

Marital Dialogue – between Conflict, Agreement and Relationship Breakdown

ABSTRACT

Marital dialogue plays an essential role in shaping the relationship between spouses and supports experiencing *personal I* in the context of the community – *We*. In these couples, where dialogue is going well, it fulfils the function of a secure base forming a community based on the foundation of unity. However, contemporary culture denies an interpersonal dialogue the authenticity and engagement, emphasizing individualistic attitudes, preoccupation with oneself, leading to relationship and community disintegration and breakdown. This paper is to present the authors twenty year research into bonds, communication styles, marital conflicts and ways of coping with them. The research shows various issues related to developing the interpersonal dialogue and thus creating bonds and unity in the marriage and family. At first, the research devoted to the transmission of generation patterns in the family is presented and it is followed by presentation of selected psychological factors influencing marriage quality and marital satisfaction.

KEYWORDS: marital dialogue, family relationships, attachment, intergenerational transmission patterns

* Correspondence regarding the paper should be sent to: Monika Kornaszewska-Polak, Katedra Nauk o Rodzinie, Wydział Teologiczny, Uniwersytet Śląski, Katowice, Poland, e-mail: m.j.polak@wp.pl

It is irrefutable that the dialogue is a natural potential and unity resource in marriages from their very beginning. During the engagement period young people create new *We* value while talking, presenting and discussing their ideas, opinions and values. The new *We* value is a factor motivating to undertake an effort for a community – the family. Such an attitude allows for creating the culture of dialogue based on its authenticity and involvement. In contrast, the opposite situation of conflict and disintegration creates barriers for unity, destroys it and leads to a number of situations, which cause concern these days, such as separation, divorce, cohabitation and various alternative marriage options. According to Buber's philosophy of the dialogue meeting another human is essential for realisation of the *personal I* (Buber, 1992). Being in the dialogue is an authentic attitude towards other people with no fear or doubt or search for one's own profits, which means making oneself available to others through talking to them, giving them emotional support or providing them with psychological, material or spiritual help. The attitude of not leaving another human being to one's own devices is characterised by noticing him or her, identifying his or her needs, sensitivity and empathy to whom this individual actually is and responding to the needs. In the culture of dialogue the human existence has an irrefutable quality and value and the human good is its primary objective.

DEVELOPMENT OF MARITAL ATTACHMENT IN THE FACE OF CONFLICT AND RELATIONSHIP BREAKDOWN

Dialogue constitutes a basis for developing various human relations, however, its unique character can be observed in the connection with the marital bond. It is there in the basic social unit, where a new human being is born and where the whole society has its beginnings. The bond of attachment and love is built on the authentic experiencing each other and willingness

to offer oneself to another person as an unconditional gift. This bond is created on the basis of childhood patterns when spouses learned the attitude towards the opposite sex, atmosphere for talking, trust and openness. Such correct patterns created at home are called secure attachment style, where an individual trusts the world and people, does not treat them as enemies, trusts in stable and long-lasting relationships. According to the attachment theory these patterns can be treated as a *secure base* upon which any other relationships with people are built (Bowlby, 2007). The relationship patterns where relations with parents are not correct, are called insecure attachment styles.

Authentic dialogue poses no problem for people with secure attachment style as they show no fear related to their partner's availability. Young people who are engaged are involved in the dialogue as they talk to each other before taking a decision to solemnise their relationship, due to which they start building this unity even before they get married. This potential is sufficient for many couples and allows them to stay together for better or for worse (Kornaszewska-Polak, 2014a).

Meeting another person in the dialogue contributes to development of mutual trust and openness and also allows an individual to know a true *personal I*. By experiencing another person, to certain extent we also incorporate this person in our own *I* borders and we eliminate the distance existing between two people. It is when the bond of closeness and intimacy is developed. Due to this intimate contact, it is possible to create a new life in the atmosphere of mutual acceptance and unity. Only then is the conceived child fully accepted and parents become a main inclusive behavioural pattern for him. In the process of growing up parents teach their children attitudes and values that are naturally adopted by the children who observe and imitate them. While observing adults they learn how to treat one another and how to communicate and fulfil their needs. Behavioural patterns are passed from generation to generation. Therefore the term *secure*

base does not only refer to one marriage or family. It is in the cradle of the family life where appropriate attitudes are formed and then are transferred into adult life and other areas of social functioning of an individual.

Conflicts are an integral part of the family life. They occur almost everywhere where two people are present and conflicts of interests are likely to arise as well as miscommunication and disputes over everyday matters. The conflict evokes a number of emotions and leads to specific reactions. This behaviour depends on an individual's ability to cope with conflicts when tension and stress increase due to inability to achieve one's own goals. When a conflict escalates, taking each decision by a couple becomes a battleground – a conflict of opinions or trying to prove who is right (Kornaszewska-Polak, 2014b). When one party wins, the other loses, which leads to evoking spouses' negative feelings to each other. In most cases the causes of conflict are external and objective, however, some degree of good will is needed to identify them.

Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that the conflict is a kind of test showing if a given individual is capable of coping with one's own emotions and if this individual will take into account other people's interests while trying to achieve one's own targets. Conflicts can be solved in a number of ways, which proves the relationship strength. Difficult problems can be resolved either by talking them through or "sweeping them under the carpet" and thus evading them. The good thing about the marriage is the fact that periods of conflicts are followed by reconciliation and mood swings which prevent boredom and everyday monotony.

However, currently there is a dominance of attitudes with increasing unwillingness to compromise or resign from individual objectives for the sake of the common good. Partial concession and resigning from some personal benefits is seen as an act of heroism that only few people can afford these days. Due to insufficient personal maturity, reconciliation and forgiveness become more

and more difficult to achieve in disputes and conflicts. It is also caused by the fact that culture is oriented on achieving success at any price. Besides, there is no room for agreement, achieving common objectives and real understanding. This leads to disintegration and divisions in the marriage or family, and building coalitions dominated by the lack of trust and a fear of losing something important. Consequently, young people do not want to solemnise their relationship in order to avoid being hurt due to conflicts and therefore they create alternative to the marriage or so called 'free' relationships.

Contemporary culture causes that the interpersonal dialogue loses its authenticity and involvement, and emphasises individualist attitudes. Now conflicts more frequently lead to disintegration of the relationship and marriage breakdown. What is more, bonds that are supposed to last for a lifetime are not as binding as they used to be. Nowadays it is easier to dissolve the marriage bond, not only for psychological reasons or its social acceptance but also due to legal regulations facilitating the marriage dissolution. When an individual finds it difficult to function in one relationship, replaces it with another one, more satisfying and more comfortable. This behaviour reflects immaturity and a hasty conclusion that a relationship built with another person will be easier and better.

Increasing number of divorces results from misunderstandings of psychological nature and the most common cause of divorce are incompatible personality types. In the divorce conflict spouses find it difficult to indicate each other's good personality traits or recall good moments spent together in their common past (Przybyła-Basista, 2006). This conflict leads to perceiving a spouse as a main enemy and an obstacle in pursuing one's own objectives. Therefore, the best solution seems to free oneself from a spouse by parting. Children, to a larger or smaller extent, are usually involved in this conflict and are strongly affected by it because they observe parents' behaviour and are witnesses to

their conflicts and arguments. They frequently feel responsible for this situation. Parents' parting and division of their marital property cause inner conflicts in children who will always love both parents. In some cases in such a conflict, one of the parents tries to discredit the other spouse in the eyes of a child. It causes severe psychological consequences in children in their lifetime and results in their difficulty or even inability to have a steady relationship later in their adult life.

GENERATION TRANSMISSION OF BEHAVIOURAL PATTERNS IN FAMILIES

The purpose of this study is to present the authors twenty year research into bonds, communication styles, marital conflicts and ways of coping with them. The research shows various issues related to developing the interpersonal dialogue and thus creating bonds and unity in the marriage and family. This research was conducted at different times, however, it is presented here not in a chronological order but 'topical' order, which emphasises the significance of creating the dialogue bond from the early childhood to the old age. Thus, at first the research devoted to the transmission of generation patterns in the family is presented and it is followed by presentation of various factors influencing marriage quality and marital satisfaction.

The research into emotional relationship in the generative and procreative family with the use of the E. Bene and J. Anthony's Family Relations Test showed relationships between inappropriate relations in the child's family and the child's difficulties later in the child's adult life (Bene, Anthony, 1993). In the research into kindergarten children the model of family relationships reflected an emotional picture of authentic emotional relationships in a given family. Excessive positive or negative reactions towards family members formed the basis for characterisation of emotional

attachment pattern in the child (Róžańska-Kowal, Kornaszewska-Polak, 2006). Children are usually attached emotionally to their mother who, in order of importance, is followed by their father, siblings and other people. The research focused on adults showed that maladjusted children who did not get love or emotional support every day, could not love or support others in later life. They did not feel understood, accepted or safe in their relationships with their parents, which led to the lowered self-esteem and distrust. Communication problems in these families resulted from the lack of consistency between their parents' words and deeds (contradiction between verbal and non-verbal communication). The lack of positive, secure relationships in the childhood led to higher depressivity, maladjustment and higher crime rate.

Subsequent research focused on the situation of families with various life problems they cannot handle (Kornaszewska-Polak, 2016b). The research describes living conditions of the dysfunctional families in Silesia province from the perspective of family assistants working with them. Families described by the family assistants are mostly communities with the high rate of the learned helplessness, unwilling to undertake or implement changes and are immune to any kind of influence of external institutions willing to help them. It is estimated that such helpless families depending on social care account for 80% of families supported by the social welfare institutions. Relationships in those families are disturbed and children do not get parents care or support. What is more, they often need to take care of adults and even take over their duties from them.

Situation of dysfunctional families is extremely difficult, sometimes with no prospects for better future. Helpless people see no sense in changing their lives, have no motivation to solve their own problems or hope that their lives may change and look different. Members of such families are lacking in life competences like stable self-assessment and a self-esteem upon which they could build their achievements. The dysfunctional families come from

the social environments that are neglected, poor and excluded (marginalised). Their generalised helplessness is accompanied by other problems such as: mental diseases and disorders, degenerating poverty, depressivity, addiction, unemployment; neglected physical intellectual and spiritual needs. Helplessness as a parental attitude is passed from one generation to next generation as a transmission of thinking and behavioural patterns. Children while observing certain attitudes of their parents towards problems learn almost automatically to act in the same way in their lives. Vicious-circle learning is closed then and can be broken only by external intervention (e.g. through the family assistance).

Another research, this time of qualitative nature (analysis of family genograms) investigated dysfunctional patterns in the family related to the parents' divorce (Kornaszewska-Polak, 2007). Common beliefs that separation, parting and divorce are generally the best solutions to marital problems reveal the significance of this phenomenon and its stigmatising character. An overview of international clinical, psychological and sociological research devoted to the divorce proves that the divorce is the easiest solution for most kinds of incompatibilities in married couples. Many external reasons for divorce indicated by spouses e.g. financial or housing problems or conflicts with parents-in-law can be solved by talking or negotiating, but spouses' incompatibility seems the most difficult barrier to overcome. In order to prove it, analyses of intergenerational transmission of behavioural patterns were conducted. They showed that defective behavioural patterns in adults block the possibility of personal development and thus make it impossible for an individual to leave the cycle of the conflict and crisis. It seems that at this stage the dialogue between the spouses is out of the question and they intend to break the painful bond at any price.

Unfortunately, in the divorce conflict, it is the children who suffer the most and for whom parents' parting is a trauma with far-reaching consequences for the whole lifetime. The children

are lacking in trust and a sense of safety, which leads to breaking their own relationships and the lack of building satisfactory bonds in their adulthood (adult children from dysfunctional homes).

A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH ON THE INFLUENCE OF SELECTED
PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS ON MARITAL SATISFACTION

This part of the article presents the research into the influence of selected psychological factors on the quality of marital relationships. They include assertiveness, ways of communication, emotional differences between women and men, various ways of coping with stress, attachment styles and loneliness.

Assertiveness in the research was recognised as a crucial element of the general spouses' outlook indicating an ability of defending a *personal I* in various interpersonal situations. Thus the assertiveness level was measured in sixty married couples with average marriage length of thirteen years (Kornaszewska, 1998). The analysis of the research findings revealed that assertiveness has a significant impact on the quality of marital relationships. They also showed that adoption of an assertive attitude on the average level contributes to lasting bonds in the area of emotions, intellect and action. Interestingly, in the situations when only one of the spouses had a high level of assertiveness, it was sufficient to make both spouses feel satisfied with their relationship. This result suggests that the marriage has its own laws and economics, so if one of the partners does not feel strong enough to undertake difficult tasks, the other one can take over some of the tasks. Due to this, spouses can rely on each other in difficult situations in their lives. The ability of setting limits by the spouses and conscious inclusion of the partner into one's own intimacy zone (exceeding limits) caused that marital relationships were healthy, full of feelings, understanding and cooperation.

Next analysed issues were ways of spouses' communication and their influence on marital relationships (Kornaszewska-Polak, 2012a). The M. Plopa and M. Kazimierzak (2008) questionnaire was used to investigate the communication level in short-length marriages (4 years) and in long-length marriages (over 20 years). The study involved 84 married couples, it was a purposive sampling based on the seniority of the respondents marriage (young and mature marriages). In the survey, there were 41 pairs in the first group, where the average age was 25 years, while in the other 43 pairs – the average age of 47 years. The hypothesis was assumed that there is a significant difference between independent variables – *age* and *sex*, and dependent variables – the three scales of *Marital Communication Questionnaire* (*Support*, *Involvement* and *Depreciation*). The multivariate analysis of variance model (MANOVA) was used to investigate the hypothesis. The results revealed that women achieved higher scores in the Support and Depreciation scales (verbal scale) and men scored higher in the Involvement scale. It also proved that with age the involvement in the relationship decreased and support weakened. Presumably, at this stage (mature marriages) communication between spouses reaches the level of higher stability but the intensity of the emotional bond decreases and involvement in the relationship becomes weaker.

Another issue investigated in the mentioned research was spouses' communication through virtual channels (mainly the Internet) analysed by means of the author's own questionnaire. Research findings showed that, for obvious reasons, the Internet impact is much stronger in the communication of the young generation. However, despite advantages of frequent opportunity for communication, the problems arose because of misunderstandings, emotional simplification and immature expectations in these married couples. Majority of young women were satisfied with both direct communication with a spouse and with internet communication unlike young men who were less satisfied. However,

it turned out that the higher satisfaction with direct talks with the spouse, the higher is the level of understanding, closeness within a relationship, expressing feelings towards one another and preventing any potential problems that might arise.

While trying to identify problems in spouses' communication, it can be assumed that many misunderstandings result from individual differences between men and women. Differences in emotionality and coping with stress are regarded as essential to everyday functioning in the marriage. This is because emotional system is one of the fundamental resources facilitating human adaptation to the surrounding reality. In the next conducted research marital couples were investigated in terms of personality, emotionality and ways of coping with stress (Kornaszewska-Polak, 2012b).

A number of specific differences found in men and women emotionality were distinguished, due to which it was possible to define emotional profiles of men and women, called also styles of men and women emotionality. Women's emotionality (called also expressive emotionality) is characterised by experiencing numerous emotions while facing difficulties, in particular the negative ones (anxiety, tension, high level of fear) as well as high emotional excitability (reactivity) and the control of situation prove great ease of expressing emotional states and taking control over the environment (also oriented on cooperation with others). Men emotionality (called also instrumentality) was characterised by low agitation level (reactivity), high level of emotional resistance, strong control of expression and weak control of the situation. These traits can influence the attitude of distancing and withdrawal from situations with high emotional tension in order to avoid experiencing unpleasant negative emotions.

The next part of the research revealed differences between ways of coping with stress by women and men. They predominantly consisted in a different choice of strategy of coping with stress. Women's reaction to stress included behaviours such as

avoidance coping (withdrawal from some activities in order to stay in a good mood and get some time to think) and assuming responsibility (excessive control of the situation and overestimating the importance of events). The most frequent tactic chosen by women was searching for social support, which facilitates obtaining physical or material help and also increases their self-esteem through a possibility of expressing oneself and being accepted by others. Men mostly used the self-control tactics as a way of coping with tension in difficult situations and the distancing strategy in the situations when events were, in their opinion, of small significance and an option of their intervention was rather limited. However, employment of the distancing tactics in the course of conflict can cause cardiovascular disorders and lead to coronary artery disease or myocardial infarction (Tylka, 2000).

The above described research into the differences between men and women led to another research devoted to qualitative analyses of marital functioning in conflict situations (Kornaszevska-Polak, 2014b). The conflicts were presented dichotomically as an *involvement-distancing* process. Dysfunctional patterns of communication and resulting from them types behaviour in marital conflict reveal partners' struggle for taking over power and control in their relationship, and then, consequently cause frustration and partners' deep dissatisfaction. The analyses showed that in interpersonal conflicts spouses adopt attitudes typical of their gender. Women's behaviour is strongly marked by emotions and reveals a tendency for emotional ambivalence, while men's behaviour is relatively balanced with a tendency for distancing and emotional withdrawal. In the *involving-distancing* conflict when men suppress their emotions, their wives frequently feel these emotions and respond to them with strong anxiety, agitation and frustration. In marriages with low compatibility rate, women experience long-lasting stress and feel worse whereas men's behaviour and their excessive control of their emotions leads to circulatory disorders or heart attack. In the opposite situ-

ation, in the case of compatible marriages, the spouses' enjoy better physical and mental health as well as the higher level of marital satisfaction.

During the next stage of the analysis of the psychological factors influencing the relationship satisfaction, the spouses' attachment styles were analysed on the basis of J. Bolby's theory and its adaptation for adults made by C. Hazan and P. Shaver (1987). The basic assumption of the attachment theory is a belief that early attachment relationships in the childhood with people important to them are a model for their romantic attachments in their adult life. Two hundred and fifty married couples with various marriage length were investigated in terms of their well-being, loneliness and marital happiness (Kornaszewska-Polak, 2016a). The conducted analysis proved statistically a relationship between the secure attachment style and marital satisfaction which contributed to the high quality of married life and overall life satisfaction in the investigated people. As well as this, there were the reverse relationships observed between insecure attachment styles and the low level of marital satisfaction, which indicated lower happiness level in marriages characterised by ambivalent and avoidant attachment styles.

Interestingly, the research proved mediating influence of loneliness and psychological well-being on the marital satisfaction. As it turned out, the marital satisfaction can reduce the feeling of loneliness in people with secure attachment and the high level of well-being can increase this satisfaction in people with insecure attachment styles. Thus it can be concluded that the indicated psychological factors (loneliness and well-being) have a significant impact on spouses and satisfaction in their relationship. Individuals with different attachment styles have a potential to feel more secure in their relationships. Thus people with avoidant attachment style are not always non-supportive, anxious or ambivalent. In addition, they are capable of developing their competences, in particular in the relationships with a partner with the high level of

the secure attachment, due to which the rate of satisfaction with their relationship for both partners is relatively high.

Furthermore, the next conducted research analysed marital relationships in elderly people suffering from chronic lung diseases. Its purpose was to assess the feeling of loneliness and its intensity in marital relationships in the investigated patients (Kornaszewska-Polak, Marcinkowska, Skrzyńska-Rafałowska, Rogoziński, 2016). Seventy six patients suffering from the chronic lung diseases, average age: 57.5 years (age range: 42-74) were investigated. In order to analyse the loneliness level in patients the DLS (non-student version) scale was applied. It is a method of self-esteem assessment of loneliness and social dissatisfaction in adults (Schmidt, Sermat, 1983). The research showed occurrence of loneliness in various types of interpersonal relations and it was most deeply felt in close relationships and was declared by 53% of the patients. The loneliness occurred particularly in the areas of: sexual activity, lack of emotional security and a sense of support, lack of understanding and effective communication in the relationship as well as failure to fulfil partner's emotional needs. The research indicated statistically relevant differences concerning the gender in particular, the investigated men more frequently experienced total isolation particularly during the diagnosis, whereas the investigated women received more support from their partners and were better communicators in the relationships. Thus, the research proved that people over sixty are a group that is particularly vulnerable to the feeling of loneliness and isolation in close relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

As the presented analyses suggest, secure attachment style as the behavioural pattern acquired in the childhood is a potential for lasting and stable relationships that might last for a lifetime. The

trust in the world and people leads not only to developing satisfying bonds with a spouse and solving conflicts, but it also serves as a behavioural model for next generations that can be treated as a *secure base*. Insecure attachment styles in adults become a reason for social maladjustment and the learned helplessness and lead to difficulty or even an inability of building lasting marital bonds. Nevertheless, despite fossilised behavioural patterns, there is a possibility of their modification with the help and support of a loving partner, his or her trust and a sense of security.

The research indicated that differences between men and women conditioning the marital satisfaction reflect the relationship dynamics based on gender differences, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, relationship dynamics whose homogenous part consists of the conflict and reconciliation. The research clearly shows that in the relationships where the dialogue takes place, despite various difficulties, reaching an agreement is possible, which facilitates understanding the partner's intentions and motives. Owing to partner's understanding and acceptance of differences it is possible to reach a sense of unity and community, which stimulates spouses to fuller involvement in their relationship.

The culture of individualism and loneliness has dominated the contemporary world leading to alienating individuals and artefact ties – thus in vain do people look for attachment figures that would be satisfying and would not hurt. Martin Buber (1992) claims that it is not enough to live only for oneself, as the fullness of life can be achieved through living and being for others. The ongoing crisis of human relationships is a crisis of a lost man searching blindly for individual happiness without bearing losses, costs or suffering.

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