

TRIANGULATION IN (POST) DIVORCE FAMILY DYNAMICS: A SYSTEMIC FAMILY APPROACH

Key words

triangulation; family dynamics; parental conflict; divorce; interparental communication; parental decision-making

Author

Sanja R. Sretić, MSc. Centre for Social Welfare "St. Sava," Niš, Serbia. PhD Candidate, Department of Pedagogy, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, Niš, Serbia

Correspondence

s.sretic-15797@filfak.ni.ac.rs

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Summary

The research has been conducted with the aim of determining parents' perception of triangulation as a pattern of family functioning in relevance to characteristics of family dynamics: the way the divorce procedure ended, the quality of parents' communication, as well as their decision making about children in the (post) divorce period. The data is collected via DFOR PRP scale constructed on the basis of two standardized instruments and the parents' questionnaire constructed specially for the needs of this research, to question sociodemographic and control variable. The results show statistically significant difference in the level of perceived triangulation in relation to the characteristics of family dynamics. Triangulation is more present with parents whose divorce process was full of conflicts and has included the network of different institutions, with no or only conflict communication, and the ones with no agreement on any parental decisions, that is to say, where children themselves make crucial decisions, based on the perception of the parents included in the research. The obtained results point to the necessity of early recognition of disfunctional family dynamics as a risk factor for forming coalition between a parent and a child/children based on their age and timely intervention through educational and psychotherapeutical work with the parents.

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INTRODUCTION

During the development of human society the family, its structure, its function, its exterior and interior dynamics, even its system of values has continually been changing and developing "in the so called attempt to meet the demands placed before it in a certain moment, space and social system"(Janković, 2004: 13). Especially in the last few decades, social changes on the microlevel such as massive industrial production, emancipation, egalitarianisation of gender roles, spreading of the ideology of individualism (Amato, 2000; Zamora Huerta et al., 2020) have led to the huge turnover and drastic change in what is considered to be family and family life. Currently, it is easy to say that the family as an institution is 'in deep crisis' which is recognised as a fundamental threat to the stability of a society. One of the main reasons of such a family trend is frequent occurrence of marriage divorce as a phenomenon of family life which itself causes huge changes on the level of family system.

Starting from this understanding, educational science relies on modern psychological concepts, particularly the systemic family approach, to examine the modern family and patterns of family functioning. With its structural characteristics (integrity, circularity, hierarchical structure, adaptive self-organisation, boundaries) a systemic family approach offers a holistic perspective of revealing all possible dimensions of family system in a post-divorce period. From a pedagogical point of view, this enables understanding educational practice within the family system and thinking about the ways how to intervene in the process of education with the aim to improve family functioning (Milošević, 2009). One of the specific parental problems which might occur in this life

phase is the tendency of parents to put children in the triangle of a conflict. By examining literature, the author has established that not many research have been conducted from the parents' perspective, so this empirical survey aims to explore the perception of parents and expressiveness of triangulation in relation to the character of post-divorce period, all to the end of the divorce process, the quality of parents' communication, and their decision making.

THE DIVORCE AND POST DIVORCE-PRE-DICTORS FOR THE PROCESS OF TRIANGULATION

The divorce is a significant social problem both in developed and underdeveloped countries such as ours. This is the reason Arkes (2013; according to Jackson & Fife, 2018) suggests that almost 40% of all the children will experience a divorce of their parents in their lives, and that annually almost one million children go through a divorce process (Bing, Nelson & Wesolowski, 2009; according to Jackson & Fife, 2018).

From a psychological perspective, a divorce reflects prolonged marital instability and represents a major source of difficulties and distress experienced by spouses during their marriage (Čudina-Obradović & Obradović, 2006). As a "multidimensional process of family change" (Batić, 2010: 23), a divorce causes many issues and challenges. One of them is, most certainly, negotiation about a new communication pattern between ex-spouses, since a divorce means the end of a partner relationship but not parenting and its role. From a systemic perspective, changes in the marital subsystem caused by divorce are reflected throughout the entire family system, affecting parent-child relationships, sibling interactions, and the family's relation-

ship with its external environment. Similar to the cause and effect mechanism, the changes in a marital subsystem lead to further changes, towards new patterns of behaviour sprung from the altered family relations. Dysfunctional relations between parents and children are developed in the context of dysfunctional marriages (Cox & Paley, 2003), which show mutual dependance among the members of a family. The main problem is the negative influence of marital conflicts on parental functions and on the parent-child subsystem, which has a negative reflection on cognitive and emotional processes of a child, on parental efficiency, guidance, warmth, and support (Cheung & Chung, 2023; Harman et al., 2022; Russotti et al., 2024; Warmuth, et al., 2020). The effect of negative influence outlines violated, blurred boundaries between the parental subsystem and the one of a child-parent which may result in forming a stable inter-generational coalition (Bowen, 1976; according to Ponappa et al., 2017).

According to Bohannon's model (as cited in Kaslow, 1991), after the post-divorce period involving a reorganisation of family roles and relationships aimed at establishing a new family balance comes the post-divorce period characterised as a period of establishing new roles and relationships and the beginning of new family homeostasis.

It is the phase which demands reorganisation of family system on several levels (individual, parental, social) and the change of the existing family identity. A family in the post-divorce period is a very chaotic environment, which shows the need of redefining the existing boundaries, rules, behaviours, and interactions. Goldman and Coane (1977) refer to this period as a state of existential paradox for both parents and children.

When the parents are capable of distinguishing between their partner from their

parental role and understanding the importance of the other parent's figure in the life of their child/children, they create and maintain a cooperative relationship in the post-divorce period. This kind of relationship is based on constructive parental communication and collaboration which is indicative of parental functions after the divorce and is a predictor of parental cohesion (Beckmeyer et al., 2022; Jamison et al., 2014). Parental communication is much more than exchanging messages and information about children. It reflects the capability of parents to negotiate and have unique styles of upbringing their children as well as the attitudes in the altered family structure, of solving problems and conflicts when they occur, and of, making mutual decisions which influence their children's growth and development (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002; Rejaän et al., 2022).

Nevertheless some parents have very limited capability of differentiating a partner from his/her parental role, which results in longterm, continuous conflicts, which very often include children as well. In many cases, parents maintain a competitive relationship in which the child becomes the focus of ongoing disputes, leading to the involvement of various institutions and further deterioration of the already hostile parental relationship. Abundant research literature (Miralles et al., 2023; Neff & Cooper, 2004; Smyth & Moloney, 2019; Smith-Etzeberria et al., 2022) shows that almost 20-30% of families can be characterised as highly conflicting.

Inadequate parental cohesion, exemplified through conflicting parental interaction, is one of the strongest destructive factors for children's non conformity with the divorce, manifestation of problems (internalised and externalised) in behaviour, and is an example of high risk factor for forming inter-genera-

tional coalition with a child/children through the process of triangulation (Camisasca, et al., 2019; McCauley & Fosco, 2022; Stallman & Ohan, 2016).

TRIANGULATION AS A PATTERN OF FAMILY FUNCTIONING IN PARENTS (POST) DIVORCE PERIOD

The process of a family triangulation is one of the fundamental concepts of a systemic family approach. It determines the period in which parents include their children in their conflicts with the aim of avoiding conflict or shifting attention from the current one. Within Bowen's family systems theory, triangulation is understood as a mechanism through which family members attempt to regulate relational anxiety and preserve systemic balance (Bowen, 1976, according to Willis et al., 2021). Besides inhibiting constructive problem solving on the level of a partner, or, better to say, a parental subsystem, the process of triangulation blurs boundaries in relationships as well as the hierarchy of power in a family since one of the parents forms a union with a child (Etkin et al., 2014; Grych et al., 2004; Van Dijk et al., 2022).

The forming of inter-generational coalition as a consequence of a conflictual parental relationship paralyses the capacity of parents to function as stable and secure figures of attachment for their children and to provide care, support, and an functional model of family life (Dallos et al., 2016). Usually, the parent who has obtained parental authority expresses the need to gain emotional support and propinquity which can, to a high extent, inhibit children's activities appropriate for their age and their stage of development. The children get trapped in this relationship with the parent they live with and represent compensation for an emotionally dysfunctional

marriage (Dallos & Vetere, 2012).

From a parent's point of view, the process of triangulation can have instrumental role and the function of achieving certain parental aims, such as normalisation of relationship with their spouse, substitution for inadequate marriage, regulation of spouse distance, avoiding direct conflict and its escalation, expressing of vengeance aggression, and obtaining information (Neophytou & Rodríguez-González, 2021).

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM

The aim and research questions

This empirical research has been conducted with the aim of establishing the perception of parents of triangulation as a pattern of family functioning in relation to characteristics of a post-divorce period: the way the divorce procedure has ended, the quality of communication between parents, and the way they make decisions in the post-divorce period.

In accordance with the defined objective, the following research questions have been asked:

1. Are there statistically significant differences between parents in the perceived triangulation in relation to the way the divorce process has ended?
2. Is triangulation as a pattern of family functioning determined by the quality of parents' communication in the (post) divorce period?
3. Are there statistically significant differences in the perceived triangulation of parents in relation to the way of making decisions about a child/children in the (post-)divorce period?

Sample of Respondents

With the method of deliberate sampling, we have formed a sample consisting of 100 parents of both genders (57% female i 43% male) who are undergoing divorce and are dealt with the 'Sveti Sava' Social Service Department in the city of Niš (Serbia) and of families whose divorce process has been completed and are currently in the phase of post-divorce period on the territory of Niš. Therefore, the primary criteria for inclusion of respondents in the study have been:

- 1) parents who are in the process of divorce and in whose mediation the 'Sveti Sava' Social Service Department in Niš is involved, with reference to the procedures for exercising parental rights and regulating personal contacts of a child/children with the other parent;
- 2) parents who are in the post-divorce period;
- 3) parents who have shown willingness to voluntarily participate in the research.

Methods, techniques and instruments

In this research, the method of theoretical analysis and systemic non-experimental method, the survey method, and scaling have been used. The DFOR-PRP scale represents a combined and adapted instrument constructed on the basis of two previously validated instruments (Margolin, Gordis, & John, 2001; Parker, 2010). The items have been modified and adapted in accordance with the characteristics of the sample and the aims of the present study. A scale of Likert type with 5 degrees (1-never; 2-rarely; 3-sometimes; 4-often; 5-very often), consisting of 34 items adjusted to the sample of research, has been applied. The questionnaire is divided in four subscales: Cooperation, Communica-

tion, Conflict, and Triangulation. The value of Kronbach's alpha coefficient shows that the DFOR-PRP scale has satisfying reliability ($\alpha > 0.842$). Furthermore, the application of the Kronbach's alpha test indicates satisfying reliability across the relevant subscales: Triangulation ($\alpha > 0.895$), Conflict ($\alpha > 0.762$), Communication ($\alpha > 0.777$), and Cooperation ($\alpha > 0.800$).

The questionnaire for parents constructed for the purpose of this research contains 23 items collected as a sociodemographic and control variable scale. For the purpose of this research we have shown how prominent the pattern of triangulation with its control variables actually is: the outcome of divorce process, the quality of parents' communication, as well as decision making in a post-divorce period.

Research procedure

The research was conducted between September 2023 and March 2024. Prior to data collection, the permission to conduct the research was obtained from the management of the institution. Parents' participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. The researcher informed participants about the study's purpose, data confidentiality, data protection procedures, and the research's ethical standards. The informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation. Anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were ensured throughout the research process. They were also informed that the results would be used exclusively for scientific research purposes. Given the sensitive nature of the research topics, special attention was paid to the protection of personal and family-related information in accordance with ethical research standards.

Statistical processing of the collected data

The obtained data were processed in the SPSS statistical package. For determining the level of presence of basic variables of this research, we have applied the technique of descriptive statistics—the size of a sample (N), standard deviation (SD), arithmetic mean (M), frequencies (f), and percentages (%). With the aim to determine reliability and validity of the created instrument, the Kronbach’s alpha statistical procedure has been used. Based on examining the normality of distribution of Triangulation subscale (the responents’ replies are distributed with statistic significance from normal distribution), the Kruskal-Wallis difference test has

been used in this research.

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

The following part of the paper presents the results of empirical research aimed at examining parents’ perception of triangulation as a pattern of family functioning in the (post-)divorce period. The analysis of the results is organised in accordance with the set research questions and includes an examination of differences in the perceived triangulation in relation to the way the divorce has ended, the quality of communication between parents, and the way decisions are made in the (post-)divorce period.

Chart 1: The difference in expression of triangulation in relation to divorce finalisation variable

Non-parametric process (Kruskal-Wallis test)	Divorce finalization	N	X ²	ε ²	p
Triangulation	Uncontested marriage divorce	38	18.11	0.17	<.01
	Intervening of Social Service	44			
	Inclusion of the network of institution	518			
Post hoc test			Test Statistic	p	
Uncontested marriage divorce	Intervening SS		-13.36	0.11	
Uncontested marriage divorce	Inclusion of the network of institution		35.18	<.01	
Intervening SS	Inclusion of the network of institution		21.82	<.05	

Chart 1 shows the expression of the pattern of Triangulation in relation to the divorce finalisation variable. The Kruskal-Wallis statistical procedure shows that there is a statistically significant difference in the family pattern of Triangulation (18.11; p<.01) in relation to the divorce finalisation variable. The post hoc analysis revealed that parents whose divorce process involved a network of institutions reported significantly higher levels of perceived triangulation than parents who had unconsented marriage divorce (35.18; p <

.01) and those whose divorce process involved only the intervention of the Centre for Social Work (21.82; p < .05) In the remaining cases the difference is not noted. The findings suggest that the more conflictual and institutionally mediated the divorce process was, that the more respondents perceived their former spouse as exhibiting behaviours associated with triangulation. The Kruskal-Wallis test shows a statistically significant difference between the groups H(2)=18.12, p<.01, where the effect size was high ε² =0.17.

Chart 2: The difference in the presence of triangulation in relation to variable of parent's communication in post-divorce period

Non-parametric process (Kruskal-Wallis test)	Communication of parents in post-divorce period	df	X ²	ε ²	p
Triangulation	Communication is frequent and peaceful	3	16.85	0.14	<.01
	Communication is good with occasional disputes				
	Verbal conflicts on a daily basis				
	Communication is conflicting with no possibility for achieving an agreement on anything				
Post hoc test			Test Statistic		p
Everyday conflicts with no possibility of achieving agreement	Communication is good and correct		35.29		<.01
	Good communication with occasional disputes		28.95		<.01

Chart 2 shows the presence of Triangulation in relation to the variable of communication of parents in a post-divorce period. By applying the Kruskal-Wallis statistical procedure we have obtained the result featuring a statistical significance in the family pattern of Triangulation (16.85; $p < .01$) in relation to the variable of communication of parents in a post-divorce period. In the final section of this chart, we show only statistically significant results. A post hoc analysis reveals that there exists a statistically significant difference in perception of triangulation between spouses who maintain conflicting communication in relation to those whose communication is regular and correct (35.29; $p < .01$)

and those whose communication in relation to their parental roles is good with occasional disputes (28.95; $p < .01$). The findings indicate that the more conflictual the communication between former spouses is, and the less agreement they reach, the more frequently respondents perceive the other parent as engaging the child/children in triangulation. The Kruskal-Wallis test shows a statistically significant difference between the groups $H(3) = 16.85$, $p < .01$. The obtained value ($\epsilon^2 = 0.14$) indicates a high effect size, suggesting that the quality of parental communication in the post-divorce period has a substantial effect on the level of triangulation.

Chart 3: The difference in the presence of triangulation in relation to decision making variable in the post-divorce period

Non-parametric process (Kruskal-Wallis test)	Decision making in post-divorce period	N	Mean Rank	df	X ²	ε ²	p
Triangulation	Decisions are made by parents	40	35.16	3	26.16	0.24	<.01
	Each parent makes their own decisions	24	57.94				
	Children make decisions	12	80.83				
	No communication between parents	24	53.46				
Post hoc test			Test Statistic		p		
Decisions made by parents	Each parent makes their own decisions		-22.78		<.01		
	Children make decisions		-45.67		<.01		
No communication between parents	Children make decisions		27.37		<.05		

Chart 3 shows the presence of the Triangulation pattern in relation to the decision-making variable in the context of parenting during the (post-)divorce period. Using the Kruskal-Wallis test, it has been found that there is a statistically significant difference in the family pattern of triangulation (26.16; $p < .01$) with respect to the variable of decision-making in the (post) divorce period. The research findings indicate that there is a statistically significant difference in the perceived triangulation between spouses who make decisions jointly and those where each parent makes decisions independently (-22.78; $p < .01$), as well as between those who make decisions jointly and those where a child/children makes the decisions (-45.67; $p < .01$). A difference is also observed between parents who have no communication and those where a child/children makes the decisions (27.37; $p < .05$). In other cases, there is no statistically significant difference. The obtained differences in the perceived triangulation suggest that it is more pronounced in situations where a child/children makes decisions or where each parent makes decisions individually. The Kruskal-Wallis test shows a statistically significant difference between the groups, $H(3) = 26.16$, $p < .01$. The obtained value ($\epsilon^2 = 0.24$) indicates a high effect size, suggesting that the way decisions are made in the post-divorce period has a substantial impact on the level of triangulation.

DISCUSSION

The manner in which the divorce has been finalised is the first characteristic of the (post-) divorce period in relation to which the intensity of parental triangulation with a child/children has been examined. The obtained data shows that there is a statistically significant difference in the intensity of the trian-

gulation process depending on the way the divorce has been finalised (18.11; $p < .01$). The post hoc analysis reveals that former spouses differ in the level of the perceived triangulation of the other spouse among respondents whose divorce has involved a network of institutions compared to those who have reached a mutual agreement (35.18; $p < .01$) and those in whose case the Centre for Social Work mediated (21.18; $p < .05$). In other words, the perceived triangulation is most pronounced among parents who maintain highly conflictual parental communication with their former spouse and in whose divorce process a network of institutions has consequently mediated (Centre for Social Work, Municipal Court, Marriage and Family Counselling Centre, Institute for Mental Health Protection, etc.). The results of the effect size measure ($\epsilon^2 = 0.17$) confirm that the way divorce has been finalised has significant practical implications for understanding family dynamics in the (post-)divorce period. A high-conflict divorce process involving the mediation of a network of institutions significantly indicates impaired parental cohesion, conflictual parental communication, and difficulty in establishing a functional parental alliance, which significantly contributes to the emergence of triangulation as a dysfunctional family pattern.

Considering primarily the distribution of responses on this variable, the results show that the Centre for Social Work has been involved in a divorce process for the majority of parents in this sample (44%), as the authority entrusted with forming opinions in the process of exercising parental rights and regulating the model of a child's/children's contact with the other parent (Pravilnik o organizaciji, normativima i standardima rada centra za socijalni rad, 2008, Article 4, Paragraph 2). Such a distribution indicates

the existence of parental conflict concerning further care of a child/children, since the co-parental divorce phase (Kaslow, 1991) is certainly one of the most dramatic phases of a divorce process. The formation of an inter-generational coalition of a parent with a child/children is a response to a chronically hostile partner and, subsequently, parental relationship characterised by a lack of trust, continuous disagreement over everyday parenting issues, and a consistent desire for prolonged court proceedings (Anderson et al., 2010; Joyce, 2016; Johnston, 1994; Nielsen, 2013). The intensity of triangulation in the context of a high-conflict divorce indicates a deficit of parental competencies and skills in terms of ensuring supervision and control, consistency in applying disciplinary strategies, parental warmth, and responsibility—findings also confirmed in previous studies (Beckmeyer et al., 2017; Dallos et al., 2016; Macie & Stolberg, 2003; Peris & Emery, 2014;). In such parental dynamics, a child becomes a means of the power struggle, with a complete marginalisation of his or her needs and interests. Conversely, it has been shown that the institution of amicable divorce, which implies parental consensus and joint decision-making regarding duties and responsibilities, is associated with a lower level of triangulation. Such findings are also expected, given that the co-parental relationship often reflects the parents' readiness and ability for functional communication, as well as their clear differentiation between parental and former partner roles.

When it comes to the intensity of triangulation in relation to the characteristic of parental communication during the (post-)divorce period, the research results indicate a statistically significant correlation between the quality of parental communication in the (post-)divorce period and the intensity of triangulation (16.85; $p < .01$). The distribution of

responses for the communication variable shows alarming, yet not unexpected, findings considering the results obtained for the variable regarding the manner in which the divorce has been finalized, which already testified to a highly conflictual parental relationship. A closer look, at the distribution of responses for this variable, reveals that the largest number of parents in this sample (38%) do not maintain any communication. Guided by the postulates of the systemic family approach, which views communication as one of the dimensions of family system functionality, the obtained results regarding the absence of communication in the parental domain indicate unbalanced, that is, dysfunctional family systems in this sample. In situations where communication between parents exists, it is accompanied by occasional verbal arguments (26%), and among some parents (20%) by frequent conflicts without the possibility of reaching consensus, which further confirms the aforementioned dysfunctionality. Only 16% of parents perceive their communication with their former spouse after the breakup of the marital union as regular and appropriate. Given the existing quality of communication, results of post hoc test shown that there is a statistically significant difference in perceived triangulation between spouses who maintain conflictual communication compared to those whose communication is regular and appropriate (35.29; $p < .01$), as well as between those whose communication is accompanied by verbal conflicts (28.95; $p < .01$). The results indicate that the more the communication between former spouses in the parenting domain is filled with intense conflicts and the absence of agreement, the greater the situations in which the respondent perceives that the other parent triangulates the child/children. This is supported by the results of high

effect size measure ($\epsilon^2 = 0.14$), which suggest that the quality of parental communication in the (post-)divorce period represents an important dimension of family functioning and significantly contributes to differences in the perceived triangulation. These findings confirm the theoretical foundations of the systemic family approach, which emphasise the fact that the quality of inter-parental communication is the critical aspect of family functioning after a divorce (Grych et al., 2004; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2002;). Since the parental subsystem is positioned at the top of the family system hierarchy, it is expected that communication within the partnership domain will spill over into other subsystems and affect them. The obtained findings support the fact that parents in the (post-)divorce period included in this sample have not developed a functional communication channel, which increases the risk of involving a child in conflict as a mediator, an ally, or a messenger—typical forms of triangulation (Dallos et al., 2016; Etkin et al., 2014;). In a predominantly dysfunctional (conflictual or non-existent) communication, parents naturally fail to form a coherent parental alliance, which leads to the blurring of family boundaries and the destabilisation of the family hierarchy.

Among parents whose communication is regular and appropriate, serving the timely and adequate fulfillment of children's developmental needs, triangulation is the least pronounced. This does not mean that there are no conflicts in the parenting domain, but rather that they are resolved constructively, guided by the best interests of a child/children. This group of parents possesses the capacity for a clear differentiation between a partner and parental roles and demonstrates readiness to nurture a cooperative parental relationship.

The last but equally important characteristic of the (post-)divorce period in relation to which the intensity of triangulation has been examined is parental decision-making during the (post-)divorce period. In the examined sample, the largest number of parents (40%) make decisions jointly. Twenty-four percent (24%) of parents reported that each parent made decisions independently, while another 24% reported that joint decision-making regarding their children was not possible due to the absence of communication between the former spouses. Only 12% of parents leave decision-making to a child/children. Such a distribution reflects different forms of family dynamics—from cooperative to distinctly dysfunctional—and is conditioned by the previously tested characteristics of the (post-)divorce context. Observed in isolation, these findings might appear somewhat contradictory. When institutions of the system mediate in the (post-)divorce process, which implies a low quality of parental communication, joint decision-making on matters significantly affecting a child's/children's future cannot realistically be expected. The obtained results may point to a tendency among parents to provide socially desirable responses. Considering the process of triangulation within such a distribution of responses, it has been found that there is a statistically significant difference in the intensity of triangulation depending on the manner in which decisions are made during the (post-)divorce period (26.16; $p < .01$). The large effect size ($\epsilon^2 = 0.24$) confirms that dysfunctional decision-making patterns in the (post-)divorce period represent an important risk factor for the development of triangulation as a dysfunctional family pattern. As expected, the lowest level of triangulation has been recorded among parents who jointly make decisions about important matters concern-

ing their children ($M=35.16$). As an indicator of relational stability, joint decision-making reflects a cooperative parental alliance with clearly defined boundaries, thereby minimising the risk of involving a child in inter-parental conflict. Such a model protects a child's emotional development and reduces the likelihood of triangulation. On the other hand, higher levels of the perceived triangulation have been observed among parents who act independently and without mutual communication ($M=57.94$), as well as among those where communication in the parenting domain does not exist and decision-making is therefore impossible ($M=53.46$). Particularly significant is the finding that the highest level of perceived triangulation has been identified in families where a child/children makes decisions ($M=80.83$). Using post hoc test, the obtained differences in the perceived triangulation indicate that it is more pronounced in cases where a child/children makes decisions (-45.67 ; $p<.05$) or where each parent makes decisions independently (-22.78 ; $p<.01$). A high-conflict parental divorce in which a network of institutions mediates (or has mediated), accompanied by predominantly conflictual communication between parents, clearly opens space for a role reversal and parentification—that is, the inclusion of a child in decision-making processes that fall within the scope of parental authority and responsibility. Through such parental behaviour, a child assumes a level of responsibility that often exceeds his or her developmental capacities, causing feelings of inner conflict, guilt, and the need for loyalty to one parent— all of which are characteristic outcomes of the triangulation process (Fosco & Bray, 2016; Ponappa et al., 2017; Van Dijk et al., 2022).

The intensity of triangulation in situations where parents act independently, with-

out mutual communication, indicates low parental cohesion, a high-conflict parental relationship that continues from the marital period, and the potential instrumentalisation of children within the inter-parental relationship. Such family dynamics, characterised by conflictual or non-existent parental communication, in which decision-making is left to children or where each parent makes decisions individually, raises questions about the quality of parental educational strategies and represents a high risk for the development of social behaviour disorders (either internalised or externalised).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The conducted research indicates certain limitations. These primarily concern the choice of the sample, given that this study includes parents who have been mediated through a single institution (the 'Sveti Sava' Centre for Social Work in Niš) and those parents in the post-divorce period from the territory of the city of Niš. Considering the structure and size of the sample, the possibility of generalising the findings to the entire population of parents in the (post-)divorce period in Serbia is limited.

A second limitation relates to the method. In this study, the intensity of the triangulation process relies on the perception, that is, self-reporting, of one parent, and the obtained responses may reflect a subjective assessment and perception of the ex-spouse's behaviour. Additionally, it is possible that the unavailability of the other parent (due to territorial distance or lack of motivation to participate in the study), as well as the fact that the participating parents have been involved in procedures at the Centre for Social Work regarding the exercise of parental rights and the regulation of a child's/children's person-

al contact with the other parent, influenced the obtained results.

CONCLUSION

The conducted empirical research, viewed from a systemic perspective, primarily indicates that a divorce process has a profound impact on the family system and can give rise to both functional and dysfunctional patterns of family functioning. Statistical analyses show that triangulation is determined by dysfunctional marital dynamics, particularly among parents whose divorce has been high-conflict one and involves a network of institutions, as well as among those where communication is absent or conflictual. The findings also confirm the principles of the systemic family approach, which emphasise the importance of relational boundaries, hierarchy, and communication within the family system, as the family during and after divorce continues to represent an interconnected network of personal relationships in which each family member depends on and affects the others. Since the formation of triangular family processes negatively impacts the social and emotional development of a child/children, as supported by numerous empirical findings, this study highlights the importance of early recognition of family dynamics and the identification of high-risk marital relationships that may lead to destructive patterns of family functioning. In this regard, the obtained findings suggest some important implications:

Given the increasing prevalence of high-conflict divorces, there is a recognised need to develop and improve support programmes for parents involved in high-conflict divorce proceedings, which pose a high risk for destructive patterns such as triangulation. Therefore, pedagogically target-

ed interventions with parents in the (post) divorce period should aim to guide them from conflictual toward constructive, and cooperative parental communication.

Considering that the quality and intensity of parental communication determine the overall quality of the parental relationship, it is essential that educational programmes aimed at strengthening parental skills and competencies in joint decision-making be developed and implemented, which directly affects the future of children.

The increasingly complex family dynamics of modern families point to the necessity of continuously strengthening and improving the professional competencies of practitioners who work directly with parents in the (post)divorce period, as well as developing local community services.

In practice, there is a recognised need to expand the sample to include multiple institutions and other territories, as well as to involve both parents to ensure a multi-perspective analysis. In addition to quantitative methods, it would be useful to incorporate qualitative approaches (interviews, case studies, focus groups) to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the triangulation process.

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ТРИАНГУЛАЦИЈА У ПОРОДИЧНОЈ ДИНАМИЦИ У ПЕРИОДУ (ПОСТ)РАЗВОДА: СИСТЕМСКИ ПОРОДИЧНИ ПРИСТУП

Кључне речи

триангулација; породична динамика; родитељски конфликт; развод; комуникација између родитеља; родитељско доношење одлука

Аутор

Сања Р. Сретић, мастер,
Центар за социјални рад
„Свети Сава“, Ниш, Србија.
Докторанд на Департману
за педагогију Филозофског
факултета Универзитета
у Нишу, Ниш, Србија.

Кореспонденција

s.sretic-15797@filfak.ni.ac.rs

Област

Породична педагогија,
социјална заштита

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Резиме

Истраживање је имало за циљ да испита перцепцију родитеља о изражености триангулације као обрасца породичног функционисања у односу на карактеристике породичне динамике: начин окончања бракоразводног поступка, квалитет комуникације између родитеља у (пост)разводном периоду и начин доношења одлука о деци. У теоријском приступу истраживању најпре су представљене карактеристике разводног и постразводног процеса, учесталост развода и породична динамика у овом периоду. У посебном поглављу представљен је концепт триангулације као системске породичне конфигурације која се најчешће јавља током развода и у постразводном периоду. Подаци су прикупљени применом ДФОР-ПРП скале, конструисане на основу релевантне литературе, и Упитника за родитеље, посебно конструисаног за потребе овог истраживања, којим су испитиване социодемографске и контролне варијабле. Резултати показују да постоје статистички значајне разлике у нивоу перципиране триангулације у односу на карактеристике породичне динамике у (пост)разводном периоду. Триангулација је израженија код родитеља чији је бракоразводни процес био висококонфликтан и укључивао мрежу различитих институција, код родитеља између којих комуникација не постоји или је конфликтна, као и код оних који не постижу договор о родитељским одлукама, односно у случајевима у којима деца сама доносе важне одлуке, према перцепцији родитеља који су учествовали у истраживању. Добијени налази указују на потребу за раним препознавањем дисфункционалне породичне динамике као фактора ризика за формирање међугенерацijske коалиције између родитеља и детета/деце, као и за правовременим интервенисањем кроз образовни и психотерапијски рад са родитељима.

