

Mary Richmond's Retail Method in Treating Divorcing Parents with High Conflict

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Abstract

Mary Richmond's retail method of reform provoked development of a focused treatment program for high conflict divorce designed to (1) promote cohesion of the self, (2) reduce expressed parental conflict, and (3) provide a better outcome than the current standard service model. A Pretest-Posttest Control Group Design was implemented to test the effectiveness of this approach with Bowen's family systems theory and Kohut's theory of self psychology. The results suggest people who attended eight sessions of the focused treatment group experienced a greater sense of self cohesion with reduced co-parenting conflict.

Key words: Bowen, Kohut, family systems theory, self cohesion, self psychology

In Mister Rogers Talks with Parents, Rogers and Head (1983) explain, "For a couple with young children, divorce seldom comes as a 'solution' to stress, only as a way to end one form of pain and accept another" (p. 226). Research indicates that while parents are impacted by divorce proceedings, children experience the pain of divorce. "Divorce affects primary bonds with parents, presents challenges to conceptions of social reality, and creates stress which interferes with normal development," according to Hess and Camara (2010, p. 80). Research has identified stressors experienced by children, such as relationship struggles with one or parents, academic difficulties, and changes in peer relationships (Greene, Sullivan & Anderson, 2008; Hess & Camara, 2010; Johnston, 1994). The detrimental effects on children and the potentially harmful impact can even be present when a parent is residential with regular involvement and contact with the children (Amato & Booth, 1994; Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1992; Furstenberg, Hoffman & Shrestha, 1995; Lin, 2008). When consistent relationships between the parents and the children were maintained, the children's self-reports of well-being were elevated (Ahrns, 2007). "What the children wanted was not for their parents to be friends as much as they wanted them to be cordial and not badmouth each other" (Ahrns, 2007, p. 58). Overall, studies indicate children need regular contact with both parents.

The Gordon Poll Youth Survey interviewed 1,000 teenagers between the ages of fourteen and eighteen from married homes and divorced homes about their opinions on divorce. During the process the attitudes, thoughts, and feelings about divorce and family issues maintained by the teenagers were measured: The overwhelming message I received from their comments is that children want their parents to stay together, but if that's not possible, to keep the children out of the conflict. More than anything, though, the children just want their parents to stay together." When asked what the teens wanted their parents to know, they said that that divorce "hurts," "sucks," and that they "don't want to be blamed for it," or they feel "caught in the middle. One thing children wanted their parents to know about divorce is that the process is "Not easy for us at all." (Jolivet, 2011, p. 176)

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1. Mary Ellen Richmond's Retail and Wholesale Methods of Reform

Mary Ellen Richmond was a forerunner in the field of social work. Her concept of social casework included an examination of the relationship between people and their social environment. She began with the individual, including the person's family, together with an analysis of the community, and the governmental agencies overseeing the individual and the family.

The primary application of the retail method is the assessment of an individual within the environment, while the primary application of the wholesale method is to assess and intervene through members of a larger group. Examining one person or one family implements the retail method of reform. The wholesale method implements the same assistance to a larger group of people, such as extended family, a neighborhood, or a community. Richmond's retail method of reform does not eliminate the need for the wholesale method of reform. These two methods of reform, combined with an examination of topics specific to high stress divorce, provided a point of reference for integrating and applying family systems theory and the theory of self psychology. Richmond's retail/wholesale methods of reform propagated through Kohut's theory of self psychology and Bowen's family systems theory offered the guiding line for assisting parents dealing with high conflict during the dissolution of marriage.

2. High Conflict

High conflict divorce was defined by Levite and Cohen as Couples who have been engaged in the divorce process for at least two years and whose relationship is characterized by the following attributes: high degree of anger, hostility, and distrust; incidents of verbal and/or physical abuse; high rate of custody litigation; and ongoing difficulty in communicating about, and cooperating over the care of their children. (Levite & Cohen, 2012, p. 46) Research conducted by Hetherington and Kelly (2002) indicated that approximately 20–25% of parents display negative behaviors toward their ex-spouse, engage in conflict, and/or make attempts to undermine the other parent's relationship with the children. Current studies suggest that ten percent of separations fall into the category of high conflict divorces (Kelly, 2000). The issues stem from continued distrust, on-going litigation, and financial matters (Kelly, 2000).

Emerging research suggests that high conflict can be demarcated from other conflictive divorces, not only by the intensity and duration of the conflict, but also by the underlying factors that likely precipitate and perpetuate the conflict between ex-partners, including factors pertaining to attachment. (Saini, 2012, p. 174) Directly or indirectly, each person involved in dissolution of marriage procedures can benefit from education and intervention specific to their individual roles. The parents and children, the family fragmented system, as well as the environment, can be utilized to promote a healthy new life stage. To do so, a combination of the retail method and the wholesale method of reform is required. At this time, only the wholesale method of reform is implemented in most communities. By law, a standard service model of parent education is required for divorcing parents with children less than 18 years of age in most states. In this study, the integration of two theoretical lenses, self psychology and family systems theory, addressed the retail method by an integrated approach to intervention for decreasing conflict and increasing a sense of self cohesion.

3. Sample

Table 1 describes the sample utilized to illustrate this treatment approach. All participants were randomly selected from those persons completing the judicially mandated standard service model required for parents seeking divorce with children less than 18 years of age.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Study Participants (exact values rounded)

	Mean	SD	Median	Range
Age	38	10	37	22-62
Education	15	2	16	12-18
Years Married	10	6	10	<1-30
Marital Status	2	0.5	2	2-3
Filed for Divorce	0.4	0.5	0	0-1

Notes: N = 32. Marital Status, 1 = never married to the other parent, 2 = in the process of divorcing, 3 = already divorced. Filed for Divorce, 0 = no, 1 = yes.

Twenty-one percent (21%) of the participants had one child, thirty-one percent (31%) had two children, thirty-one percent (31%), had three children, and fifteen percent (15%) had four children. One participant had two children who were deceased. The total number of children from the 32 participants was 77, with 39 children from parents in the control group, and 38 children from parents in the experimental group. All 32 participants were residents of a suburban county located outside a large metropolitan area.

The average age of participants was 38 years old. The youngest participant was 22 years old, while the oldest participant was 62 years old. The average level of education completed was fifteen years indicating that most participants completed some college. All participants completed high school, while the highest level of education completed for one participant was a master's degree.

4. Methodology and Instrumentation

Parents participating in the study completed three pre-treatment instruments: the Parental Alliance Measure™ (PAM™) (Abidin & Konold, 2001); the Level of Conflict Assessment of divorcing or separating couples (LOCA) (Langenbrunner, Cox, & Cherry, 2013), and the Assessment of Self Concept (ASC) (Barnwell & Stone, 2015). The PAM™ measures the parenting aspects of a couple's relationship, providing the counselor with the parents' perspective of how cooperative, communicative, and mutually respectful they are with regard to caring for their children. Internal consistency was measured at .97, and test-retest reliability at .80. The LOCA measures divorcing individuals' perceived level of inter-parental conflict. Internal consistency reliability of the scale was .94. The ASC records the responses to items constructed from the essential concepts of Kohut's Self Psychology and Bowen's Family Systems Theory. Internal reliability of the ASC using Cronbach's α was computed to be 0.99. This high level of reliability was achieved by constructing the ASC items to follow very exacting specifications derived from the theories of Kohut and Bowen, and by writing and constructing a unified sequential scale of items. Validity is a unified concept, but was assessed in four ways: (1) clinician assessment of the quality of items according to the two theoretical viewpoints, (2) correlation of the ASC to the PAM™ and the LOCA, (3) comparison of scores on the ASC for experimental and control subjects participating in treatment, and (4) Rasch determination of a unidimensional scale composed of the 30 ASC items.

Participants were randomly selected for assignment to the experimental group and the control group. The experimental group members attended eight ninety-minute sessions following the four-hour standard service model mandated by the presiding judge. The control group completed the four-hour standard service model, but was wait-listed and offered similar services following the eight-week study. At the conclusion of the intervention, the ASC was administered to the intervention-eligible group and the control group together with the therapist's attendance record and assessment of participation. Participation level was rated high, medium, or low, and assessed as insightful, mundane, or non-participatory for each session and for the module summary. The curriculum for the sessions included the following topics: empathy, self cohesion, mirroring, idealization, twin ship, circular causality, structure, patterns, emotional suppression, triangulation, and differentiation of the self. Each session began with an experiential activity about the topic of the session, followed by a communication activity. Participants processed the activities as a group. The final portion of each session included time for journaling about the session and intended application of the concepts. The group facilitator's empathic approach followed the intention of Kohut's self psychology theory.

5. Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory.

Bowen's family systems theory is regarded as a comprehensive family therapy. The multigenerational concentration takes into consideration the unresolved emotional reactivity to primary caretakers. The unresolved issues create a vulnerability that increases the risk and likelihood of one repeating patterns in other relationships. A primary factor in Bowen's theory included the notion that the unresolved issues must be addressed. According to Bowen, "Human relationships are driven by two counter balancing life forces: individuality and togetherness. Each of us needs companionship and a degree of independence" (p. 125). His thought was that less autonomy exists in the emotional lives of clients than originally thought (2008). Bowen termed a concept called "differentiation of self" which he believed was the "ability to be flexible and act wisely, even in the face of anxiety" (1972, p. 127). When a client is undifferentiated, a tendency to act in an emotionally "cutoff" manner is observed. The theory would purport that a healthy personality cannot be developed without differentiation. Bowen (2008) asserted that the higher the level of differentiation, the higher the level of resiliency. According to

Bowen, the undifferentiated family system generated conflicts and pathology. The result was multigenerational emotional reactivity to anxiety. When parents do not find effective ways to deal with emotions, such as anxiety, they transmit these anxious traits on to their children.

The result is the continuation of the process from generation to generation. As this pattern continues the inability to deal with anxiety increases with each generation. Each generation places unresolved emotions on the next generation. Change in the family system occurs when anxiety reactivity is slowed down as a result of family members understanding how they are involved in the patterns. Bowenian therapists would teach the family differentiation, avoidance of triangulation and re-opening cut off family relationships (p. 146). Resolving unresolved emotional attachment of an emotional cutoff would promote the health and well-being of the system. Bowen's ideas attempted to help clients to get beyond blame and anger (2008).

Techniques utilized by clinicians who practice Bowen's family systems model include genograms, neutralizing triangles, relationship experiments, coaching, the "I-Position" and process questions. "Far more important than developing methods and techniques of family therapy, Murray Bowen made profound contributions to our understanding of how we function as individuals, how we get along with our families and how these are related" (p.151). Bowen's therapy calls for the therapist to remain neutral while encouraging families to explore their conflicts with process questions. As patterns are discovered, the process and the structure are examined (2008). The therapist remains neutral in an effort to be and remain de-triangulated. If clients become heated, the therapist must remain calm while examining facts while not taking sides. When following the Bowen model, a therapist would practice techniques such as relationship experiments, so family members can become aware of the roles. Outcome is thought to be successful when anxiety is reduced and self-focus is increased (2008). Conflicts are reduced as each family member reviews and comes to an understanding about the role played in the system.

6. Heinz Kohut's theory of self psychology

Heinz Kohut's theory was developed when he concluded that clients sought to merge with an idealized figure to have their needs met (Elson, 1986). Kohut described disturbances of the self that seek psychic organization (Kohut, 1971). Self psychology moves beyond the id, ego, and superego frame of reference. Two words that seem to sum up the theory are "exchanges" and "empathy" (Kohut, 1971). Kohut's primary attention of self psychology is the importance of self (Kohut, 1971, 1977). When social workers understand the emotional factors that promote or hinder the self-object development of the client, and when the social worker demonstrates empathy, cohesion of the client's self may be improved. Self cohesion is achieved through innumerable transmuting internalizations of self object functions into self functions (Kohut, 1971).

When a social worker is aware of specific factors about self psychology, more can be done to identify the client's self-object needs and the client's self-cohesion (Kohut, 1971). Full autonomy of an individual is not recognized by self psychology since the relationships between objects have great significance on an on-going basis. Not only does the theory examine how clients engage with caregivers, the theory also explores the importance of the relationship between the client and the worker (Hollis & Woods, 1981). The creation of the self occurs when the process arranges individual subjective events. Kohut explained his view that a normal developmental phenomenon can result in narcissism (1971). "The narcissistic line of development is active from the beginning of life and is a precondition for adequate personality functioning" (Banai, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005, p. 225). The self can be described as the core of a person's personality (Kohut, 1971). The self responds to other objects and the environment based on past, present and in anticipation of future events. The objects and environments influence how the self reacts to stimuli in the present moment and in the future (Kohut, 1971). Early empathic understanding and responsiveness of a parent promote the formation of the nuclear self. Kohut stated that self-object empathic responsiveness is essential to build the internal structures (1971). Gradual failures of a non-traumatizing nature are also beneficial so the child can experience transmuting internalizations.

External functions executed by of the parent become internal self function allowing the individual to begin to develop a cohesive self. Early in life, children rely on their parents for self-cohesion. When maladaptive relational patterns are present, the child may have difficulty acquiring a cohesive self. When the child's self-object needs are not met, and when the parent does not effectively demonstrate self-cohesion, the child may have difficulty self-regulating emotions (Banai, Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Kohut, identified the self-object needs as mirroring, idealization and twinship (1977, p. 136). The personality of the individual buries narcissistic injuries in an effort to avoid re-exposure to unmet needs. Clients may appear resistant.

The resistances are motivated by disintegration anxiety (Kohut, p. 136). The archaic self is in conflict with the archaic environment and the result impacts the development of the self. Additional self-object needs include the need for merger experiences, the need for an adversary and the need for efficacy (Goldstein, 2001).

Although these terms are not fully explained in this paper, identifying the terms as a part of the self psychology theory is important. Goldstein wrote, "Although Kohut thought that early self-objects are crucial to the development of the infant's self, the need for others to provide support and sustenance continues throughout life" (2001, p.81). Kohut identified five self-object functions: ability to monitor anxiety, ability to seek self-objects, ability to communicate affect and needs, ability to establish goals and work toward the goals, and the ability to manage disappointment and maintain self esteem in the face of adversity (Kohut, 1984, p. 70). Empathic responses are not enough for the development of self-object functions. When the child experiences a minor frustration and delayed responsiveness from the self-object, the child must rely on previous experiences of being responded to in order to survive the delay. The infant begins to develop the ability to tolerate frustrations. During these times, the self-object functions become permanent in the psyche. The process involves input from the child and the parent. "Transmuting internalization is a part of the tension arc of the self" (Kohut, 1984, p. 70). The individual, who experiences limited or even blocked self-expression, struggles to build a tension arc between basic ambitions and basic values using inborn talents and acquired abilities. "This tension arc is the dynamic essence of the complete, non-defective self; it is the conceptualization of the structure whose establishment makes possible a creative-productive, fulfilling life" (Kohut, 1984, p. 21).

Transmuting internalization can take place when a parent acts as a self-object and when the parent is actively seeking to meet the child's self-object needs. The child can then make the internalization on his own. Affect regulation is a process completed initially by the child's parent. As the child practices the skill, the regulation of emotion becomes a part of the self. The next step occurs when the child is able to experience self-cohesion. The child becomes less dependent on the role of the external regulatory system, also known as the parent, when the process of transmuting internalization occurs. On the other hand, when needs are not fulfilled, symptoms come into being. Disturbances of the self over prolonged periods interrupt the development of a sense of cohesiveness.

7. Clinician's Behavior

Kohut stressed the importance of the clinician understanding the client's disruptions from an "experience near" perspective. He viewed the clinician's role as one that would demonstrate empathy for two purposes. First, the clinician gains an understanding of the client's subjective state in order to understand deficits and disruptions. Second, a clinician enters the subjective state of the client providing an empathic self-object experience to promote healing. The clinician must become aware and knowledgeable about the client's subjective inner state by using affect as a cue. Understanding how the client views himself and how he interacts with others provides an "experience near" perspective (1971).

8. Results

The Assessment of Self Concept (ASC) scores were used to determine participant change from therapy, and to evaluate the effectiveness of this model program. A t-test was calculated between the pretest-posttest difference scores for the experimental and control groups. Campbell & Stanley indicate, "The most widely used acceptable test is to compute for each group pretest-posttest gain scores and to compute a t between experimental and control groups for these gain scores" (1963, p. 23). The ASC was found to be statistically significant at .01 with regard to the gain score difference between the experimental and control group. Table 2 gives these details.

Table 2

ASC: Two-Sample t-Test of Pretest-Posttest Differences Assuming Unequal Variances Control group Experimental group

Mean	0	11
Variance	108.53	177.07
SD	10.42	13.30
N	16	16 in each group
df	30	
t computed	-2.60	
p	0.01	

t Critical two-tail,	p = .05	2.05
Decision	Statistically significant at .05	
Cohen's d	0.93	
Power	0.74	

The correlation between the LOCA and PAM™ was -0.67. These two instruments reflect an inverse relationship. The correlation between the LOCA and the ASC was 0.18, and the correlation between the PAM™ and the ASC was -0.09. The low correlations between ASC and the LOCA, and the ASC with the PAM™ are interpreted to indicate that the ASC is associated with a different area of investigation than the content measured by the LOCA and PAM™ because the ASC items were specifically constructed from the primary concepts Bowen's family systems theory and Kohut's self psychology. Regression analysis was conducted on the posttest difference scores for the nine characteristics of the variables of gender, age, highest grade completed, number of year's married, marital status, person to file for divorce, total number of children, developmental stages of children, and number of deceased children. None of the nine characteristics was found to be statistically significant. The sample size for regression was very small which may have influenced this outcome.

9. Assumptions and Limitations

Threats to external validity include sample and sample size, delivery of service, number and length of time for sessions, time of the sessions, and location. Pretest and posttest cause-effect relationships may compromise the generality of the findings because of time required for changes to occur, and lack of sensitivity of the instruments to the effects expected. The sampling design does not permit extrapolation of the findings to a larger population. Although the subjects constitute a high conflict segment, the response validity was considered valid even though self-reporting can be suspect. Participants attended all sessions of the experimental group and indicated the sessions were beneficial.

10. Research Implications

Richmond indicated, "The enactment of law is a wholesale process, its enforcement is a retail process" (Richmond, 1906, p. 177). Families may continue to suffer during the divorcing process if only the wholesale method of reform is implemented. The retail method is an educative process that assesses the requirements of family needs, and mode of treatment.

Richmond recognized the importance for social workers to understand how the tasks of social work are influenced by the environment (Dore, 1999). Social work is not a static entity, but "like clients in interaction with the environment, it influences and is influenced by the context in which it is carried out" (Dore, 1999, p. 170). Social casework is defined by Richmond as, "the processes which develop personality through adjustments consciously effected, individual by individual, between men and their social environment" (Dore, 1999, p. 173). To alleviate the suffering of the family and its members, social workers must examine the individuals and the family systems within their environments. If social workers do not examine the environment as well, the suffering may continue in various ways. Richmond was ardently aware of the exchanges and relationships between the individual, the family, and the macro system. The individual is a part of his environment, and both the individual and the environment must be engaged, assessed, intervened with, and evaluated, in order for effective change to occur.

Summary

The concepts of behavior, development, and family are the threads that weave together before, during, and after a divorce. Alfred Adler explained that all behavior serves a purpose (Mosak & Maniaci, 1999). The behaviors of individuals and the behaviors of a family as a whole serve a purpose as well. Life is not stagnant; each aspect of life moves in a developmental path at varying rates. Families are comprised of people affiliated by co-existence, affinity, and/or consanguinity. The threads tie together to create a framework of understanding and perhaps even treatment for those families facing a necessary loss, also known as yet another life transition. Viorst wrote, "But letting go of our fearful and childish black-and-white simplifications for the difficult ambiguities of real life is another of our necessary losses" (1986, p. 49). Individuals change, families change, and change is constant. Each change represents an important life transition. The degree of struggle or ease during change can make or break the spirit of individuals and family units. Liddle offered "a list of five categories of questions for therapists to pose when examining a therapy to examine the interconnected relationship of issues basic to all therapies" (1982, pp. 246-247).

These categories are helpful to consider when deciding which theory to apply when providing treatment for a client. The five categories include: the definition and nature of therapy, the goals or objectives of therapy, the role and function of the therapist, the therapist's theory of pathology and, conversely, the therapist's theory of normative family functioning; and finally, how the therapist should evaluate his or her work (Liddle, 1982, pp. 243-250).

Since the inception of the profession, social workers have attempted to improve the welfare of children and families. Although not all families act in a dysfunctional manner, many families face struggles and hardships. Effective clinical advancement must emphasize the importance of family with a psychodynamic approach. Families facing the dissolution of marriage may benefit from an integrated model that incorporates factors of self psychology, and family systems theory. By looking at the topics of behavior, development and families, an integrated model created based on one psychodynamic theory and one family theory is developed.

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