

Increasing Resilience in Children from Families with Divorced Parents by Using the Basic PH Model

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Abstract

Introduction: Resilience is the key factor in the child's ability to adjust to parental divorce and stimulating individual positive characteristics is essential in the field of resilience factors.

Objectives: In this article we want to show how we can use the Six Part Story Method of Mooli Lahad to activate internal resources (corresponding to the BASIC PH model) and help the children to differentiate from their conflicting parents. We started from the central idea that by composing personal stories as a method of assessment and therapeutic intervention, we can understand the types of resources and coping styles of the child.

Methods: In the first part we present the results of a comparative study between the type of resources identified in the stories of 34 children who come from families with recent divorce and type of resources identified in the stories of 34 children from intact families. In the second part of this article we present a model of therapeutic intervention that has as a main objective the activation of personal resources and growth of the adaptive capacity of children.

Results: Children with no history of divorce experiment less difficulties in their relationships with others and live positive feelings of confidence in themselves and their families. Children from families with recent divorce often use imagination as a way of coping. Also they obtained statistically significant higher minus scores compared to the control group for Social coping styles.

Conclusions: Identifying the ways of coping pattern, of the relevant themes and of the conflicts that cause difficulties, support therapists in the establishment of intervention programs for children who have experienced divorce.

Keywords: *divorce, children, resilience, basic ph coping model, 6 PSM method*

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I. Introduction

Most often, parents do not cease conflicting relationships after divorce, the parental conflict being maintained by visitation program discussions, determination of residence of the child, the natural parent-child connectedness or alimony. Trapped in conflicting parental relationship, some children naturally succeed in showing resilience while others can become extremely vulnerable and may have major psychological problems. How will the child react to the parents' divorce traumatic event depends on personal risk factors and coping strategies. The factor that has a major risk is keeping the child in parental conflict and forging alliances of one parent with the child against the other parent (Barnes, 1999; Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan, 1999, Kelly and Emery 2003).

Our practical experience in such cases, and the existing publications such as Chen and George (2005), Barnes (1999), have shown that there are several factors that can reduce the negative effects of divorce and increase the child's resilience such as: degree and time length of the parental conflict, quality of parenting practices, parent-child relationship and children's individual characteristics (temperament, self-esteem, level of development, coping strategies).

The most obvious protective factors are those related to the relationship of the child with the parents after divorce and to the children's individual characteristics. Resilience is the key factor in the child's ability to adjust to parental divorce and stimulating individual positive characteristics is essential in the field of resilience factors. Child resilience can be developed and enhanced by positive actions and adult protective actions and reducing risk factors (Pedro-Carroll, 2005). Also, special attention is paid to how children's resilience can be increased during and after the divorce period (Jen-De Chen, Rebecca A. George (2005).

Recognition of the child's individual style of coping enables parents, teachers and others who care for the child to respond better to their needs, to offer support and to reinforce their coping strengths.

The Basic Ph Coping Model was developed by Dr. Mooli Lahad (1992). The model suggests that people have six characteristics or dimensions that are the heart of their personal style of coping: beliefs and values, affects, social imagination, cognitive and physiological. Although everyone has the innate ability to use every dimension as part of their coping style, most people tend to rely on comfortable coping methods that have been developed in time. Although The Six Part Story Method is a projective method

commonly used by many therapists, it has not been validated as a method to determine a person's coping methods (Lahad 1992). Among the most representative studies where the Six Part Story Method has been used, we remind the research of Dent-Brown, K and Wang, M (2004) or that of Krkeljic and Pavlicic (1998) in which there had been evaluated the coping mechanisms of some subjects who had been exposed to long-term crisis situations.

Dent-Brown, K. and Wang, M. (2004) used the Six Part Story Method trying to differentiate between people with no history of mental illness and those diagnosed with Borderline Type Personality Disorder. The results of Shigeo Tatsuki (2000), reinforce that this projective method can be used successfully to discover inner strengths and activate positive resources in mothers with preschool children to help them cope with post-traumatic stress. In the book of M. Lahad published in 2013, Basic Ph shows how it can serve as a metamodel for understanding coping and resilience (p 15-17).

II. Method

The objective of the study

A stressful situation such as a divorce becomes unbearable for the child and blocking when extended on a long period of time. For these reasons, in this paper we want to show the psychological diagnosis and therapeutic utility of the Six Part Story Method of Mooli Lahad to identify resources and coping styles of the child on one hand, and on the other to support the therapeutic approach and support the child to differentiate from the conflicting parents.

Participants and Method

For this study 64 children with ages between 6 and 11 were tested using the Six Part Story Method model. The subjects were divided into two groups, based on their history of divorce, as follows:

The control group was made up of 34 children (17 boys and 17 girls) with ages between 6 and 11, without a history of parental divorce. All children had a normal cognitive development and did not have any psychiatric or neurological disorders.

The second group was made up of 34 children (18 boys and 16 girls) with ages between 6 and 11, all with a history of recent parental divorce. All children had a normal cognitive development and did not have any psychiatric or neurological disorders.

All children have been tested with the Six Part Story Method model. The children narratives were recorded in a written form and examined independently by the authors. Only the results found in both

assessments were taken into consideration in the statistical procedures.

The Six Part Story Method is a drama therapy tool in which the client creates a fictional story following structured instructions from the therapist. (M. Lahad, 1992, 1993) The six parts of the story are:

1. Who is the main character?
2. What is the main mission/task for our character?
3. Who or what can help in this task?
4. What is/are the obstacles(s) in the way?

What prevents the task from being achieved?

5. How does the main character goes about overcoming the obstacle?
6. What is the outcome?

The participant draws simple images on a sheet of paper as the instructions are given, to act as a prompt when the story is told. Once the six pictures are drawn, the participant is asked to tell the story, without interruption or questions. The participant is to tell as fully and as detailed possible, adding details and inventing new descriptions. Finally, the clinician asks questions about each picture and the story in general, to help the participant elaborate the story and to check any points that are not clear.

The dimensions under examination in the children's stories were: beliefs and values, affect, social, imagination, cognitive and physiological (according to Lahad's classification of individual

coping styles, 1992, 1993); coping resources, thematic level and conflicts areas. (according to Lahad, 2013)

The nature and frequency of each dimension has examined depending on the story elaborated by each subject.

III. Results

All the results obtained after scoring the stories developed by subjects in both groups were processed in a quantitative (using SPSS) and qualitative manner.

After the descriptive statistic analysis (average, standard deviation, normal distribution, homogeneity of variance) and the T Test to compare the two groups, there have been registered significant differences between the two groups ($p < 0.01$ / $p < 0.05$) for different scores (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2).

The statistical analysis of the results showed no statistically significant difference between the two groups with regard to use of the following ways of coping: affect, social, beliefs, physiological (-). There is a difference in terms of coping methods: cognitive, social, physiological and affect between the two groups, but the difference is not statistically significant.

Statistically significant differences resulted for the following ways of coping: social (-) and imagination. The scores for the coping style affect (-) were obtained only by the group of children with a history of divorce.

Coping mode	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
belief	lot control	34	1.62	1.939	.332
	lot divorce	34	2.15	1.258	.216
affect	lot control	34	1.18	1.267	.217
	lot divorce	34	.91	1.621	.278
social	lot control	34	3.59	2.017	.346
	lot divorce	34	3.53	2.537	.435
imagination	lot control	34	1.82	3.157	.541
	lot divorce	34	4.50	4.673	.801
cognitive	lot control	34	13.06	4.716	.809
	lot divorce	34	12.59	8.791	1.508
physiological	lot control	34	5.94	2.849	.489
	lot divorce	34	5.74	4.660	.799
aff.neg	lot control	34	.00	.000	.000
	lot divorce	34	.03	.171	.029
soc.neg	lot control	34	.68	.806	.138

	lot divorce	34	1.38	1.280	.219
physiological negative	lot control	34	1.44	1.211	.208
	lot divorce	34	2.09	1.694	.291

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

Dimensions	t-test	Sig.(2-tailed)
belief	-1.336	.186
affect	.750	.456
social	.106	.916
imagination	-2.767	.007**
cognitive	.275	.784
physiological	-.220	.827
aff.neg	-1.000	.321
soc.neg	-2.722	.008**
physiological negative	-1.812	.075**

p < 0,05 ** p < 0,01

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

IV. Discussions

Group of children without parental divorce

For children with no history of divorce, the themes that were most frequently highlighted during the study were those relating to social relationships and assuming social roles in life, namely, the need to relate and communicate with others (high scores for social adaptation). Also, themes aimed at helping the weak frequently appeared or confrontation with authority for recognition and affirmation, but without assuming the role of the parents' "saviour". Children with no history of divorce experiment less difficulties in their relationships with others and live positive feelings of confidence in themselves and their families. They express emotions in an appropriate way that does not involve aggressive emotions to themselves or general destruction, as occurs in children with a history of divorce. They recorded some negative results that were statistically insignificant for Social and Physiological coping styles. For the Cognitive dimension, the control group achieved significantly higher scores than the group of children with a recent history of divorce, aspect that can be interpreted psychologically by the fact that they have concrete ways of thinking that helps them find solutions to resolve appropriately certain life

situations. The story is always with a happy end and there are frequently maternal and paternal symbols inside the story: fire, earth, sun, water.

Group of children with parental divorce

Children from families with recent divorce often use imagination as a way of coping. Also they obtained statistically significant higher minus scores compared to the control group for Social coping styles. On a psychological level, this suggests that they live feelings of social isolation, conflicts and internal tensions.

In the stories of children with a history of divorce, aggressive characters predominate: monsters, criminals and bad people and there are frequently occurring situations involving rescue of the powerless from a serious danger, fire or disastrous event. The most common themes in the stories of children with a history of divorce are those concerning resolving parental conflicts, physical confrontation and the struggle between good and evil, which suggests not only their responsibility for improper parental relationship, but also a strong guilt complex.

The minus score for the coping style Affect, only achieved by the group of children with a history of divorce, correlated with the minus score for coping mode Social, suggests that they do not have a good

emotional self and have unrealistic expectations in relation to their own experience of life.

The end of these children's stories is generally a sad or ambiguous one and their stories frequently involve maternal and paternal symbols: fire, earth, sun, water. Unlike the children in the control group, children with parents in divorce proceedings do not have strong skills in cognitive adaptation and are inclined toward social withdrawal. Also at a psychological level this could suggest that it is particularly difficult to assume social roles and to clarify some beliefs and ideas related to their parents' divorce.

Since their inner resources are blocked, they tend to develop coping strategies based on imagination and logical schemes. This aspect emphasizes a dependent behaviour and compensating alliances and one parent becoming the saviour of the family.

Also, the minus score for the coping mode Affect, obtained only by group of children with a history of divorce, correlated with the minus score for the coping mode Social, suggests that they do not have a good emotional self and they have unrealistic expectations in relation to their own life experience.

Linking these minus scores to the generally dramatic tone of the story, the frequency of conflicts and themes (saviour theme, the confrontation between the forces of good and evil) identified in the stories of children with a history of divorce, reinforces once again that they live the feeling that they are responsible for the parental divorce and that they assign themselves a pivotal role in restoring the parental couple.

The ultimate objective is to help develop resilient personalities within the meaning of Lahad M. (2013): "Resilient personalities are characterized by traits that reflect a strong, well-differentiated and integrated sense of self. (structure of the ego, the self) and features that promote mutual interpersonal relationships with others (Galmezy 1991 Greef and Ritman 2005 Rutter 1987 Shiner 2000)"(p.12).

The case of Iulia

Iulia is a 8 and a half years old girl whose parents have been separated for two years and have been involved in a divorce process for one year. Her father lives and works in Italy. The mother is the one who asked for the divorce. Her father, although he said that the relationship with his wife was not good, does not agree with the divorce because he believes that for Iulia it is traumatic not to have both parents with her. The father visits Iulia every two weeks and spends part of the vacation time together. Parents dispute determination of residence of the child.

The psychological evaluation was originally asked by the mother, because the girl is affected by the current family situation. At one of the meetings Iulia also came accompanied by her father.

At first, Iulia seems a shy child, a little avoidant and anxious. If encouraged, she can easily express herself. Throughout the evaluation, we observed she had a very good insight, a good ability to concentrate her attention and very good consistency in language and thought. Iulia is a child who speaks with great ease and creativity in her drawings and stories.

Iulia speaks with pleasure about school, her friends and the animals they have at her father's house. She has a generally positive tone in addressing these issues. What creates internal tensions, anxiety and confusion is the conflicting relationship between her parents. Iulia feels threatened, she feels like being in the middle of the parental conflict. Her greatest fear is to remain without one of her parents. Iulia said she did not want to live with her father because she's afraid she will never see her mother.

Also she is afraid to tell her father that she wants to stay with her mother because she says: "*He cries and he no longer pays attention. I don't like it when he doesn't notice me.*" The girl needs both parents and their cooperation in order to find a safety status.

In relationship with her father, Iulia feels a great emotional pressure. It is possible to receive a message from her father whose significance is that the mother wanted a divorce and that is why they are not currently a whole family. She said that her father put her on the phone to tell a friend that her mother is evil and does not want to stay with her and she did just that, although she did not believe so, because she feared that he might get upset with her.

From other statements, it is revealed that she says and does what her father wants, when she is with him, because she is afraid that otherwise he will forget about her. When they meet he only talks about the divorce and Iulia often sees him crying. The assessment of projective tests shows that Iulia has a positive image of her father, she is emotionally attached to him and is impressed when he is sad.

When she came together with the mother, we could see that Iulia has a very good emotional relationship with her and a secure attachment. The relationship between them is natural and affectionate. During the assessment, they spoke about activities that they do together.

In the meeting when she was brought by the father, we noticed that Iulia had an affectionate relationship with him and she feels relaxed in his

presence. The girl made contradictory statements compared to those made when she and her mother came together. For example, she said that her mother asked her to tell us that she wants to stay with her. She said that her mother told her that she would die unless she stays with her. She said that sometimes she is afraid of her mother because of the way she yells at her, threatening and offending her. When she was asked if she fears that her father could forget about her, she confirmed, but she said it was not true, and that he complains all the time when she is with him. Facing a declaration from the other meeting, she told that her mother taught her to say that.

The contradiction between the statements from the two moments of the evaluation led us to believe that Iulia is deeply affected by the conflict between her parents and by the loyalty to the parent with whom she attends the meeting at the cabinet. In several moments of the evaluation, Iulia showed that she does not accept the separation of her parents, both during the interview and in her drawings. She wants to be with both her parents in the future. She said she would like to live in Italy with her father, but with her mother also, and that her parents should not divorce.

The conclusion of the evaluation is that Iulia is caught in the conflict between her parents, which is attracting her into an alliance with one parent against

the other constituting risk factors for her future emotional development. Iulia gives the impression of a child who wants to please, to comply with others. She tends to suppress the expression of her emotions and needs.

During the evaluation we noticed the presence of emotional confusion in her, she did not seem to be clear about what is good and what is bad in a particular situation. Emotional dissociation and avoidance are neurotic defence mechanisms, which Iulia uses to cope with the insecurity felt in relation to her parents in conflict. On the other hand, Iulia wants to be heard, to be able to have the freedom to make choices. She has adaptive resources, but she feels dependent on her parents and therefore needs support in order to meet her need of affirmation.

I recommended parenting counselling for parents, in order to help them learn to communicate effectively with regard to raising and educating Iulia. They now seem to have a co-parenting conflict, which causes distress both for them and for their daughter. I have recommended the inclusion of Iulia in a counselling program to be helped to cope with the trauma of her parents' separation and differentiate herself from their conflicts.

The Six Part Story was used in one of the meetings as a method of psychological evaluation and as a method of therapeutic intervention.



Iulia's story

The heroine was a flower (C) named Violeta (C) and she had to save (S) a rose. (C) That is what the Sun said (C). (I) The Rose (C) was very ill. (PH-) The Sun, (I) as he was a friend of the flower (S) thought (C) he could tell her that (S) she can do experiments. (B) After that, the Sun (I) spoke (S) with flower (I) to help the rose. (S) And she was not happy (A) that someone (C) was sick. (PH-) Once, he went on his way (PH) to the rose. (C) He encountered a huge branch (C, PH) for the flower. After that, the flower said: what to do?! (C) Because she got scared (A) when she saw the branch, (C) it was big. (PH) After that, the Sun (I) explained (C) what to do and said: as she knows how to do experiments (B) to make a syrup from that big stick (PH, C) and she said OK (S) and said they needed something more. (C) After that, the Sun (I) told him (S) to take mud and grass because that always helps the flower to do that. (C, B) The flower (I) said (S) that it would be better to make a syrup. (C) After that, she took the grass and the mud. (C) She put a lot of mud on the stick and then added some grass because from the mud it was sticky. (PH C) After that, he stretched heavily on the stick (PH, C) and began to make a syrup. (PH C) It began to flow (PH) on the stick (C) but could not keep it (C) because she had to have it for the rose. (C) The Sun gave her (I, S) a tiny bottle (C) to put the syrup. (PH, C). Because she was putting (PH) the syrup (C) somewhere the stick began to disappear ever more. (C, PH-). After that, she managed to pass over the stick. (PH, C) After that, they found the house of the rose (C) and they spread towards the rose (PH) that she could see him in bed. After that, she gave the special syrup (S, C) and the rose healed. (PH)

Identified style of coping: B (3), A (2), S (10), I (8), C (31), PH (13), Ph- (3).

To cope with stress, Iulia mainly uses cognitive resources, physical activity and she relies on social relationships. At the level of natural resources she lives in a conflictual state, leading to the idea that she can develop psychosomatic disorders. Her emotional resource is very little developed. Iulia tends to block the expression of her emotions.

The theme of the story: Iulia identifies herself with the role of the "saviour" in dealing with those who suffer and has the scenario of the child who needs to please others in order to not be abandoned. This scenario was formed in relation to the parent that she

perceives in weakness and is repeated in relation with her friends.

During the assessment she referred to her friend Caroline who gets upset if she plays with other colleagues. *"At school my girlfriend quarrels me if I play with other friends."*

Therapeutic strategy: To help Iulia get in contact with herself based on the personal story, we used the dramatization technique. The girl was instructed to identify herself, in turn, with every character in the story. Thus she was able to express different sides of her. She identified qualities of each character and then talked about moments in her life when she had felt like that.

Finally, she realized that she tends to save others but that she also needs support from her loved ones. She learned to express her needs and ask for help. An important thing was that she discovered that she has a very good ability to transform unpleasant things. She discovered her inner strength.

V. Conclusions

The research using the BASIC PH model evidenced significant differences between the coping styles and the thematic levels that occur in children from families with recent divorce compared to children from families without divorce.

Identifying the ways of coping pattern, of the relevant themes and of the conflicts that cause difficulties, support therapists in the establishment of intervention programs for children who have experienced divorce. Based on the stories they built through dramatization, children can be helped to develop more effective coping strategies, to activate their inner resources that help them differentiate themselves from their parents, to become more affirmative and grow their self esteem.

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