intervention program, which aims to reduce interparental conflict and improve communication in the relationship with the child, developed by Martínez-Pampliega (2015), includes 11 weekly intervention sessions, targeting three main topics: *divorce and its impact*, *interparental conflict* and *coparenting*. Wagner and Diamond (2016) recommend individual therapy in the first phase of the intervention, since the predisposition towards conflict and emotional reactivity can interfere with the therapeutic processes. Parents Forever (Cronin *et al.*, 2017) tackles five themes: legal issues and the role of mediation in divorce; economic status in the context of divorce; the impact of divorce on the adults; the impact of divorce on the children and ways to access a new life perspective. Salem *et al.* (2013), conceptualizing divorce as a legal and public health issue, advance an intervention program based on parental education. Braver *et al.* (2016) apply the Family Transitions Guide program, with the aim of reducing both the parents' conflicting attitudes and behaviors as well as the exposure of children to parental conflicts. The Family Transitions Guide program consists of working with the group in an hour-long meeting, attended separately by mothers and fathers. The program uses motivational interviews that enable parents to support the development of their children's resilience after divorce and limit their exposure to conflict, while improving their parenting quality.

### 3.2. Integrative interventions in conflictual coparenting

Lebow's integrative model of approaching the post-divorce family coincides with Johnston's approach (1994) and attempts to explain the conditions and mechanisms through which post-divorce conflictual relationships arise and endure – these are the result of the interaction between three categories of factors, on three levels: *the individual level*, *the interactionist level*, and *the external level*.

#### 3.2.1. The Multi-Level Integrative Model

The intervention strategies proprietary to integrative couple psychotherapy are based on a multilevel understanding of each case, since the problems themselves have multiple layers of causality. The difficulties of former partners and children can manifest themselves in one's behavioral, cognitive, or emotional regulation capacity, individual psychodynamics, systemic

circularity or can be generated by the influence of the extended family, the legal system, etc. The intervention will always be directed to the levels containing the main identified problems located problems, or those problems which pose a solution that is the most acceptable to the customer.

## PART TWO

### RESEARCH EVIDENCE IN POST-DIVORCE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROCESSES

The present research takes the psychological problems identified in the counselling sessions addressed to divorced families as a starting point. Romanian courts often enquire whether the underage person is the victim of some form of abuse, including the victim of parental alienation. However, things are far from clear in the area of parental alienation. Professionals' opinions, recorded in the scientific literature, are divided, and the concept itself is poorly scientifically validated and used as an umbrella term in difficult situations around the parent-child, post-divorce contact (Visu-Petra, 2022). In this research the initial assumption was that correctly identifying the reasons underlying the child's refusal to have contact with one of the parents helps create an adequate intervention model to remedy this problem. Identifying parental traits and features of their dynamic further contributes to building a personalized intervention.

#### CHAPTER 4. A MODEL OF PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION IN CONFLICTUAL COPARENTING – THREE CASE STUDIES

In this study, a pilot program for an integrative psychotherapeutic intervention was tested across three separate cases of divorced families with a moderate level of conflict that could have influenced the quality of coparenting. The common denominator of all included cases is the negative psychological impact of parental conflict on the parent-child relationship – the child refuses contact with one of the parents.

► **The main objective** of the study was *to restore contact between the child and the rejected parent*. In order to achieve the main objective, we have set out five sub-objectives:

1. *Identification of individual and relational psychological mechanisms that maintain parental conflict*. To this end, we applied four questionnaires to the adults participating in the study, through which we evaluated their parental history, coping style, level of parental skills and level of parental experienced stress;

2. *Identification of clinical intensity symptoms in the children included in the sample.* A questionnaire to assess anxiety, depression, somatization, post-traumatic stress disorder and social problems was applied.
3. *Carrying out the individualized programs of integrative psychotherapeutic intervention for the parents involved in conflict,* both individually and in the parental dyad, in order to alleviate parental conflict;
4. *Increasing cooperative coparenting,* through psychoeducation and through building the skills of interparental communication;
5. *Laying out the foundations of a guide for psychological interventions in divorce situations marked by conflictual coparenting,* in order to improve interparental processes and with a positive impact on the child.

### ► Hypotheses

We proposed the following hypotheses:

1. Post-divorce conflictual relationships are influenced by parental competencies, the coping strategies used by parents, and their ability to communicate assertively;
2. Post-divorce conflictual relationships are influenced by the emotional reactivation of relationship traumas from each parent's past;
3. Improving parental competencies, coping strategies and their ability to communicate assertively post-divorce will increase the collaboration between parents, also manifested as encouraging the child to have personal connections with the other parent;
4. Reducing interparental conflict will increase the child's willingness to have personal connections with the rejected parent.

### ► Participants

For this study we selected three divorced couples, actively going through post-divorce parental conflict.

- Six parents – three male and three female, aged between 32 and 44. The time from the divorce to the intervention was between 3 months and 1 year and 6 months;
- Three children, two female and one male, aged between 7 and 13. All the children included in the study refused contact with one of the parents, for a period between 3 months to 1

year and 2 months. The refusal concerned both physical as well as through the telephone or online.

### ► **Method**

The intervention program included two sections, one about the assessment of the participants and one which included the integrative psychotherapeutic intervention

#### ► **The assessment part of the study**

The assessment of each family member and their relationships with each other was initially carried out.

The instruments used were: four psychological assessment questionnaires and an exhaustive interview guide on parental history; an interview on the child's rejection behaviors towards the parent and the frequency of interpersonal contact, as well as a checklist of alienating behaviors. There were six preliminary interviews in each case: one with each parent, one with the parental dyad, an interview with the child and an interview in the parent-child dyad, each one hour and a half in length.

The parents were assessed with: *the Parenting History Survey*, developed by Stuart A. Greenberg and Lewis Humphreys in 1998; *the Parenting Stress Index - Fourth Edition (PSI-4)*, developed by Richard R. Abidin (2012) and marketed by Psychological Assessment Resources (PAR); *The CERQ Cognitive-Emotional Coping Questionnaire* (Kraaj *et al.*, 2007); *The Questionnaire for Investigating Parental Competence*, a tool developed by Simona Maria Glăveanu (2012).

#### ► **The Intervention Part of the Study**

The results obtained from the assessment revealed two directions for the psychological intervention: an individual one, with each parent involved in the program and one in the parental dyad, for each couple.

Ten individual one-hour long intervention sessions and ten two-hour long sessions were held with each parental dyad. In total, there were 150 hours of psychological intervention sessions, across the three conflictual couples.

The intervention was founded in integrative psychotherapy. It integrated specific methods and techniques: transactional analysis, art-therapy and expressive psychotherapies, schema therapy, cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy.

While working with the parental couples, psychoeducation sessions and training on communication styles were carried out, in order to alleviate the parental conflict.

In individual work, issues such as: restructuring the mechanisms of maladaptive coping, emotional support for processing feelings of abandonment and betrayal resulting from situations of infidelity, the development of an assertive style of communication, the development of adult instance were approached.

### ► **The General Results of the Study**

For all three couples, the initial assessment revealed a series of coping strategies that contributed to the perpetuation of the conflict (rumination, catastrophizing, blaming others), a series of poor parental competences that affected the parent-child relationship, but also aggressive communication styles. Furthermore, the interviews with the parents surfaced relationship traumas that contributed to the current relational difficulties. The highlighted issues were approached through the psychotherapeutic program, which led to a decrease both in the observed and parent-declared conflictual behaviors. In addition, in each of the cases subjected to the intervention, the formerly rejected child-parent contact was restored in various forms, albeit not in its court-established form, in all of the cases.

The final reassessment of the participants revealed an increase in the initial scores. Thus, there were improvements in the cognitive-emotional coping mechanisms used, parental competences and a decrease in the level of stress associated with the relationship with the other parent of the child.

### ► **Discussions**

In this chapter of the thesis, we conceptualized, and pilot tested a program of integrative psychotherapeutic intervention in the parental dyad, post-divorce. The intervention was successful and was helped by the moderately low levels of parental conflict and the interest of both parents towards the wellbeing of their child. These enabling conditions are also mentioned in other studies. Fackrell *et al.* (2011) show that intervention programmes are only valuable if the parental conflict



is relatively low and parents are able to focus on the interests of the children. Only a relationship of communication and cooperation between parents can protect children from the effects of separation, even when there has been a history of conflict, violence and abuse (*idem*).

The assessment of the factors involved in the child's refusal to have contact with the rejected parent was one of the strengths of the program. Several categories of factors were taken into account, both personal and related to the parental dyad. The intervention exhaustively covered all these factors.

There are other similar interventions that address cases of less severe refusal/resistance to contact, as well as associated family dysfunctions – multimodal family therapy (MMFI), joint child-centered therapy (FCTC), family restructuring therapy, integrative family therapy (IFT), structural family therapy, family reintegration therapy (RT), family reunification therapy (FRT), multifaceted family therapy (MFFT) and reconciliation therapy (Fidler, *et al.*, 2013; Polak & Moran, 2017; Polak, 2020). The shared aspects with our intervention are the systemic approach towards the family, which involves all family members engaging in therapeutic interventions, in different combinations.

The decision to not involve the children in the therapeutic process and to approach the relationship between the parents directly was also made out of the wish to provide the children with ample room for individual decisions and the freedom to exercise their own will regarding if/when to resume contact with the rejected parent.

The initial assessment of the three families aimed to exclude any indicators of abuse right from the get-go, as they would justify the parent's rejection. On the other hand, the success of the intervention was largely due to the willingness of the parents involved to accept the change. However, similar interventions are still needed on parental shifts in order to consolidate the results achieved.

It is worth noting the small number of research papers on the results of post-divorce interventions, compared to the criticisms regarding the various therapeutic models, interventions and educational programs (Dallam & Silberg, 2016; Drozd *et al.*, 2019; Polak, 2020; Fidler *et al.*, 2017; Faust, 2018; Greenberg *et al.*, 2019).

## ► Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a theoretical point of view, the study provides evidence on the antecedents and consequences of parental alienation, highlighting parental competences, parental conflict and coping strategies as factors that, once optimized by psychological interventions, decrease the behaviors of parental alienation, improving the child's communication with the rejected parent. The study also highlights the parental alienation behaviors of one or both parents, which affect the child's relationships with their legal guardians.

From a practical point of view, the study develops the interventional area of post-divorce conflictuality, which is relevant in the light of the fact that in Romania there is no research on the effectiveness of psychotherapeutic intervention programs in such cases. The effectiveness of court-ordered counseling programs is not clinically validated or known. The main focus of counseling is the child and very rarely the parental dyad.

### ► **Study Limitations and Future Research Directions**

A first limitation of the present research is the lack of inclusion of children in the intervention program; the children were only assessed. It is possible that an extended program, which would have included the child in individual and family sessions, may have generated better results.

Another limitation is related to the number of meetings with parents. In each case, the individual intervention would have required a greater number of sessions, as profound issues related to the situation of each of them today were brought to the surface, which could be more thoroughly explored. Extensive individual interventions have been shown to significantly decrease conflictuality and emotional reactivity, thus making the parental therapeutic process more permissive (Wagner and Diamond, 2016).

The objective of the study, which was successfully achieved, was to restore contact between the child and their rejected parent. But it should have been accompanied by a new objective, that of strengthening the child's relationship with the rejected parent, which would have allowed fundamental assessments regarding the quality of the parent-child relationship following the re-establishment of contact.

The low number of cases in the study (three families) prompts caution with regard to the results obtained. Examining several conflictual families could be the basis for the future development of a best practice guide in the field.

As case studies have shown that the intervention is less effective in a context of high conflictuality between parents, further optimisations of this intervention should take into account a particular approach, through additional/different techniques or procedures, to tackle highly conflictual cases.

## ► **Conclusions**

The case studies presented contained similar situations, namely the rejection of one of the parents by the child, but with different causes.

It has been possible to demonstrate the effectiveness of an intervention program centered exclusively on the parental dyad, both when the rejection is caused by the direct influence of a parent and when the child has justified reasons for rejection.

The individual and relational factors that perpetuated conflicts between the parents were identified, on the basis of which the personalized interventions were carried out. The psychotherapeutic method used was the integrative approach. The six parents had individual psychotherapy sessions and participated in interventions in the parental dyads. At the end of the interventions, progress was recorded in terms of: cognitive-emotional coping mechanisms, parental competences and the level of perceived stress in relation to the former partner, as well as progress in the relational dynamics child – rejected parent.

However, these results should be interpreted with caution, as the parents were voluntarily involved in the study, which suggests their pre-existing orientation towards improving the problem, despite their relational difficulties. Secondly, the level of conflicts manifested in the parental dyads was moderate, the psychological interventions in highly conflictual families being much more difficult.

## CHAPTER 5. METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION – THE VALIDATION OF THE COPARENTING RELATIONSHIP SCALE ON THE ROMANIAN POPULATION<sup>1</sup>

### 5.1. Method

**Objective:** to validate the Coparenting Relationship Scale (SRC; Feinberg *et al.*, 2012), to the Romanian population.

**Participants:** the sample consisted of 287 women (56.9%) and 217 men (43.1%) aged 25 to 64 years ( $m = 40.6$ ,  $SE = 5.99$  years, skewness = 0.08, kurtosis = 0.037). 514 responses were obtained, of which 504 were considered valid.

The original version of the *Coparenting Relationship Scale* was used; CRS; Feinberg *et al.*, 2012). This includes 35 items that measure seven areas of coparenting: consensus between parents, parental closeness, exposure to conflict, support for the other partner, undermining the other partner, supporting the other partner's parenting style, and division of chores.

**Procedure:** given that there is no generally accepted specific method for adapting a scale to another language (Iliescu, 2017), a combination of the translation and back-translation procedure (*idem*) was used, in addition to the techniques put forth by the team who adapted this measure to the Spanish speakers living in Brazil (Carvalho *et al.*, 2018).

#### ► Data Collection

The SRC items translated in the Romanian language were included in a research questionnaire, alongside a section on participants' demographics.

The questionnaire included several questions regarding: the harmony within the coupledom, the child's suffering due to interparental conflict and the parents' opinion on the child's tendency to position themselves on the side of one of the parents, excluding the other. Responses were measured on a 7-point Likert scale.

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<sup>1</sup>This study was published during doctoral studies Form: Dumitriu, C. G., Dudu, A., & Butac, L. M. (2022). Validation of the Romanian version of coparenting relationship scale. *International Research Journal of Public and Environmental Health* Vol.9 (1),pp. 24-34. <https://doi.org/10.15739/irjpeh.22.004>

## 5.2. Results

*Confirmatory factorial analysis* (CFA) was performed to validate the translation of the items into Romanian, using the statistical package R (Lavaan) (Rosseel, 2012). The suitability of the models was tested on several parameters: Chi-squared test (CMIN), CMIN/DF ratio (DF - degrees of freedom), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), approximation of the square root error of the arithmetic mean (RMSEA) and the Akaike informative criterion (AIC), for comparing the models. The original 7-scale model (Feinberg *et al.*, 2012) could not be tested with CFA, due to the *Division of Labor* subscale, which consisted of only two items. In these conditions, the factorial structure with 6 factors and 29 items was adopted, and the factorial loads of each item are all over 0.7, which indicates a good match of the model.

### Reliability

The Cronbach-alpha internal consistency index was computed. All item-scale correlation indices were acceptable, while consistency indices for items removed were lower than the overall scale coefficients. Values indicate good or very good reliability (Gliem & Gliem, 2003); none of the  $\alpha$  values significantly exceeds 0.95, which means there are no redundant items.

### Discussions

Starting from studies that invoke the need for multidimensional tools to measure the quality of coparenting relationships (Feinberg *et al.*, 2012), the above study had the objective to test the psychometric properties of the Romanian version of the Coparenting Relationship Scale (SRC).

Using confirmatory factorial analysis, the final, psychometrically acceptable factorial solution includes 6 subscales and 28 items, unlike the original version, which contains 7 subscales and 35 items. The Romanian version of the Coparenting Relationship Scale has a good internal consistency for all subscales, with coefficients similar to those obtained by its authors. All subscales of the Romanian version of the SRC have a significant association with other aspects related to the functioning of the couple (within the coupledom) and with variables related to the child (complicity with one of the parents, distancing from the parents).

### Practical and Theoretical Implications

Our study provides scientific support for an adapted version of the Coparenting Relationship Scale, which can be used by practitioners to assess the level of parental conflict and develop interventions for children affected by poor coparenting relationships.

SRC is also a useful tool in research, as it helps towards a better understanding of coparental practices, in the Romanian cultural context and towards increasing awareness of the need for interventions aimed at coparenting relationships within family counseling sessions, centered on improving the post-divorce adaptation of children affected by parental conflict.

## CHAPTER 6. AN INVESTIGATION INTO INTRA- AND INTERPARENTAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE POST-DIVORCE COPARENTING

### 6.1. Objectives and Hypotheses

Identifying the variables that predispose separated partners to dysfunctional behaviour is essential to determining the categories to which interventions aimed at mitigating the effects of a highly conflictual divorce should be addressed, both on the parents themselves and on the children as indirect victims. Based on research results suggesting that individual differences are associated with dysfunctional attitudes and behaviors after separation, we set out to investigate the extent to which these differences generate dysfunctional patterns of coparenting.

#### *Research Hypotheses and Questions*

H1: Dysfunctional cognitive schemas are negatively associated with the optimal components of the coparenting relationship (agreement, closeness, support, approval) and positively associated with dysfunctional components of the coparenting relationship (undermining, exposure).

H2: Good parenting skills are positively associated with the functional components of the coparenting relationship and negatively with the dysfunctional components of the coparenting relationship.

H3: Family conflict and unfavorable conditions pre-divorce are positively associated with the dysfunctional components of the coparenting relationship and negatively with the functional components of the coparenting relationship.

This study also aims to find answers to two research questions:

1. Are there statistically significant differences between people who have reported different causes of divorce, when it comes to family conflict, unfavorable conditions pre-divorce, functional and dysfunctional behaviors of the coparenting relationship, parental skills, maladaptive cognitive schemas, or emotional coping strategies?
2. To what extent are cognitive-affective coping strategies associated with the functional and dysfunctional components of coparenting relationships?

### 6.2. Method

#### *Participants*

The sample of the study included 169 participants, 84% female and 16% male, aged between 24 and 61 years old ( $M = 42.71$ ,  $SD = 6.15$ ). Of these, 91.7% come from urban areas, and 8.3% from rural areas. As for the last form of education completed, 43.2% have completed higher education – bachelor level, 36.7% have completed a master's program, 15.4% have graduated from high school, and 4.7% – doctoral studies.

### ***Procedure***

The data was collected online, through the dissemination of the research form in the virtual communities of divorced or divorced parents (groups on social networks), as well as through a website dedicated to divorced parents.

### ***Measures***

*Family conflict and unfavorable conditions pre-divorce* were assessed using **The Divorce Adjustment Inventory Scale – Revised (DAI-R)**, developed by Portes *et al.* (2000). *Dysfunctional cognitive schemas* were evaluated using **The Young Schema Questionnaire – Short Form (YSQ – S3)**; Young & Brown, 2005). *Parental competence* was assessed using **The Parental Competence Questionnaire (CCP)**, developed by Glăveanu (2012). *Cognitive-emotional coping* was evaluated using **The Cognitive-Emotional Coping Evaluation Questionnaire (CERQ)**, developed by Garnefski and Kraaij (2007). *The quality of coparenting relationships* has been studied using **The Coparenting Relationship Scale (CRS)**; Feinberg *et al.*, 2012), adapted to Romanian population by Dumitriu *et al.* (2022). The grounds for divorce included in the form sent to the participants were as follows: *one's own infidelity* (score 1), *infidelity of the partner* (score 2), *financial reasons* (score 3), *family reasons* (score 4), *domestic violence* (score 5), *alcoholism* (score 6), *other causes* (score 7) and *multiple causes* (score 8). Depending on the response provided, each participant was assigned to one of the eight subgroups thus formed.

### **6.3. Results**

The results of the study show that all three categories of factors are significantly associated with post-divorce coparenting relationships.



As for *dysfunctional cognitive schemas*, the results support the proposed hypotheses only partially. Although most schemas are significantly-positively associated with the dysfunctional aspects of coparenting relationships, some of them, namely distrust/abuse, isolation, self-sacrifice, are negatively associated with the functional aspects of coparenting relationships. However, the negative correlations are relatively small and statistically significant only in relation to certain components of the coparenting relationship, which casts doubts on the extent to which they are indeed associated. This tendency can be explained by the fact that the cognitive schemas in Young's taxonomy describe dysfunctional attitudes, emotions, and relational behaviors that can be directly/proximally associated with other dysfunctional behaviors, rather than beneficial behaviors.

Our results highlight that cognitive schemas from the the *separation and rejection* category are to a greater extent associated with negative coparenting attitudes and behaviors, such as undermining the partner or exposing the child to conflicts.

The context of divorce most likely activates separation-related schemas (such as abandonment, distrust, emotional deprivation, shame, isolation), which generate unhealthy behavioral responses. For example, the fear of abandonment, loneliness, distrust of the partner and emotional deprivation are easily activated by the experiences of separation – these increase the conflicts between the partners who, paradoxically, want to protect themselves from negative emotional states.

Schemas in other categories also show significant associations with dysfunctional aspects of coparenting, even if these correlations are relatively small. These include schemas of penalty, negativism, subjugation, vulnerability, thus highlighting, on the one hand, the general cognitive and emotional vulnerability that dysfunctional schemas can create in difficult relational contexts, such as divorce, and on the other– their negative impact on others, especially on the children who are exposed to parental conflicts.

Emotional availability and support is the parental competence most relevant for the quality of coparenting relationships, which has significant correlations (small and medium) with most facets of coparenting, including: consent between parents, support of the other parent, avoidance of undermining the former partner and not exposing the child to interparental conflicts.

Crisis management, which assumes the parent's ability to facilitate the resolution of problems that are difficult for the child, is insignificantly associated with coparenting. However,

it is significantly-negatively associated with undermining the other parent, but the correlation is of reduced strength.

The overall score on parental competencies is significantly (negatively) associated only with the dysfunctional components of coparenting. This would be explained by the tendency of parents to over-relate to desirable behaviors, such as parental skills, while underreporting the least desirable, such as undermining the partner and exposing the child to interparental conflicts.

*Family conflict and family context before and after the divorce* have the closest associations with coparenting relationships.

*The family conflict before the divorce* is associated significantly, negatively, with *the agreement between the partners* and with *the support in the coparenting relations*, and is positively associated with *the undermining of the other partner* and with *the exposure of the child to the intra-family conflict*.

*Unfavorable family conditions pre-divorce*, as well as post-divorce (tense atmosphere, precarious financial situation, conflict, impairment of economic status, etc.) are strongly, negatively associated with *the consent, approval, closeness, and support of the post-divorce partners* and present a strong positive association with *the undermining of the partner* and with *exposing the child to the conflict*.

By contrast, *the positive resolution of divorce* is positively associated with *the functional aspects of coparenting relationships* and negatively with *dysfunctional coparental relationships*.

The strong association with coparenting relationships is in line with our expectations and is most likely due to the fact that they describe behaviors and characteristics specific to family relationships, which represent proximal antecedents of coparenting relationships, unlike previously investigated individual differences, which are distal antecedents

### **Exploratory Results**

As for the answers to the advanced research questions at the beginning of the study, A number of significant results draw attention. Thus, most maladaptive schemas were more pronounced in the case of people who divorced as a result of infidelity, compared to those who divorced for reasons other than infidelity.

Significant differences between the two groups were identified for *the schemas of abandonment/instability, inadequacy/shame, protectionism, subjugation, approval seeking and negativism*; people who divorced as a result of infidelity scored higher on all these variables.

The results can be explained by the fact that infidelity, as a traumatic interpersonal experience, is, in and of itself, a source of psychological instability – it fuels thoughts about one's own personal value, dependence on others and the need for approval, as a result of perceived rejection. These schemas could be pre-existing to some extent, but they could be activated/accentuated by experiencing infidelity.

*Subjugation and penalty schemas* were also more pronounced in people who reported family causes as grounds for divorce, compared to people who did not report family causes as antecedents. Indeed, subjugation and punishment are two deeply dysfunctional relational patterns that can generate family conflicts or other types of relational difficulties; they maintain a tense family climate that can lead, through the emotional wear and tear of the partners, to divorce.

In terms of *cognitive-affective regulation strategies*, the most relevant have proven to be: *catastrophizing* (especially present in the case of infidelity and family causes), *putting the situation in perspective* (infidelity and domestic violence), *making others culpable* (family causes) and *positive reframing* (domestic violence).

The results obtained also revealed that *domestic violence* and *infidelity*, as acute stressors with a very intense emotional impact, are those that require the activation of functional coping strategies (putting things into perspective and positive reframing), in order to increase tolerance to the traumatic negative experience, with major destabilizing potential. Unsurprisingly, *the conflict and unfavorable conditions pre-divorce* are more pronounced in the case of people who have divorced as a result of *domestic violence*, which is also associated with an extremely high, generalized level of family conflict.

In the case of people who have divorced as a result of domestic violence, dysfunctional coparenting relationships are predominant. Thus, dysfunctional competences such as *exposure to conflict* and *undermining* are stronger in the cases where domestic violence was the reason for divorce, while *support* and *approval* show low or moderate scores.

## CONCLUSIONS

The topic of this doctoral thesis, although far from being novel among international studies, is still new and necessary at national level. The studies carried out within this doctoral work have outlined several research directions in the field of assisting families in divorce situations, capitalizing on the existing research evidence, and identifying a series of counseling / psychotherapeutic objectives for the practitioners and experts working with such cases.

In the practical-applied part of the thesis, the efficiency of an intervention program was tested (**Study 1**), during which the need for an objective assessment of the interactive component of the family relationship, as well as of the coparenting relationship was revealed. Starting from this need, a tool for evaluating coparenting was identified and validated on the Romanian population, namely The Coparenting Relationship Scale (**Study 2**).

The validated instrument was later used, along with other licensed psychometric tools, in a new study (**Study 3**), which revealed the individual, relational and environmental factors that influence the quality of post-divorce coparenting.

We have thus ensured that this research will provide of evidence for psychological counseling, clinical psychology, and psychotherapy – its results serve to optimize psychological interventions in post-divorce conflict situations.

The three mentioned studies provide a number of tools with implications in psychological practice. Thus, **Study 1** provides a model of integrative psychotherapeutic intervention in the parental dyad, starting from the identification of individual vulnerability factors and the characteristics of coparenting. Using the proposed model as a starting point, practitioners can develop their own intervention programs. The multifactorial approach also allows the identification of alienating behaviors present in one of the parents, thus avoiding generalizations regarding parental alienation, based on the child's refusal of contact.

**Study 2** makes an important methodological contribution to the clinical assessment of families who are divorcing, through the validation of the Coparenting Relationship Scale to the Romanian population. The measure comes to the aid of psychologists who conduct legal and court assessments and cover a topic which previously lacked any locally adapted measures. The scale can be used in clinical assessments and research, alongside other measures.

**Study 3**, a quantitative research paper conducted on 169 participants aged between 24 and 61, highlights the factors on which interventions aimed at improving coparenting post-divorce relationships should focus. In the case of pronounced maladaptive cognitive schemas, in-depth interventions are recommended, aimed at modifying the way in which the person relates to themselves and others. Psychoeducation and counseling are suitable interventions in case of low parental competences. Knowing the mechanisms of cognitive-emotional coping can constitute, in turn, the foundation of designing intervention programs that reduce parental conflict.

A few limitations of the studies are worth mentioning, in addition to the theoretical and practical contributions previously enlisted. In **Study 1**, the main limitation is that of the reduced number of participants, given that the scope of the intervention program carried out included three families (over 150 hours). Another particularity that does not allow for the generalization of the results is related to the studied levels of parental conflict. Thus, the parental dyads included in the study showed a moderate level of conflict, which implied their very willingness to engage in the study. Another limitation concerns the psychological assessment of the parents, which did not include any assessment on their personality.

**Study 2** also has a number of limitations. One of these is that the validated scale is self-report, so it might provide a distorted perception of the coparenting relationship. Then, participation in the study was voluntary, which may indicate that the people who filled in the questionnaire have certain particularities, including openness to dialogue and other cooperative attitudes.

One limitation of **Study 3** is the lack of involvement of the children in the research. Thus, we cannot make any assessments of how cognitive schemas, parental skills and conditions of divorce also influence the post-divorce functioning of children.

In conclusion, this research is far from having solved the problem of highly conflictual divorces. However, the three studies provide theoretical, methodological, and practical-applicative resources necessary for managing the vast field of divorce and facilitate future avenues of research.

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