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## **DIVORCE AS A SYSTEMIC TRANSITION: ROLE RECONSTRUCTION IN POST-MARITAL FAMILY REORGANIZATION**

**ABSTRACT:** From a systemic perspective, divorce is a family transition that requires reorganization of the family and personal life on multiple levels. Roles in the system transform, which largely means a transition from spouses and parents to independent individuals and co-parents, and which often requires changes in identity, responsibilities, overall functioning. This article examines the domains of post-marital functioning most affected by divorce, as well as the role changes that may contribute to adaptive adjustment.

Divorce, viewed through the lens of systemic theory, represents a transition in which roles, boundaries, and relations between its members take place. Using an analytical and deductive approach grounded in the systemic perspective and the concept of life transitions, the paper provides a detailed description and analysis of role changes in post-marital family reorganization.

The main contribution of the article is in the consideration of a theoretical perspective that treats divorce as an adaptive process, offering a systemic conceptual perspective on roles following divorce. The findings have implications for the development of interventions in the domains of family counseling, mediation and psychosocial support, emphasizing the importance of adaptive role reconstruction and cooperative family functioning after divorce.

**KEY WORDS :** divorce, family roles, adaptation to change, psychological counseling.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the systems theory of family functioning, the marriage is seen as an interdependent system with its own rules, boundaries and subsystems, and with roles that are functional, reciprocal and aimed at maintaining the homeostasis of the relationship. Through the roles in the system, interaction patterns are regulated, the couple's goals are achieved, family needs are satisfied, but they also change when necessary, according to the context of functioning. (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Hecker & Wetchler, 2003) In the marital and partnership relationship, practical, emotional and relational tasks are accomplished within the system and towards external systems. During the duration of the marriage, the emphasis is on unity and role sharing. Significant changes in this dynamic are initiated when the partners separate and divorce.

Divorce, through the prism of the systemic approach, represents a complex process of restructuring the family system, and implies a transition to individual functioning with a new distribution of roles, boundaries, and responsibilities. (Moral et al., 2021; Cohen & Levite, 2012) Divorce has several legal, social, psychological, and financial implications, making it a serious decision and one of the biggest life stressors. It has an impact on nearly every aspect of life and results in numerous modifications to the conditions for continued functioning. (Cabilar & Yilmaz, 2022) The changes are

multidimensional and multifaceted, affecting partners, their children, as well as the broader social system in which they live. (Apata et al., 2023) According to Lamana et al. (2018), when partners separate, family connections that were once a source of strength, can become a source of stress, resulting in mental health challenges such as emotional distress, depression, or anxiety. Divorce is defined by various theoretical perspectives as a loss of one's physical, social, and emotional identity. (Araujo & Lima, 2016; Haber, 1990) On an individual level, divorce is often experienced as a personal crisis marked by feelings of loneliness, disappointment, pessimism, failure, shame, helplessness, and questioning of one's own identity. (Sbarra, Hasselmo & Bourassa, 2015; Brosi et al., 2025) On a relational level, divorce significantly changes the family system by affecting emotional bonds within the family, daily routines, and the stability of relationships. (Shebak, 2025) Divorce also affects children in the family, who may be at increased risk of developing emotional difficulties, adjustment problems, academic difficulties, and behavioral problems. (Amato, 2010) In addition, changes also affect the broader social and economic context of family functioning, such as social networks, financial conditions, housing, roles of members in the community, and many other aspects.

With the reorganization of the entire family system through divorce, family identity and family roles change. Divorce itself results in a shift in identity from "we" to "I," making the ex-partners no longer partners, spouses, or life companions. Multiple psychosocial variables influence the divorce process, creating distress in the lives of all involved, and the reorganization of family functioning often requires family members to accept new responsibilities, obligations, and establish new boundaries. Postmarital adjustment to divorce is a complex, often long process that involves emotional, financial, and social restructuring. According to Knöpfli, Morselli, and Perrig-Hiello (2016), adaptation patterns depend primarily on intrapersonal resources, and a small proportion of divorced individuals show long lasting difficulties. They emphasize that although divorce is deeply stressful, the majority of individuals eventually adapt to their new circumstances, with many experiencing long-term personal growth and improved well-being, especially after high-conflict marriages.<sup>1</sup> As mentioned earlier, a significant part of adaptation is the restructuring of family roles, which are patterns through which family members fulfill their functions and include responsibilities that are necessary for the functioning of the whole family. Roles define different levels of functioning of family members, and through them members fulfill their tasks within the system. (Spasovska, 2022) Understanding the processes through which families adapt after divorce and restructure family roles provides valuable insights into the complexity of this life transition and informs the provision of targeted support and appropriate resources to facilitate adjustment.

## CHANGES IN FAMILY ROLES AFTER DIVORCE

In the family, the roles that each family member has, are important for both their individual and family functioning. Family roles are a product of personal and environmental factors (gender, environment, tradition, culture) and as such are susceptible to change.<sup>2</sup> It is most effective when family members have functions

1 Knöpfli, B., Morselli, D., & Perrig-Chiello, P. (2016). Trajectories of Psychological Adaptation to Marital Breakup after a Long-Term Marriage. *Gerontology*, 62(5), 541–552. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000445056>

2 Macmillan, R., & Copher, R. (2005). Families in the Life Course: Interdependency of Roles, Role Configurations, and Pathways. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67(4), 858-879. Retrieved August 19, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3600243>

that correspond to their age, education, position in the family system, and individual qualities. Family roles may be instrumental or affective and serve to manage and maintain the family system through decision-making, boundary maintenance, and leadership that supports growth and development, as well as through the distribution of responsibilities according to readiness, provision of livelihood, care and support, and the development of life skills among family members.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the divorce process, relationships between members and roles are most affected, and they change as the family system is restructured. Roles change from joint and shared, to independent and individual roles that often require new adjustments to key changes related to the termination of a partnership, parenting, finances, housing and household maintenance, social organization, relationships with the extended family, possible new partnerships, as well as the adaptation of children to the new context of family functioning. (Aydin, Sahin & Badahir, 2025; Lawler, 2019; Cano & Gracia, 2022; Butkute, Mortelmans & Sondaite, 2023)

The first significant role change in the end of a marriage is the change in the partner role. Divorce is a profound transition from a shared interdependent life to independent individual management of the basic components of life. With the formation of marriage, partners merge their separate lives into a shared partnership with a focus on togetherness, while with divorce, the process is reversed. (Brown, Lin & Marino, 2025) In this context, divorce often acts as a catalyst for a profound transition, forcing a shift from a partner identity to an identity of independent individual. While marriage emphasizes shared decision-making and mutual support, divorce shifts the focus to individual autonomy and personal responsibility. This process involves redefining oneself, taking on new roles, and establishing self-sufficiency in the emotional, financial, and practical aspects of life.<sup>4</sup>

In the context of parenting, partners face the challenge of continuing their role as parents while simultaneously relinquishing their role as partners. (Lawler, 2019) This task requires transforming the emotional attachment between parents into a functional attachment that limits the relationship to parenting alone. (Emery, 2011) Parents who experience separation, face significant changes in parental functioning and managing the responsibilities that were previously shared. After divorce, joint parenting is transformed into sole or shared co-parenting, in which the individual responsibility of each parent is increased, and joint coordination is required.<sup>5</sup> Reorganization involves managing the children's daily needs, the time they spend together, household responsibilities, communicating with the other parent about the children's needs, and emotional reactions as they cope with the loss of the relationship. (Amato, 2000) Parents form their own new parental identity, and the changes marked by divorce include navigating different parenting styles for both parents, managing new schedules, and acting as single parents when the children are in their care. In the process of granting custody after divorce, the court decides with whom the children will live, taking into account the best care for them. In the Republic of North Macedonia, in most cases, children after divorce remain living with one parent (usually the mother)

3 Спасовска, М. (2022). Особенности на семейното функциониране на семейства с деца със специални нужди. ВТУ „Св. Св. Кирил и Методий“, Философски факултет: Докторска дисертация

4 Butkutė, L., Mortelmans, D., & Sondaite, J. (2023). Restricted Self-Transition: A Journey of Divorcees Through Lasting Marital Dissolution in Eastern European Society. *Europe's journal of psychology*, 19(3), 273–284. <https://doi.org/10.5964/ejop.9619>

5 Pires, M., & Martins, M. (2021). Parenting Styles, Coparenting, and Early Child Adjustment in Separated Families with Child Physical Custody Processes Ongoing in Family Court. *Children (Basel, Switzerland)*, 8(8), 629. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children8080629>

and visit the other parent at certain intervals. (Mickovikj & Ristov, 2019) There are also initiatives for shared parenting after divorce in the spirit of international standards, although in practice the first form of granting custody is dominant in 90% of cases.<sup>6</sup> It is not uncommon for one of the parents to be excluded from parenting the children upon divorce.

The transition from joint financial planning to single-income budgeting is a serious challenge after divorce. Economic roles after divorce shift from shared and joint responsibility in a shared household, to individual management of assets and expenses in separate households. (Mortelmans, 2020) Research shows that divorce causes a significant drop in household income, especially for women. Women's economic difficulties after divorce are most often associated with child custody, i.e. the presence of children increases the economic needs of the household, limits opportunities for work engagement and includes direct costs of raising children that are often not compensated by alimony and support.<sup>7</sup> In the Republic of North Macedonia, the Family Law stipulates that a parent who does not live with the child must provide support (alimony) depending on the needs of the child and the financial capabilities of the parent. In our country, after divorce, mothers are often forced to combine work with childcare, while fathers change their economic role with support. (Mickovikj & Ristov, 2019) This form of financial distribution of obligations makes mothers responsible for economic needs, while fathers are more focused on the function of financial supporters. Most studies place the magnitude of the decline in household income for women in the range of 23%–40% in the year following divorce. (Tach & Eads, 2015) According to the analysis of Mickovic and Ristov (2019), more than 60% of divorced mothers in Macedonia face a decline in their standard of living, while the father faces higher support costs. It is evident that after divorce, the economic role of partners is transformed, with a significant impact on income, expenses and economic stability.

After a divorce, each partner faces new, independent roles in maintaining their own home and household, which during the marriage were shared. Tasks that were previously distributed, after the divorce each partner performs independently. This change also carries financial implications, i.e. the costs of rent, bills and home maintenance are completely individualized, which requires redefining the budget and priorities.<sup>8</sup> Because men and women tend to allocate responsibilities within a marriage differently, the economic impact of a marriage breakup will be significantly different for the two sexes, to the extent that such specialization existed in that marriage.<sup>9</sup> In addition, childcare is combined with household care, which requires a new allocation of time and energy. A significant challenge in this context can be losses in home ownership or housing costs after divorce as a result of property division or reduced financial resources.<sup>10</sup> To a large extent, post-divorce change concerns

6 Koha.mk. (2024, February 15). Baballaret e quajnë diskriminuese mënyrën e kujdestarisë pas shkurorëzimit në Maqedoni [Fathers call custody after divorce discriminatory in Macedonia]. Koha.mk. <https://koha.mk/en/baballaret-e-quajne-diskriminuese-menyren-e-kujdestarise-pas-shkurorëzimit-ne-maqedoni/?utm>

7 Tach, L M, & Eads, A. (2015). Trends in the economic consequences of marital and cohabitation dissolution in the United States. *Demography*, 52, 401–432. doi: 10.1007/s13524-015-0374-5

8 Einiö, E. K., & Ponkilainen, M. E. (2025). Gendered housing consequences of divorce: An analysis of marital dyads from different sex and female same sex couples. *Genus*, 81(1), Article 38. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41118.025.00276.x>

9 Roeper, T., & Bennett, N. G. (2013, September 27). The evolving economic consequences of divorce (Extended abstract, Population Association of America). CUNY Institute for Demographic Research. <https://marxe.baruch.cuny.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2021/05/The-Evolving-Economic-Consequences-of-Divorce.pdf>

10 Fischer, M., & Khorunzhina, N. (2019). Housing decision with divorce risk. *International Economic Review*, 60(3), 1263–1290. <https://doi.org/10.1111/iere.12385>

planning, organizing, and using resources and carrying out activities without support from the other party, which is part of the broader process of post-divorce adaptation. (Leopold, 2016)

The social role of each partner changes after divorce mainly through restructuring of social networks and relationships. Loss of social ties is common after divorce. Research shows that most divorced people experience a reduction in their social networks shortly after divorce, meaning that they lose contact with some friends, relatives, or shared social connections.<sup>11</sup> In about half of the cases, the lost relationships were not replaced even many years later, suggesting that divorce can cause long-term changes in social integration and social functioning. (Terhell, Broese van Groenou, & van Tilburg, 2004) After divorce, relationships with the extended family change, especially with the relatives of the ex-partner. Contacts with former in-laws and other relatives often decrease or cease, while relationships with one's own family strengthen.<sup>12</sup> However, over time, some of these relationships are replaced by new friendships and strengthened ties with existing relatives. Social support from family and a network of friends have a significant positive impact on the process of readjustment after divorce. Key findings highlight that emotional, practical and informational support and positive feedback play an important role in helping individuals navigate their complex life changes after divorce. (De Bel, 2023)

After the end of a marriage, each partner may become involved in a new partnership, which leads to new and more complex family dynamics. This configuration involves both former and new partners, who must establish new boundaries and ways of functioning if the couple's parenting is shared and both participate in raising the children.<sup>13</sup> The process of introducing new partners can affect the dynamics between parents and shape the way roles and responsibilities are reformed, especially in the context of building new structures and potential moves in newly formed families, such as entering into a serious relationship, coexistence, or possibly remarriage. (Waller & Hetherington, 2021) Adequate management of this communication and attention to family boundaries can facilitate the family transition and encourage a more functional reorganization of roles after divorce. In this case, roles become more flexible and are shaped according to the needs of the new family configuration.

Changes in family roles after divorce are summarized in Table 1 below.

| Family Role  | Before Divorce                                                       | After Divorce                                | Key Changes                               |
|--------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Partner role | Cohesiveness,<br>Emotional connection<br>and support, Focus on<br>WE | Discontinuity of<br>partner role, focus on I | Identity of<br>independent<br>individuals |

11 Krumrei, E., Coit, C., Martin, S., Fogo, W., & Mahoney, A. (2007). Post-divorce adjustment and social relationships: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 46(3-4), 145-166. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J087v46n03\\_09](https://doi.org/10.1300/J087v46n03_09)

12 Kalmijn, M. (2020). Guilt after divorce: Parental guilt towards children. In D. Mortelmans (Ed.), *Divorce in Europe: New insights in trends, causes and consequences of relation break-ups* (pp. —). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97722-1\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-97722-1_13)

13 Moore, E. (2012). Renegotiating roles postdivorce: A decisive break from tradition? *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 53(5), 402-419. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2012.682892>

|                                   |                                                        |                                                                          |                                                                                                  |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Parental role                     | Shared parenting, sharing of care and responsibilities | Single or co-parenting                                                   | Increased individual responsibility for children, need for coordination                          |
| Economic role                     | Shared finances and resources                          | Separate finances, division of assets, redefining budgets and priorities | Financial independence or burden                                                                 |
| Role in the household             | Division of household responsibilities                 | Separate responsibilities in separate households                         | Increased burden and need for reorganization                                                     |
| Social role                       | Shared social identity (couple)                        | Individual identity                                                      | Redefining the social network                                                                    |
| Relationship with extended family | Shared family ties                                     | Split or redefined relationships                                         | Restructuring relationships with families of origin, changing relationship with partner's family |
| New partner roles                 | NA                                                     | Possible emergence of a new partner/ stepmother/stepfather               | Complex new family dynamics                                                                      |

Table 1. Changes in family roles after divorce

THE IMPACT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT ON FAMILY ROLE  
RESTRUCTURING AFTER DIVORCE

The allocation of family roles and associated tasks is not limited to the nuclear family, where parents and children operate together. Harmony and stability can be achieved in many family forms, including post-divorce family systems. (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002) It is possible to adapt family roles that are functional even after divorce, by establishing new models of functioning and effective coordination. However, not all individuals adjust in the same way after divorce. Some show more resilient and adaptive strategies, while others face longer difficulties in emotional regulation and acceptance of change.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, psychological support in the process of reorganization of family roles after the end of marriage can be significant in encouraging changes and empowering families to incorporate them into the new family configuration after divorce. (Van Gasse, Mortelmans, 2020)

Changes in families are multidimensional, and the post-divorce transition is marked by an impact on emotional connections, daily routines, and relational stability. Psychological support can initially be helpful in constructively adopting new roles (independent adult, parent) without retaining past roles that make adaptation difficult. (Youvan, 2024) Psychotherapy, family counseling, or consultations with psychologists can help manage emotions, ease conflicts, and strengthen the ability

14 Guzmán-González, M., Gómez, F., Lafontaine, M. F., & Tay-Karapas, K. (2025). Profiles of Psychological Adjustment to Divorce and Separation: Associations With Attachment Insecurity, Forgiveness of the Former Partner, and Emotion Regulation Difficulties. *Journal of marital and family therapy*, 51(3), e70055. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.70055>

to adapt to new roles.<sup>15</sup> Psychological support also facilitates the establishment of healthy boundaries and constructive relationships between family members, allowing for a more functional reorganization of roles and more adaptive management of the new family dynamics. (SinghBagh, Fatma, & Pareek, 2024)

Considering the above, psychological support after divorce should primarily focus on the following areas:

Emotional adjustment and building a new identity, with an emphasis on personal autonomy;

- » Improving the quality of parenting and developing functional models of parental cooperation;
- » Supporting the well-being of children in the family;
- » Supporting the building of new family alliances with functional relationships and boundaries;
- » Encouraging the creation of a social network of support from friends, relatives, professionals and support groups.
- » Psychological support is needed to encourage reflection and acceptance of transformed individual and family roles as a new way of functioning, and not just as a loss of previous ones. Effective recovery after divorce requires more than legal solutions, it requires therapeutic interventions that promote flexibility, adaptability, and psychological resilience.

## CONCLUSION

Current statistics show an increase in divorce rates both worldwide and in our country.<sup>16</sup> Despite being a stressful event and life crisis, it is important to be adaptive and with fewer unwanted consequences for all involved. Adjustment after divorce is not linear. It often takes a long time, and the entire reorganization of roles requires time, self-awareness and support. In the divorce process, significant differences can be observed among partners in qualifying their relationships, responsibilities, agreements, interests and opinions, and this can have an impact on the degree of adaptation in the post-divorce period. (Cao, Fine & Zhou, 2022; Markoç, 2023) From a systemic perspective, divorce as a transitional process involves the reorganization of roles, boundaries, and relationships within the family. Therefore, understanding changes after divorce requires an approach that takes into account systemic dynamics and life transitions, providing insight into the forms through which family members adjust their roles and responsibilities.

This theoretical review highlights the importance of adaptive role reconstruction and cooperative functioning of the family after divorce. The findings emphasize the need to promote the wellbeing among family members, contributing to healthier and more functional adjustment after separation. The findings presented in the paper represent a framework for understanding family roles and adaptation after divorce, which can be a useful basis for developing interventions in the areas of psychological counseling, mediation, and psychosocial support. Further theoretical and empirical research is needed to advance understanding of family role reconstruction after divorce, particularly regarding processes of adaptation, cooperation, and emotional support among family members.

<sup>15</sup> Varghese, M., Kirpekar, V., & Loganathan, S. (2020). Family Interventions: Basic Principles and Techniques. Indian journal of psychiatry, 62(Suppl 2), S192–S200. [https://doi.org/10.4103/psychiatry.IndianJPsychiatry\\_770\\_19](https://doi.org/10.4103/psychiatry.IndianJPsychiatry_770_19)

<sup>16</sup> World Population Review. (2026). Divorce rates by country. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/divorce-rates-by-country>

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