

The Specific Issues of Self-Image and the Image of Parental Figures for Children in Families with Conflict Divorce

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Abstract

Introduction: *Conflict divorce and child custody fight are major risk factors for developing a distorted self-image and for children's adapting to the external environment. Common conflicts between parents, particularly those which turn the child into a central element, the conflicts that manifest in the child's presence or which determines the child to develop loyalty to one parent only, they are all associated with behavioral, relational and emotional problems developed by the children caught up in between (Pruett, Arthur & Ebling, 2007, Amato & Afifi, 2006; Grych, 2005; Johnson, 1997).*

Objectives: *In this study we want to show the role of projective methods to identify the specific way children in families who undergo conflict divorce represent their own self-image, their parents' image and their relationship with parental figures. This research can be a model for clinical assessment of the children in the fight for custody.*

Methods: *The evaluation protocol included the following projective methods: Family Drawing Test, Duss Fables test and CAT test.*

Results: *The investigation showed notable differences between the 2 children groups under study in regard to the dimensions of Family Drawing test, Duss Fables test and C.A.T. test.*

Conclusions: *The results of this research highlighted the relevance of using projective methods in identifying important aspects of self-image, emotional state, and parental representation of children with conflicting divorcing parents.*

Keywords: *projective methods, parents image, child custody child self-image, assessment*

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I. Introduction

One of the most controversial areas of forensic psychology is child custody practice. The role of psychological testing in child custody evaluations is a topic of ongoing controversy. Numerous authors have criticized the quality of evaluations carried out in this area (Melton, Petrila, Poythress, & Slobogin, 1997; Melton, Weithorn, & Slobogin, 1985; O'Donohue & Bradley, 1999; Turkat, 1993). Complaints have included the lack of empirical methods, the inappropriate use of psychological tests, the improper use and interpretation of data, and the lack of usefulness to the court.

Brodzinsky (1993) and Melton et al. (1997) strongly criticized tests that are irrelevant to the legal issue and the routine use of personality tests and IQ in child custody evaluations, except where such testing can appropriately address special issues or apparent problems, such as to characterize the parent-child relationship or to determine the severity of a parent's depression and its ensuing impact on the child. According to them, routine administration of such tests, simply for the sake of testing, is inappropriate and it is important for evaluators to maintain an objective stance, to understand transference and countertransference issues, and to adhere to professional practice parameters.

In 1994, two professional organizations, American Psychological Association and Association of Family and Conciliation Courts made public child custody guidelines to promote proficiency in this area. According to American Psychological Association the guidelines for child custody evaluations in divorce stressed the need for multiple methods of data collection; cautioned against over-interpreting or inappropriately interpreting assessment data in the custody evaluation process; and emphasized the primacy of parenting capacity, the psychological and developmental needs of the child.

Conflict divorce and child custody fight are major risk factors for developing a distorted self-image and for children's adapting to the external environment. Common parental conflicts, especially those which place the child as a central element, which is manifested in the child's presence or which determines the child to develop loyalty to one parent only, are associated with behavioral, relational and emotional problems.

The complexity of cases involving child custody ordinarily requires a trustworthy approach with the aim of communicating a reliable, objective and relevant assessment.

Psychologists appointed to conduct the clinical evaluation of children whose parents are in the process of obtaining custody will be interested both in evaluating the direct relationship between the child and the parents and in evaluating children's relationship needs and their perceptions regarding their parents. While the interview emphasizes what the child can declare, the projective methods help the child express his/her deeper beliefs.

In a critical review of child custody evaluation reports, a study of 52 reports, Bow & Quinell (2002) suggested that for adult personality assessment, objective tests were preferred over projective measures. The Comprehensive System (Exner, 1993) was preferred over other Rorschach scoring methods by the majority of those participants using the test. Sentence Completion was the next most commonly used projective instrument (40%), followed by the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) and Human Figure Drawing (HFD), each used by 20% of study participants. For child assessment projective personality measures were used slightly more often than objective tests with children; those who used projective measures preferred the Rorschach Ink Blot Test, Roberts Apperception Test, and Family Drawings, all of which were reportedly used by 27% of those participants who reported using projective measures.

In conclusion, even in child assessment the objective tests are preferred over projective measures. The projective methods are very useful tools in achieving interaction with children and facilitating self-development and expressing their view on the situation caused by their parents' divorce.

II. Objectives

Although projective techniques continue to be widely used in clinical and forensic settings, their scientific status remains highly controversial. In this study we want to show the role of projective methods to identify the specific manner in which children in families with conflict divorce represent their self-image, parents' image and the relationship with parental figures.

III. Methods

We evaluated 80 children aged 6 to 10 years, divided equally into two groups:

1. The group of children from families in divorce and who were recommended to the authors by the court mainly focused in custody proceedings (22 boys and 18 girls).

2. The group of children from intact families (24 boys and 16 girls). The children were randomly selected from several schools in Bucharest.

All subjects were evaluated by the authors of the study during two meetings using the following projective tests: The Family Drawing Test, The Duss's Fables Test and C.A.T according to the standardized instructions. Their stories were tape-recorded and then transcribed. The interpretation of the tests was done independently by each author. Only common results were taken into account in the statistical analysis.

For the Family Drawing Test we used the quotation sheet of Colette Jourdan-Ionescu and Joan Lachance (2000), for the Duss's Fables Test we used the Handbook of Louise Duss (1971) and for the C.A.T. test we used Leopold Bellak's quotation sheet (1992).

For the Family Drawing test, the following dimensions were scored depending on presence or absence:

- **Family Image:** Real, Regressive, Ideal
- **Identification:** Mother, Father, Child, Other
- **Valorization:** Mother, Father, Child, Other
- **Devaluation:** Mother, Father, Child, Other
- **Relationship with the mother:** Close, Remote, Rejection of the mother
- **Relationship with the father:** Close, Remote, Rejection of the father

Related to the Duss's Fables test, the following dimensions were scored depending on presence or absence:

- Autonomy, Dependence, Inability/ Fear of being wounded, Abandonment
- Preference for the Father, Preference for the Mother, Rejection from parents, Jealousy of the parental couple
- The weaning complex, The mother's rejection, The father's rejection, Self-rejection
- Fear of punishment/ guilt, Fear of being aggressed
- The Oedipus complex.

Related to the C.A.T. test, we scored the following dimensions by frequency:

- **The needs of the hero:** oral, anal, regressive, cleaning, of growth, of autonomy, of aggression, of self-aggression, of safety, of playing, of knowledge, of domination, of friends, affection, receiving help, help the other, opposition, dependence.
- **The anxieties of the hero:** monsters, being killed, deprivation, loneliness, abandonment,

helplessness/ being hurt, sickness, rejection, punishment.

- **Defensive mechanisms:** denial, regression, avoidance.
- **Mother's representation:** absent, nourishing, affectionate/ supportive, domineering, aggressive.
- **Father's representation:** absent, nourishing, affectionate/ supportive, domineering, aggressive.
- **Emotional states:** sadness, happiness.

The dimensions under examination in the children's stories were as follows: main themes (according to Russ' classification of affection-oriented themes, Russ, 1985); the hero's main needs and instinctual drives, the view on the environment, parental relations, main conflicts, nature of anxieties, main defense mechanisms, nature of conflicts, and the end of the stories (according to Bellak's interpretation sheet, Bellak, 1992).

The nature and the frequency of each dimension have been surveyed/ examined depending on the story of each subject.

IV. Results and discussion

All results obtained after scoring the tests given to both subject groups were worked through with the SPSS program. In order to examine the main differences in the stories across the two groups, a quantitative and qualitative analysis was completed.

Frequencies for each dimension of the tests were compared across groups using T-test analyses of variance to determine whether children with a history of divorce could be differentiated from children without history of divorce. According to the descriptive statistical analysis (average, standard deviation, normality of distribution, homogeneity of variance), and to the T Test applied in order to compare the two groups, significant differences were registered between the groups ($p < 0.01$ / $p < 0.05$) for several scores.

4.1.1. Results for Family drawing test

Table 1. Differences between groups for each dimensions of the T Test - values and probabilities

Dimensions	t-test	Sig.(2-tailed)
The family representation	2.083	0.041*
Devaluation the mother/father	-2.025	0.046*

Rejection of the father	2.401	0.019*
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** Correlation is significant at the level (2-tailed) $p < 0.01$

* Correlation is significant at the level (2-tailed) $p < 0.05$

Fear of being aggressed	-3.424	0.001**
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** Correlation is significant at the level (2-tailed) $p < 0.01$

* Correlation is significant at the level (2-tailed) $p < 0.05$

4.1.2. Discussions for Family drawing test

As far as the image of the family is concerned, in the case of children from divorced families predominate the drawing of the ideal family, while in the case of children from non-divorced children predominate the drawing of the real family. It appears that it is more difficult for children in families with divorce to accept the reality of the present family. The defensive mechanism of denial and avoidance appears. In children from divorced families, the devaluation of the mother and the devaluation of the father are significantly higher. The rejection of the father is significantly more important in children belonging to divorced families. It is noticed how the Family drawing test highlights in the case of these children their dissatisfaction with parental images and dysfunctional relationships: the alliance with one of the parents, the rejection of a parent.

The rejection of the father by children in divorce families are aspects found also by Spigelman, G., Spigelman, A., & Englesson, I. L. (1992). In their study divorce boys omitted their siblings suggesting more intensive sibling rivalry.

4.2.1. Results for the Duss's Fables Test

Table 2. Differences between groups for each dimensions of the T Test - values and probabilities

Dimensions	t-test	Sig.(2-tailed)
Dependence	-3.378	0.001**
Autonomy	2.283	0.025*
Preference for father	-2.230	0.023*
Abandon	-2.231	0.022*
Rejection from parents	-2.504	0.014*
Jealousy to parental couple	-3.077	0.003**
Rejection of the mother	-2.658	0.010**
Rejection of the father	-3.059	0.003**
Fear of punishment/ guilt	-3.907	0.000**

4.2.2. Discussions for the Duss's Fables Test

The tendency towards autonomy predominates in children with parents undergoing a conflicting divorce, whereas in the case of those who come from intact families, there predominates the tendency towards dependence on their parents. We can see here the distrust that the children of the first group have in their parental figures, and we assist at their disinvestment as figures that can provide safety, protection.

There is significantly greater abandonment in children in families with divorced parents. Mistrust seems to be greater in relation to the maternal figure. In the case of children in families with parents undergoing divorce, there predominates the preference for the father compared to those in the second lot.

Other dimensions that appear to be significantly more important in children in the first lot are the feeling of being rejected by their parents and jealousy toward the parental couple. In the case of children with divorcing parents, the mother's rejection and the father's rejection appear to be significantly more important.

Other dimensions significantly more present in children with divorcing families are the fear of punishment/ guilt and the fear of aggression. We can see how The Duss's Fables Test highlights the anxieties and insecurity of children in families with parents in conflict divorce.

4.3.1. Results for the C.A.T. test

Table 3. Differences between groups for each dimensions of the T Test - values and probabilities

Dimensions	t-test	Sig.(2-tailed)
The need of safety	2.548	0.013*
The need of dependence	-5.667	0.025*
The need for cleaning	-2.073	0.041*
The need to help other	-2.496	0.015*
Deprivation anxiety	-2.232	0.023*
Anxiety helplessness, of being hurt	1.968	0.003**

Sadness	1.435	0.008**
Defensive mechanisms – Avoidance	3.851	0.000**
Absent mother	3.731	0.000**
Nourishing mother	-2.100	0.039*
Absent father	3.247	0.002**
Aggressive/ domineering father	2.815	0.006**

** Correlation is significant at the level (2-tailed) $p < 0.01$

* Correlation is significant at the level (2-tailed) $p < 0.05$

4.3.2. Discussions for the C.A.T. test

The results of this research indicate the following dimensions discriminating between children with divorcing parents:

In the group of children with divorcing parents, the safety need and the need for dependence, significantly predominate statistically. The need to help the other appears to be significantly higher in children with intact families.

The anxieties that most commonly appear statistically in children with divorcing families are: deprivation anxiety and anxiety of helplessness/ being hurt. The defensive mechanism used significantly more by these children is avoidance. There is also a much greater sadness in these children.

With respect to the representation of parental figures, the children in the first lot have a significantly greater image of the missing mother, while children in non-divorced families have a significantly greater image of the nurturing mother. In the case of children from divorcing families there also predominates the image of the absent father and of the dominant, aggressive father. It follows that the C.A.T. highlights, in the case of children whose parents undergo a conflicting divorce, the dysphoric emotions: sadness, anxiety, helplessness. The parental figures do not give them security and can even be threatening.

V. Conclusions

The assessment of children from divorce families using projective test emphasized the following features:

- Different from children from intact families, who are not in an intensively dysfunctional relationship. They reject their parents and create the alliance with one of the parents.
- Children from divorce families do not seem to accept the recent parental separation, like most

of the participants, as we see that there predominates the drawing of the ideal family,

- Children from divorce families have more intense fears of punishment/ guilt/ aggression than the children from intact families.

The results of the study highlighted the relevance of using projective evidence in identifying important aspects of self-image, emotional state, and parental representation of children with conflicting divorcing parents. The results of the study confirm what other researches have highlighted in these children. One can notice there is good validity between the results of the three tests.

We believe that the results of the interpretation complement and support each other. We recommend that they should be applied together in a clinical assessment in case of custody.

Further investigation needs to be completed to enhance predictive value of the tests.

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