

Work-Family Conflict and the Role of Economic Crisis under the Perspective of both Eco-Systemic and Family Psychodynamic Model: A Case-Study

K. Kounenou*

Department of Education, School of Pedagogical and Technological Education, Athens, GR

Abstract: Research in the family field has identified the family-work conflict as an important relationship which affects both a person's career and parental/marital roles. The Eco-systemic model (Voydanoff, 2002) has introduced the understanding of this relationship through the exploration of work, family, and individual characteristics. The present paper, based on a case-study methodology, has attempted to explore the role of economic crisis in the work-family relationship for a three member family involved in family and couple therapy based on both eco-systemic and psychodynamic model (Scharff and Scharff, 1998). The eco-systemic model was used during therapy in order to describe and explore the ways that work, family, and individual characteristics interact with each other in regard to economic crisis, while the family psychodynamic model offered a deeper understanding of the above mentioned interactions by focusing on the families' and members' defensive mechanisms, unconscious expectations, unconscious desires and emotions, early traumatic experiences as well as the impact of early important relationships on adults' family and work roles. The present paper describes both techniques and interventions used during therapeutic process. Concluding, the process showed that economic crisis revealed hidden systemic/structural inadequacies related to family-work interaction that were based on family (as a whole), marital, and individual unconscious maladaptive mechanisms.

Keywords: Case-study, ecosystemic, psychodynamic, work-family conflict.

1. INTRODUCTION

Work and family seem to be the two most important fields in one's life. It is inevitable to distinguish one from another, since more and more people make decisions on family life in relation to their career priorities and vice-versa [1]. However the work-family relationship is also characterized by controversial aspects, which is called work-family conflict. According to Greenhaus and Bentell [2], work-family conflict is the type of a conflict among different roles. One's participation in his family is getting rather difficult due to his participation in the work domain. More precisely, the increased working hours, the ambiguity of his/her vocational role, increases the experienced anxiety and decreases his/her involvement in family life [3]. On the other side, the working parent due to the low level of his involvement in his family life, receives less emotional support from family members and therefore experiences less satisfaction from his life [4]. The work-family conflict seems to get more severe when one faces difficulties in either domain.

The economic crisis in Greece has affected one's life since he/she is facing issues related to decreased income and unemployment [5, 6]. Greek people experience practical and emotional consequences of

the crisis that are negatively related to life satisfaction [7], psychological resilience, subjective happiness [8], increased depression and low self-esteem [9, 10, 11].

Due to the importance of the work-family conflict in one's life, significant questions have been aroused: a) Do all the working parents experience the work-family conflict? Do they experience it at the same level? Is it possible to prevent it? Literature so far has shown that there are some differential factors that influence the one's experience and the severity of the work-family conflict, such as personality [12, 13], gender [14], and family support [15].

The present paper based on a case-study family therapy is attempting to provide more answers to the above mentioned questions through the incorporation of two theories: the eco-systemic approach of work-family relationship and the psychodynamic approach of family therapy. The eco-systemic model provides the therapist with a concrete basis in order to understand the context of the work-family conflict while the psychodynamic approach permits an in-depth analysis of the unconscious family-work dynamic, both on an individual and family level.

1.1. Eco-systemic Perspective of Work-Family Relationship and Conflict

One model that has tried to interpret the work-family relationship and conflict is the eco-systemic approach introduced by Voydanoff [16, 15]. According to this

*Address correspondence to this author at the Department of Education, School of Pedagogical and Technological Education, Athens, GR; Tel: +30 2102896973; E-mail: kkounenou@aspete.gr

model, the work-family relationship is the product of the interaction among various factors related to work-family interface, and work, family and individual outcomes. As Voydanoff [15] has stated "...the work-family interface is related to the cognitive assessment of work-family conflict, role balance, or role enhancement. This relationship may be moderated by social categories and coping resources" (p. 156). The way someone perceives the conflict and the balance could lead either to work-family role strain or ease. Depending on the type of the experienced work-family role, families and/or individuals elaborate work-family adaptive strategies that might facilitate adjustments to the work-family interface and prevent work-family conflict. However these adaptive strategies are very much related to the work-family fit, which by itself has feedback effects on work-family interface.

The interaction concerns various aspects of work and family, such as social parameters, work characteristics (e.g. payment, work conditions, role clarity), family characteristics (gender norms, family involvement, commitment, cohesion and quality of family role, family adaptive strategies), as well as individual characteristics and outcomes (one's coping and adaptive mechanisms, emotional status and expression).

1.2. Object Relations Family Therapy

The most contemporary and well known model of psychodynamic family therapy is the object relations family therapy invented by Scharff and Scharff [17]. It provides a thorough perspective of family dynamic, based on Winnicott's psychosomatic companionship [18], Fairbairn's reinvention of the oedipal complex [19] and Dick's perspective of mate selection and couple's relationship [20]. The mate's selection is based on unconscious signals by which the person perceives another one as a less or more syntonic central ego. This central ego provides the partners with the option of either remaking or repeating unconscious splitting and conflicts that are included in each one's personality, while at the same time it provides them with the guarantee that they will be able to resolve them. It is the joint personality, which means that both parts have come to an unconscious agreement according to which someone is going to play the role of consciousness and the other one is not going to provoke the first one's impulses [20]. The couple through the defense mechanisms of idealization share the common belief that the partner will heal all the disadvantages, leading to the development of a

couple's false self. Sharff and Scharff [17] have also stated that the couple's life is influenced by the public reality-unconscious parameter, which refers to the unconscious expectations of the community to the couple through the projection as an unconscious defensive mechanism.

According to the therapeutic model, a healthy family dynamic is formatted one hand through the central holding of the baby by his mother which permits the mother to take emotional care of her baby and on the other hand by the father's ability to hold his wife's and protects her from the demands of the other people that could otherwise interrupt the process of central holding. The father's role is called father's contextual holding. However the father's holding can be present in various levels, such as the family of origin, the neighbors and close friends. The marital relationship keeps the family at the center, exactly the same way the mother and the baby holds each other at the center, by looking each other. The parents' object relations system functions as a genetic tank, from which the child's personality will generate. However, unresolved processes and submissive object relations of the marital couple is usual to lead to the use of dysfunctional defensive mechanisms such as splitting, projection, and projective identification during marital and family interaction.

2. CASE STUDY

A couple of a three member family started therapy due to marital problems related to communication and decreased levels of satisfaction. The wife came for therapy first complaining that she was not satisfied with her marriage, she and her husband had a conflicted communication, since they were unable to agree on anything and she was thinking of getting a divorce. We agreed on having the next session with her husband and having future sessions with the whole family as well.

Maria was a 40 years old woman working in a special and demanding position in public sector. Nikos was a 45 years old man, working in a special and high demanding position in private sector. They had a 4 years old son. Their relationship had started 5 years ago and the woman got pregnant during the second month of the relationship. They got married during woman's pregnancy. They admitted that they were both very much in love when they got married and they decided that they wanted to have a child together the same moment they had first met each other.

3. THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION

3.1. Assessment of Work-Family Relationship Based on Ecosystemic Model

Work conditions: Prior to the economical crisis and Nikos' difficulties with his work, both partners were very much satisfied with their jobs, although there were some problems with the work-family roles balance for both spouses. For example, Nikos had to work many hours, even when he was at home and he had very little interaction with his son. Maria, experienced pregnancy and parenthood as rather stressful, since they kept them for the first two years away from her work. Although the type of her job in public service, her job's demands and the working hours could ideally fit with her parenting role, she remained stressed and unsatisfied by the combination of the two roles, experiencing work-family role strain.

After economical crisis had began, Nikos was coping with several problems at his work, such as underpayment, payment delays, and the possibility of losing his job. He declared that he liked his job very much, but he was feeling useless since he could not be the family's breadwinner any more.

On the other hand, Maria was very happy with her job and after crisis onset, she started training in special skills related to her specialty, although risky that could lead to self-injured. She also started spending more time at her work, although she did not have any extrinsic motivation for that e.g. raised salary or promotion. She started spending more time at work even during weekends.

Family characteristics: The family was socially isolated, highly cohesive, both prior and after economical crisis. Members had very close relationship with each other, especially as far as the mother-son relationship was concerned. Father seemed to be excluded from that relationship in regard to child rearing and father-son communication. After economical crisis and parental conflicts, The son presented signals of emotional immaturity and "infantilized" behavior, apart from the fact that he had nocturnal enuresis.

The marital couple had severe communication problems in verbal and non verbal level and no intimacy at all. After economical crisis had began, the husband's needs for warmth increased and he was trying unsuccessfully to get some tenderness and warmth from his wife, mainly by complaining of not

being loved enough by her, but his complaints only resulted in increased conflicts between them. Both of them were very much dissatisfied by their relationship. The gender roles had been reversed with the husband spending more time at home, sitting on the sofa in silence, asking for tenderness, while the wife was spending most of the time out of home or working at home.

Family and individual adaptive mechanisms: The family members both in individual and family level seemed to have no adequate adaptive and/or coping mechanisms either before or after crisis onset. First of all, it was difficult for them to ask for or accept any offered help and support from members of the extended family, due to their need to prove to their parents that they were strong enough to cope on their own. They had no friends or socially interactions apart from those that were somehow related to their jobs. Although, there was an existing fortune that could be used and reclaimed, they seemed unable to think about it or make any future plans. Also, the couple had no capacity of re prioritizing family and career goals, reexamine the importance of career and family or provide support to each other.

Individual outcomes: the husband was looking very much depressed and anxious, trapped in his work, while the wife was very much angry with him. Both of them were feeling trapped in the relationship and they couldn't see any way out. Therefore, they could not adequately use any defensive and adaptive mechanisms and the support that they could get either from the family of origin living very close to them or the reclaiming of the existing fortune.

3.2. Family Analysis Based on Object Relations Family Therapy Proposed by Scharff and Scharff

The in-depth analysis of the family and individual permits us to give answers to "why" questions in regard to the above mentioned assessment.

Underpayment and payment delays had provoked husband's emotional discomfort, emotional insecurity, death anxiety which in turn had decreased the use of defensive and adaptive coping mechanisms. The husband used to be very much focused on and dedicated to his work, receiving much pleasure and money of it. However the payment delay and the possibility of losing his job made the husband to experience his work as a frustrating object. The work's difficulties had caused a narcissistic trauma to him and his job was not any more an object offering prestige

and social recognition, and pleasure. Therefore he was regressed in primal developmental stages, searching for pleasure and relief in his wife's arms, who was experienced by him as a mother figure.

However the marital relationship was very weak and could not provide him with the central holding he needed, while at the same time the weak and traumatized husband could not provide his family (mother and son) with the appropriate contextual holding the two of them needed. Both partners were experiencing too much anger due to the marital relationship's inadequacy to hold them. The husband due to his regression to infantilized stage of development was asking for an alleviative, consolatory mother figure, while the wife was asking for a strong father figure that could make her relax. She became more self-centered, taking pleasure from her extra curriculum work activities, while the husband was asking for her warmth.

Looking at the deeper reasons for the partners' feelings and emotional situation, one has to search in their relationships with the primitive objects, namely the relationship with the important others. The husband re experienced his primal abandonment by his own mother, who had to find a work in another city far away from home and the little boy was left to relatives custody for some time. After his mother return, he became emotionally distant from her and he turned to his relatives for emotional security. When he first met his wife, he felt that he could be relaxed for the first time in his life, due to his wife's excessive engagement with house holding and her trend to search for stability in her life. However, his wife over engagement with her work had provoked much anger and sorrow due to this re-experience. Therefore, he got depressed and hopeless, unable to get up onto his feet and fight for his job or make any back-up plans. Additionally, the problems at his work provoked loss of his self-confidence and he could not take pleasure and support either from work or family. On the other hand, his depression and hopelessness had provoked frustration and anger to his wife, due to the fact that she was feeling forced to play the role of a strong and castrating woman, although she was in need for tenderness and care. The wife, as a child, had to abandon her own needs for tenderness and extra care during her childhood due to her parents' marital problems and over engagement with their younger children. Due to her own Experienced emotional abandonment by her parents, she adopted narcissistic properties, trying to

prove to anyone that she could manage to live without any help and support. When she first met her husband it was the first time in her life that she felt she could relax and stop trying having an over-excessive control over her life.

Both of the spouses had idealized one another, believing that the mate could heal their inner traumas. They shared the same trauma, namely the abandonment by their parents, which resulted in difficulties in emotional expression in an individual level, communication problems and intimacy in relationships. The husband's difficulties at work, due to general economical crisis, confounded the "false self" of the specific couple, leading to re experiences of their repressive traumas. Due to the awakening of their deeper traumas and the subsequent negative feelings, they were both unable to discuss their feelings and communicate effectively with each other. Their regression to earlier developmental stages, primitive defensive mechanisms started to operate and both partners had chosen practices and behavioral patterns that were effective during childhood. They had become a "bad object" for each other, by using the defensive mechanism of splitting and they had started looking for relief by investing in resources outside family. For example the husband was thinking that he could find emotional security outside family (e.g. finding a job abroad) and the woman was over engaged with her job. The family had entered into a crisis and was unable to use effectively inner and outer sources of support (help from members of their extended families, reclaiming of existing fortune), which resulted in further family's social isolation, since they had no interaction with members of the extended family or friends.

It seemed that the economical crisis, as it was apparent in husband's work difficulties, brought into the family's sight the marital relationship's inability to "hold" each other, due to the immaturity of each one and of the relationship itself. The work-family conflict was experienced by the husband as severe, not only due to his inability to operate as the family provider, but also due to the fact that he could not find any comfort and relief in either domain (work and family). His fear of abandonment was increased, making him unable to provide his family with the appropriate "contextual holding". The wife experienced her husband's depression as an abandonment and tried to enhance her own self-esteem by practicing activities that made her feel strong enough on her own. The mother-child relationship became even more close, but not intimate,

and the family's child became infantilized in order to fulfill the family's need for regression, through the defensive mechanism of projective identification.

3.3. Therapeutic Goals and Techniques

Based on the above mentioned assessment, the therapeutic intervention was focused on issues related to work and family both in individual and family level. First of all, it was considered as rather important to help them understand their conceptualization of work and family, in order for them to set their priorities and increase the work-family fit. It was also important for them to understand the reasons that the husband's difficulties at work increased their anxiety and the already existing work-family conflict. Open questions that allowed the expression of emotions, representations of work and family, as well as other counseling techniques, such as reflection of emotions and clarification were used.

The primal goal of the psychodynamic therapeutic intervention was the enhancement of individuation of each member focused primary on the realization of self and the self-related difficulties. For that reason, family members were encouraged to express and deal with the negative and the positive feelings in order for them to start communicating with each other.

The second therapeutic goal concerned the emergence of repetitive patterns of behavior and emotions towards others in order for them to realize that the partner and their child was actually the recipient of their unconscious traumatic experiences and that both the marital and the family relationship, as the most intimate ones, had facilitated the revival of these traumatic experiences. Partners had to face the linking mechanisms (mainly based on unconscious defensive mechanisms) between their primal relationships and their current emotional status and feelings toward each other. Therefore a more flexible therapeutic shape was adopted, including both individual, couple and family sessions. According to Shapiro and Zinner [21], the combination of individual and couple/family sessions allow the therapist to deal more effectively with the unconscious defensive mechanism of projective identification around which family life might have been organized and make the appropriate space for the achievement of each one's individuation.

During the individual and family sessions, the therapist had the opportunity to clearly see the transference among the members and the transference

towards the therapist herself, which was arranged around their primal parental and siblings experiences. For example, both partners were experienced each other both as a sibling, arousing competitive feelings, and as a frustrating parental figure as well. The interpretation of the transference by the therapist helped the members to realize the way their past relationships had influenced their relationships in the family of their own. Both partners were encouraged to express freely their inner thoughts about the other members, themselves, and the therapist, while the therapist interpreted those feelings and behaviors in regard to each one's past experiences.

Once they had realized that their frustration and anger was derived from their fear of abandonment, their projection on each other of frustrating competitive feelings related to their own siblings, and their reluctance to invest in a close and intimate relationship due to traumatic primal relationships with their parents, they achieved adequate levels of self-realization. They became aware of the massive use of splitting, projection and projective identification on each other and their child as well. Finally, they were encouraged to evaluate the existing external sources of support (members of family of origin and existing fortune).

3.4. Therapeutic Outcome

Both of them realized that the work was their own way to distant themselves from the intimate relationships that were rather traumatic for them. The father gave up his job and found another one, which made him feeling more self-confident. The mother having accepted the importance of her maternal role, which until then she had been experienced as conflictual to her work, decided to decrease the working hours and spending more time with her family. She realized that nothing terrible would happen if she had some relaxing hours with her family or resting. They learned to accept each other with his/her weakness and strengths and also they dealt with the fact that their child needed both parents' care. They started parenting their child in a more adult way. The mother asked for the father's participation and the father permitted his son to start identifying with him. The family opened its borders to outer environment and permitted grandparents to take care of the child and spending vacation time together.

CONCLUSIONS

The economical crisis had led to the husband's work difficulties which in turn had made more apparent

the already existing work-family conflict. The conflict was related to each spouse's difficulties concerning work-family fit, which in turn was provoked by each spouse's inadequacy to invest in close and intimate relationships due to early traumatic relationships. These inadequacies enhanced the experienced by them work-family role strain. The spouse's emotional behavior (hostility, warmth, and support) towards the other one mediate the relationship between economic strain and marital quality, parenting and depression [22, 23]. Both spouses had experienced a high strain due to work-family role conflicts. According to the literature, work and family are important domains for men and women [24] and both sexes seem to experience similar levels of conflict [25]. The work-family conflict for the specific case-study could be attributed to the inadequate work-family fit and the absence of adaptive mechanisms. This conclusion is consistent with Voydanoff's [15] claim that the work-family fit can itself has an effect on work-family interface and conflict, while the absence of adaptive mechanisms can either prevent or enhance the conflict. The high cohesiveness of the family as well as the regression of each family member buffered the family's ability to adapt to the new situation imposed by the economical crisis. As Voydanoff [15] has stated individual and family characteristics affect the extent to which work and family are related to each other. The therapeutic intervention focused on the enhancement of emotional expression related to their early traumatic relationships and frustrations reduced the experienced stress and helped the spouses to communicate effectively with each other and re-prioritize their work and family roles. As relative research [26] has already shown, psychological detachment of work and expression of emotions as well can moderate the relationship between work-family conflict and family-work conflict.

More research, both quantitative and qualitative, is needed to explore further the linkage mechanisms that family and work are related to each other and the coping mechanisms that can prevent work-family conflict and enhance one's quality of life.

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Received on 07-05-2016

Accepted on 06-06-2016

Published on 31-07-2016

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12974/2313-1047.2016.03.01.3>

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