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The relationship of emotional competence with strategies of coping and individual problems and strengths in the process of coping with divorce

Povezanost čustvene kompetentnosti s strategijami spoprijemanja ter posameznikovimi problemi in močmi v procesu soočanja z ločitvijo

Abstract

Divorce (or separation of a long-term partnership) is one of the most stressful life events an individual might face. Emotional processing of particularly difficult emotional states into more acceptable and positive forms of emotion marks an important psychological task in coping with divorce. Well-developed emotional competencies are crucial in the process of functional emotional processing. Our correlation study focuses on the relationship of emotional

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competency with the capacity to cope with the stress and individual problems and strengths during divorce. A total of 239 participants with experience of going through the process of divorce were included in our research. Three questionnaires were used within this study: Emotional Skills and Competence Questionnaire (ESCQ), Brief COPE, and Individual Problems and Strengths Scale (IPS). The results show the trend that those with a lower level of emotional competence experience more difficulty in dealing with the stress of divorce (they are more likely to turn to dysfunctional strategies). These individuals also demonstrate increased difficulties in the realm of well-being (more individual problems and less individual strengths). We conclude that a higher degree of emotional competence - something that develops throughout the life cycle - is a significant factor that enables the use of more functional strategies for dealing with the stress of divorce and also promotes better adjustment to the challenges of divorce.

Key words: emotional processing, stress, separation, process of coping, emotions

Povzetek

Razpad zakonske (ali dolgotrajne partnerske) zveze je eden izmed bolj stresnih življenjskih dogodkov, ki lahko doleti posameznika. Ena od pomembnih psihičnih nalog procesa spoprijemanja z ločitvijo je čustveno procesiranje predvsem težkih čustvenih stanj v bolj sprejemljive in pozitivne oblike čustev. Funkcionalnost čustvenega procesiranja temelji na primerno razvitih čustvenih kompetencah. V naši korelacijski študiji nas je zanimalo, kakšne so povezave čustvene kompetentnosti s sposobnostjo spoprijemanja s stresom in doživljanjem osebnih problemov in moči v procesu soočanja z ločitvijo. V raziskavi je sodelovalo 239 udeležencev z izkušnjo ločitve. Rezultati kažejo na trend, da osebe z nižjo stopnjo čustvene kompetentnosti doživljajo več težav v spoprijemanju s stresom ob ločitvi (v večji meri se poslužujejo manj funkcionalnih strategij s soočanja s stresom ob ločitvi). Obenem imajo te osebe več težav na področju osebnega blagostanja (več osebnih problemov in manj osebnih moči). Sklepamo lahko, da je stopnja razvitosti čustvenih kompetenc, ki se razvijajo celo življenje, pomemben dejavnik, ki v procesu spoprijemanja s stresnostjo ločitvene situacije omogoča uporabo učinkovitejših strategij spoprijemanja s stresom ter tudi boljšo prilagoditev na izzive ob ločitvi.

Ključne besede: čustveno procesiranje, stres, razveza, proces spoprijemanja, čustva

Divorce⁹ is a complex phenomenon that influences several facets of an entire family system (Braver, Shapiro & Goodman, 2006; Fine & Harvey, 2006). It leads to the development of many new needs, varying from formalities to practicalities and deeper emotional aspects, all of which require heedance. Complications, in particular regarding deeper psychological dynamics, can lead to negative long-term consequences because they obstruct a healthier and more functional approach to dealing with divorce. This contribution focuses on the characteristics of emotional competencies in individuals who are in the process of (or have been) dealing with divorce. Emotional competency affects the process of adjusting to life-after-divorce.

1. Divorce

The dissolution of a serious relationship or marriage is one of the most stressful life events which can happen to an individual. According to some studies it ranks in second or third place in the measure of the strain of stress, sometimes even higher than the death of a close family member or being imprisoned (Tasiro, Frazier & Berman, 2006). Many experts rank divorce as the second most traumatic life event that can occur (after the death of a child or parent) (Koenig, King & Carson, 2012). Experiencing the circumstances accompanying a divorce is connected with an increased risk to one's psychological wellbeing and development of various pathologies, including higher levels of depression, anxiety and substance abuse (Madara, 2019).

Divorce is a complex situation that throws individuals out of their stable ways of living and can influence their functionality. It can be viewed as a process that leaves its impact on both the social and economic-financial levels, while at the same time it causes internal, mental or psychological processes that can be detected in the experience of an individual, couple, child or whole family (Margulies, 2007). All these areas are interconnected, and complications in one area usually cause hard-to-solve problems in the others. Divorce has emotional, behavioural, social, physical and spiritual consequences (Simonič, 2015).

In most cases, divorce is a process that takes time. It is not simply a one-time event or a decision. In general, we separate the process of divorce into various phases. There are at least six phases: recognizing the collapse of the relationship or marriage, the decision to divorce or separate, preparation and planning of the break-up, the actual physical divorce, the legal and

⁹ In this article we will use the single expression »divorce« to denote separation within a marriage as well as separation of a couple that lived in a civil union (without formal marriage), despite these two being two different processes from a legal viewpoint.

formal process, and the phase of establishing a new life after the divorce (Al Ubaidi, 2017). Although all six phases of the family transformation can be addressed separately, they do frequently overlap in practice. While they do not necessarily take place in a certain order, there are often deviations and tranquil periods during the process. Sometimes there are attempts at reviving the relationship. Transformation comes gradually and it is of a cyclical nature (Carr, 2000). Specific challenges, with which family members must cope, mark every period.

Divorce has numerous consequences for the partners, children and extended family. Furthermore, the consequences usually continue long after settlement of all the respective legal aspects of divorce. As such, divorce is one of the more stressful and psychologically exhausting challenges one can experience (Rosenberg, 2011), although some studies show it is also possible for divorce to result in beneficial changes and personal growth (Amato, 2000). Divorce reaches into the usual daily activities of a person and their daily lifestyle, shattering any or all expectations. It is an event that causes true crisis, because the individual experiences it as a loss that threatens their integrity and feeling of security (Perrig-Chiello, Hutchison & Morselli, 2015). For some, psychological consequences linger long after the legal proceedings are over, often due to loss of resources (economic status, emotional support, social network etc.) and stressors due to the process of divorce itself. This exposure to a prolonged period of emotional distress can make divorcees vulnerable to a wide array of psychological consequences (Koenig, King & Carson, 2012). Some longitudinal studies show that nearly all divorcees report divorce as distressing and experience problems in functioning in the year after divorce, followed by variation in patterns of growth or decline (Bursik, 1991). Even when divorce is desired, it is stressful. In the process of coping with divorce it is therefore crucial that the process is successful, which manifests in adequate (especially emotional) adaptation to change brought into one's life by divorce and its consequences (Kitson, 2006).

2. **The emotional challenges of coping with divorce**

The multivarious changes and stressors in living conditions due to divorce increase the risk of physical and psychological distress, among males and females alike, and they are more acute during the early phase of divorce (Hetherington & Kelly, 2003; Lee, Sbarra, Mason & Law, 2011; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Divorce presents a marked challenge even for the most functional of individuals. Experiencing hard emotions during divorce is unavoidable, even advantageous;

after all, many emotions - such as fear, anger and sadness - lead us to specific actions, which are change oriented. For example, when we are feeling anxious or fearful, our tendency is to fight, escape or to at least attempt avoiding the perceived danger (Cvetek, 2014; Platovnjak, 2015). It follows that these emotions play a similar role in the process of dealing with divorce. While they encourage us to resolve the challenges that triggered them, if these emotions are extreme or long-lasting and inappropriate to the context or not appropriately regulated, they may also lead to the development of several other problems and issues. These emotions are a stress to the organism and general stress can affect the immune system, and can also generate a tendency for stress related physical distress (Lee et al., 2011). Anger and sadness can also lead to depression and suicidal thoughts and actions in some individuals (Izadinia, Amiri, Jahromi & Hamidi, 2010). On the other hand, positive emotional states (such as happiness, interest and satisfaction) expand the cognitive-action repertoire (Isgett & Fredrickson, 2015). Encouraging positive emotions generally obstructs negative emotions, expands cognitive capacity and thought processes and increases access to personal resources (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). This also holds true with divorce.

An important psychological process in dealing with divorce is the emotional processing of difficult emotional states into more accepting and positive emotional forms that is then reflected in how one deals with the stress of divorce and the consequent necessary adaptations.

3. **Emotional competence in the process of coping with stress**

The authors use the concept of *emotional processing* in the wider sense of characterizing the general progression of emotional processes. In the narrow sense it is synonymous with the concept of *emotional regulation* (Siegel, 1999). This refers to the psychological, psychophysical and psycho-neurological mechanisms by which distressed emotional responses are transformed or changed into non-distressed emotional responses, thus enabling optimal development and functioning.

Research in the field of emotions and emotional processing has in recent years become one of the most significant domains for understanding human health and general well-being. Emotions play a key role in human development and have a significant impact on all aspects of our lives, as well as on how we cope with stressful situations (Barrett, 2013). Emotional processing is complex and includes several intertwining components: recognition of the event, physiological excitement

and bodily responses, the subjective experiencing of emotion, the stance of active readiness, attention to the emotion, emotional awareness, emotion recognition, emotion expression, emotion regulation and emotional stability (Cvetek, 2014). Optimization of individual functioning is important for the entire progression of emotional processing to be appropriate and for the formation of appropriate emotional responses that do not change into unsettling emotional responses (Greenspan, 1989). How each individual experiences the individual components of emotional processing is largely a reflection of their emotional competency developed throughout the life span. Those with lesser developed emotional competency, and thus also lesser functional capacity to emotionally process, experience more negative affect, have greater difficulty inhibiting strong impulses, live less functional lifestyles, are less flexible and less resistant, have lower levels of self-awareness, are less accepting of themselves, and are less emotionally expressive in their relationships with others (Cvetek, 2015). This of course is all reflected in how they cope with stress. More or less efficient strategies for coping with stress also reflect the capacity to appropriately emotionally process (Erzar, Yu, Enright & Kompan Erzar, 2018; Noorbakhsha, Besharata & Zareia, 2010; Saklofske, Austin, Galloway & Davidson, 2007).

Emotional competency, which is expressed in the complex capacity of functional emotional processing and vice versa, matures throughout the life span (Osewska, 2017). Greenspan's theory of functional emotional development marks one of the most detailed developmental theories regarding emotional development throughout the life span (Greenspan, 1989). He describes 16 developmental periods and their corresponding emotional competencies. Affect transforms into increasingly higher forms of mental functioning through these phases, whereby key developmental tasks must be fulfilled for each period for emotional development to proceed optimally (Cvetek, 2014). Emotional processing matures through the acquirement of nonverbal emotional competence (the capacity to emotionally calm down, intimate connection with others, reciprocal emotional exchange, reciprocal resolution of social problems), through verbal emotional competence (the capacity for symbolic representation of emotional states, emotionally logical thinking, comparative emotional thinking, differentiation between emotional nuances), and through the development of self-regulatory emotional competencies (the capacity for self-reflection, autonomous desire for changing the self, reflecting on the future, intrapsychic autonomy, increasing care for the social community – partnership, parenting, wisdom) (Cvetek, 2015; Greenspan & Shanker, 2004). It is therefore to be expected that individuals who demonstrate lower levels of emotional competency are more vulnerable and have greater difficulty coping with

challenges, such as the challenges presented by divorce.

The individual's capacity to cope with problems and stress is of key significance for leading a successful life. Classical theory regarding stress coping strategies emphasizes the different styles or forms of strategies for coping with stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which are sometimes already intrinsic personal characteristics. These are a variety of methods and techniques (problem focused strategies), or emotional stances (emotion focused strategies) that the individual takes on when confronting stress (Lazarus & Launier, 1978). Both strategies (or different methods from both strategies) are often applied simultaneously, depending upon the nature of the stressor, how the individual perceives the situation, and the available resources (Newman & Newman, 2003).

Problem focused strategies aim to resolve a particular problem or issue, or to avoid a certain cause of stress. *Emotion focused strategies* aim to decrease or master emotional distress caused by a certain stressful situation. Problem focused strategies are the usual strategy when it would seem that something constructive can still be achieved regarding the stressor, while emotion focused strategies are more frequent when it would seem that the stressful situation can or should be endured (Carver, Scheier & Weintraub, 1989). In the event of divorce, when several definitive adjustments and adaptations ensue, individuals first apply problem focused strategies. Then, once the actual challenges of adapting to the divorce situation are under control, emotion focused strategies are largely called upon to deal with the stress ensuing from the increase in emotional vulnerability (Ben-Zur & Michael, 2016). However, these strategies are multivariate and are not uniformly classified as functional. Emotion focused strategies include, for instance, denial, which can lead to repression, as well as others, for instance, positive reinterpretation of events or the seeking out of social support, which can lead to growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). Furthermore, the same strategy in one circumstance may prove functional, while in a different circumstance may prove dysfunctional (Barrett, 2013). These responses thus differ enormously among each other, and they also have various implications on the success of dealing with stress as well as on the individuals' general well-being (Carver et al., 1989).

Emotions are therefore of key importance for coping with stress, and this is reflected also as regards the factor of efficiency (Watson & Sinha, 2008). Many authors have established that the process of emotional processing and the process of coping are partially overlapping aspects (John & Gross, 2007). Even problem focused strategies that are not founded so much on emotional, rather more on cognitive processes, cannot exclude the emotional aspects. Thus emotions affect cognitive choices even in these circumstances (Barrett, 2013). Emotions

regulate all the strategies for coping with stressful situations, and this is why it is of key significance that individuals have well-developed capacities for emotional processing.

During the divorce process, when emotions are more or less intense and hard, there are challenges in the course of coping with the stress of the situation. Numerous studies (Al Ubaidi, 2017; Jarwan & Al-frehat, 2020) emphasize the importance of emotions in the process of coping with divorce, but we haven't found a specific study that would investigate the role of emotional competence in this process. Our research focused on the correlations of emotional competencies with the capacity for coping with stress and experiencing personal well-being or functionality in the divorce process. We hypothesize that those with lower levels of emotional competency have more difficulty coping with the stress of the divorce (that increased levels of dysfunctional coping strategies are used) and that they have more difficulties in the field of individual problems and strengths.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

A total of 239 participants from Slovenia were included in this research, of which 103 were male (43 %) and 136 were female (57 %). All participants had experience of divorce in the last 5 years (having physically left their partner and/or were in the formal procedure of divorce or completed it). The average age of participants was 43.6 years.

4.2. Instruments

Participants completed demographic (gender, age) and divorce questions, as well as three instruments:

- a. The ESCQ - Emotional Skills and Competence Questionnaire (Cvetek, 2014) - is a self-assessment questionnaire that measures the extent of emotional competencies in situations where partners or two emotionally intimate individuals find themselves in conflict with each other. Our research applied 8 subscales of this questionnaire: trust in the help of others (4 items), reciprocity and collaboration between partners (10 items), understanding and articulation of emotions (3 items), comparative emotional thinking (5 items), fluctuation in emotional experiencing (4 items), autonomous search for new possibilities or new meaning to experience (3 items), autonomous desire to improve self (3 items) and autonomous judgment (5 items). The items are rated on a 5 level Likert type scale (1 – almost never applies to me, 5 – almost

always applies to me). The questionnaire was developed on the theoretical framework of emotional development throughout the life span (Greenspan & Lewis, 1999; Greenspan & Shanker, 2004; Greenspan & Wieder, 1998; Simonič, Cvetek, Cvetek, Gostečnik, Jerebic, Poljak Lukek, Repič Slavič & Rijavec Klobučar, 2018) and it correlates with several emotional competencies that the individual develops during their lifelong emotional development. Factor analysis of the questionnaire was used to check compliance of the theoretical framework and the selected items (first, a general pool of items was selected for each individual emotional competence corresponding to the first 12 developmental stages of emotional development; next, factor analysis was carried out to exclude the 12 factors; the items not complying with the factor saturation or which failed to comply with the selected emotional competence in terms of content, were excluded from further analysis; factors with less than three items were also excluded from further analysis; eight factors corresponding to the theoretical framework in content and also with sufficient validity thus remained included in further analysis). The questionnaire has the following dimensions: trust in the help of others (the capacity to intimately include or connect with others), reciprocity and collaboration between partners (the capacity for reciprocity and collaboration with others in interpersonal relationships), understanding and articulation of emotions (the incapacity to articulate emotional experiences), comparative emotional thinking (the capacity to understand emotional experiencing within context, when the individual is able to simultaneously consider several varying causes, stances, and consequences that might be connected with their current emotional experience), fluctuation in emotional experiencing (emotional variance, but unstable), autonomous search for new possibilities (the desire for new learning and seeking new meaning for experiences), autonomous desire to improve self (the desire to improve one's own responses, the desire for personal growth) and autonomous judgment (the capacity for independent selection of life values, as well as being able to follow them despite possible environmental pressures). The reliabilities of all subscales was tested with Cronbach alphas and ranged between 0.94 (reciprocity and collaboration between partners) and 0.73 (autonomous desire to improve self).

- b. The Brief COPE (Carver, 1997) instrument is an abbreviated version of the COPE inventory (Carver et al., 1989). It is a self-report questionnaire assessing the frequency with which a person uses different coping strategies (cognitive and psychological) in different stressful life circumstances, such as divorce. The inventory has 28 items divided into 14 two-item subscales, which

varying studies divide into emotion-focused strategies, problem-focused strategies and dysfunctional coping; the author (Carver, 1997) emphasizes that there is no standard rule as to how to divide these categories and leaves this decision to the researcher. They can also be divided into functional and dysfunctional forms of coping, depending also on the moment and circumstantial stressor (for instance the need to let emotions flow in the acute phase of mourning, but which can subsequently present an obstacle to everyday functioning). The dimensions are: self-distraction, active coping, denial, substance abuse, use of emotional support, use of instrumental support, behavioural disengagement, venting, positive reframing, planning, humour, acceptance, self-blame, and religiosity, which correlates with the general inclusion of religious and spiritual dimensions in coping with stressful life circumstances. The questionnaire demonstrates very good validity (Yusoff, Low & Yip, 2010). The Cronbach's alpha for the Brief COPE was 0.77.

- c. The Individual Problems and Strengths Scale (IPS) is a subscale of The Systemic Therapy Inventory of Change (STIC) (Pinsof et al., 2009). The IPS consists of 25 items and has eight factors: the expression of negative affect (with sub-dimensions of depression and anxiety), the absence of inhibition of strong impulses (disinhibition), life functioning, open expression, flexibility/resilience, self-misunderstanding, substance abuse, and self-acceptance. The participant rates each statement on a 5 level Likert type scale (1 – never, 5 – very often). The higher the result, the higher the individual factors are evaluated. The Cronbach's alpha for the IPS was 0.83.

4.3. Procedure

A variety of participants took part in the research. The participants were asked to keep in mind their divorce experience while completing the questionnaires. They were asked to fill in the questionnaire online (the invitation to participate in the research, with a link to the questionnaire, was sent to different groups and forums associated with divorce) as well as in written format (these participants were recruited from various environments in the snowball sampling method, mostly from a support group for divorced people led by marital and family therapists). The survey continued between October 2015 and November 2016. We used the SPSS 20 programme package to calculate the results.

5. Results

We examined how the level of expression of emotional competence correlates with individual capacity to cope with stress during the process of divorce and the level of evaluated individual problems and strengths. To establish the correlation we calculated Spearman's correlation coefficients, as the conditions for Pearson's correlation coefficients were insufficient.

Table 1.

Correlation coefficients (Spearman's rho) between the level of expression of emotional competence, coping with stress strategies and individual problems and strengths (N=239).

	ESCQ-CMB	ESCQ-THO	ESCQ-RCP	ESCQ-AE	ESCQ-CET	ESCQ-FEE	ESCQ-ANP	ESCQ-AIS	ESCQ-AJ
COPE-SD	-,239**	-,084*	-,209**	,204**	-,024	,051	-,202**	-,097*	-,104*
COPE-AC	,415**	,253**	,285**	-,305**	,229**	,018	,482**	,292**	,417**
COPE-D	-,292**	-,155**	-,149**	,334**	-,118**	,080	-,277**	-,180**	-,336**
COPE-SU	-,041	-,087*	-,047	,103**	-,104*	,078	-,097**	-,014	-,042
COPE-ES	,090	,383**	-,001	-,062	,069	,097*	,080*	,139**	,070
COPE-IS	,160**	,395**	,077	-,063	,057	,105*	,101**	,197**	,074
COPE-BD	-,424**	-,271**	-,352**	,363**	-,044	,106*	-,322**	-,033	-,329**
COPE-V	,158**	,197**	,097*	-,172**	,134**	,111*	,144**	,116*	,140**
COPE-PR	,429**	,277**	,265**	-,298**	,229**	-,012	,574**	,268**	,385**
COPE-P	,289**	,139**	,056	-,216**	,378**	,075	,396**	,362**	,341**
COPE-H	,149**	,159**	,143**	-,108**	,157**	-,029	,209**	,052	,208**
COPE-A	,299**	,162**	,130**	-,239**	,297**	,041	,382**	,159**	,408**
COPE-R	,035	,099**	-,070	-,039	,114*	,084	,270**	,225**	,100*
COPE-SB	-,244**	-,139**	-,244**	,266**	-,018	,188**	-,202**	,146**	-,261**
IPS-NA/D	-,356**	-,242**	-,387**	,341**	-,110*	,263**	-,312**	-,028	-,269**
IPS-NA/A	-,327**	-,193**	-,381**	,305**	-,074	,263**	-,251**	,014	-,247**
IPS-D	-,332**	-,206**	-,313**	,274**	-,104*	,242**	-,301**	-,050	-,263**
IPS-SM	-,206**	-,222**	-,189**	,407**	-,094	,149**	-,268**	-,013	-,242**
IPS-SAb	-,049	-,144**	-,074	,113**	-,009	,097	-,108**	-,102	-,029
IPS-LF	,308**	,232**	,292**	-,323**	,087	-,149**	,324**	,043	,311**
IPS-OE	,492**	,383**	,346**	-,471**	,204**	-,148**	,410**	,078	,513**
IPS-F/R	,476**	,273**	,356**	-,375**	,254**	-,198**	,435**	,090	,440**
IPS-SAc	,480**	,314**	,312**	-,367**	,212**	-,143**	,357**	,031	,522**
IPS-CMB	,352**	,267**	,308**	-,335**	,138**	-,176**	,303**	,044	,307**

Notes: ESCQ – the Emotional Skills and Competence Questionnaire; COPE – Coping with Stress inventory; IPS – Individual Problems and Strengths scale; ESCQ-CMB – combined result of the emotional competence questionnaire; ESCQ-THO – trust in the help of others; ESCQ-RCP - reciprocity and collaboration between partners; ESCQ-AE – articulation of emotions; ESCQ-CET - comparative emotional thinking; ESCQ-FEE – fluctuation in emotional experiencing; ESCQ-ANP - autonomous search for new possibilities and new meaning; ESCQ-AIS - autonomous desire to improve self; ESCQ-AJ - autonomous judgment; COPE-SD – self-distraction; COPE-AC – active coping; COPE-D – denial; COPE-SU – substance use; COPE-ES – use of emotional support; COPE-IS – use of instrumental support; COPE-BD – behavioral disengagement; COPE-V – venting; COPE-PR – positive reframing; COPE-P – planning; COPE-H – humor; COPE-A – acceptance; COPE-R – religiosity; COPE-SB – self-blame; IPS-NA/D – negative affect/depression; IPS-NA/A – negative affect/anxiety; IPS-D – disinhibition; IPS-SM – self-misunderstanding; IPS-SAb – substance abuse; IPS-LF – life functioning; IPS-OE – open expression; IPS-F/R – flexibility/resilience; IPS-SAc – self-acceptance; IPS-CMB – combined result of the Individual Problems and Strengths scale; * – the results is significant if the p-value is below 0.05; ** – the results is significant if the p-value is below 0.01.

The correlations (Table 1) demonstrate the trend that individuals with higher levels of expression of emotional competence correlate with higher levels of coping with stress strategies during the process of divorce: they use more active coping, they seek out and use more instrumental support, they demonstrate increased levels of venting and emotion release, they have greater levels of positive reframing and problem solving, they use more humour and have increased levels of acceptance. These are all strategies that we consider to be active and functional forms of coping with difficulties. In terms of strategies for coping with the process of divorce, individuals with higher levels of expression of emotional competence also use lesser levels of self-distraction and denial, they display less behavioural disengagement, and they are less likely to turn to self-blaming; this means that, in general, they use fewer dysfunctional strategies for coping with difficulty.

The results indicate a trend that individuals with higher levels of expression of emotional competence, as regards the realm of individual problems and strengths during process of divorce, demonstrate lower levels of expression of negative affect (depression and anxiety), have fewer difficulties with inhibition of strong impulses (disinhibition), they show lower levels of self-misunderstanding, and demonstrate increased capacity for life functioning, they also use more open expression and are more flexible, resilient and self-accepting during difficult circumstances. The combined results regarding individuals with increased levels of expression of emotional competence thus display the trend that while coping with the circumstances of divorce, these individuals also experience a higher degree of life functioning capacity.

Table 1 presents the correlations between individual emotional competencies, coping with stress strategies, and the individual problems and strengths. There are statistically significant correlations between most of the

dimensions, almost all displaying the trend of correlations between the combined level of expression of emotional competence, strategies for coping with stress and individual problems and strengths. The exceptions are in the articulation of emotions competence, where higher scores for this dimension mean that the individual experiences greater difficulty articulating emotions, as well as the fluctuation in emotional experiencing competence, where higher scores reflect greater emotional instability; the correlation values for these two dimensions are thus inverted. Among the individuals who demonstrate greater levels of trust in the help of others, those who demonstrate more reciprocity and collaboration between partners, less difficulty articulating emotions, more comparative emotional thinking, less emotional instability and fluctuation, more autonomous seeking out of new possibilities and new meaning to experiences, and increased levels of autonomous desire for self-improvement and autonomous judgment, there is a noticeable trend for these individuals to use fewer dysfunctional strategies for coping with stress during process of divorce, using rather more active and functional strategies. At the same time, individuals with higher levels of expression of these emotional competencies also have improved life functioning capacities at their disposal during the process of coping with process of divorce.

6. Discussion

Emotional challenges are inevitable in the process of coping with the circumstances of divorce. The increase in experiencing hurtful affect is not so much the problem; the question is rather how strong is the individual's capacity for functional emotional processing. It is this capacity that enables difficult and distressing emotional responses to transform or change into non-distressing emotional responses that, in turn, do not exacerbate the process of coping with the stressful situation. The developmental level of emotional competence is an important factor that correlates fundamentally with the capacity for emotional processing, as well as with more functional forms of coping with stress and experiencing general life functionality (Cvetek, 2015; Schore, 2003; Siegel, 1999). Our research examined how emotional competency levels correlate with the individual's capacity for coping with the stress of process of divorce as well as with the self-assessed levels of individual problems and strengths. Our hypothesis was that those with lower levels of emotional competency use more dysfunctional coping strategies for coping with the stress of the divorce situation more often, and that they have more difficulties in the realm of individual problems and strengths.

The results confirmed our hypothesis. Those who demonstrated higher levels of emotional competency in the process of coping with the stress of divorce, and consequently also more functional emotional processing capacity, for the most part also applied more active and functional coping strategies. For instance, they demonstrate more active coping strategies and more positive interpretations of circumstances, where - as concerns the correlations among the individual emotional competencies - the strongest correlation is with the competency for autonomous seeking out new possibilities or new meaning to experience (which is founded on having developed appropriate emotional differentiation). Appropriate emotional autonomy and differentiation are reflected in higher states of mental well-being, in the capacity for increased emotional closeness with others, in better self-control and adaptiveness, in lower levels of chronic anxiety, and in fewer psychiatric symptoms as well as lower levels of fear of abandonment (Gharehbaghy, 2011). While in the process of coping with divorce, emotionally autonomous individuals will adapt more quickly, as they will be better able to make planned and judicious choices that are based on well-developed and well-grounded internal beliefs and principles, without really being affected by the pressures or preferences of others. These individuals are more apt to take responsibility for their actions and consequences, with lower tendencies to blame others, or to perceive themselves as victims, or to feel that others are controlling or negatively judgmental of them. They are quicker to seek out active and suitable resolutions and less likely to take on the passive stance of powerlessness (Sheikh, Koolae & Zadeh, 2013). Individuals with higher levels of emotional competency use fewer dysfunctional coping strategies for coping with the stress of divorce. For instance, they display lower levels of behavioural disengagement, and this is reflected in their active and goal-oriented stance to tackling problems (rather than the common form of learned powerlessness). They also demonstrate less self-blame and they are less likely to take all the responsibility and guilt on to themselves.

As regards coping strategies, emotion regulation refers to the aspects concerning the interaction between emotional processes and behavioural responses to a particular stressful situation; such as, how individuals change their emotional experiencing, how they express emotions, and how they influence the contextual factors triggered by these emotions. One can apply either more or less suitable strategies in this process. For instance, emotional repression is the conscious attempt to inhibit the ongoing stream of emotional experiencing (Kashdan, Barrios, Forsyth & Steger, 2006), which in the long run could lead to additional problems. Individuals who are prone to unsuitable or dysfunctional emotional processing develop complex defence mechanisms, their purpose being

to provide protection, albeit unsuitable, from unacceptable and uncontrollable emotions. The result compounds the use of dysfunctional coping strategies that fail to actually help cope with the stress; and furthermore, they do not lead to growth, rather to additional complications (Cohen & Finzi-Dottan, 2013).

This is also related to the results of our research, where we have identified the correlation between experiencing individual problems/strengths and emotional competencies. The results display statistically significant correlations between all individual areas of problems (except for substance abuse) and strengths with the level of emotional competency. A restricted capacity to emotionally process is mostly associated with difficulties with openness of expression, with flexibility in responses and resilience, as well as with the ability to self-accept. For those who are facing a stressful situation, this renders them even more vulnerable. Several studies confirm the interconnectedness of emotional functioning and different forms of personal problems and psychopathologies (Cambell-Sills & Barlow, 2006; Eisenberg, Hofer & Vaughan, 2006; Kring, 2010; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2002; Werner & Gross, 2010). These studies are in line with our conclusion that the problems and strengths measured in our research significantly correlate to emotional competencies. This means that those who have lower levels of emotional competence developed more difficulties in the process of coping with divorce.

In the light of our conclusion that an individual's capacity for coping with the stress of divorce significantly correlates with their functioning level of emotional competence, it would seem important to consider how to help those facing difficult life situations (such as divorce) attain sufficient, and improved psychological capacity and competence for effective coping. The results substantiate that emotional competence significantly correlates with dysfunctional coping strategies for stress as well as with perception of lower levels of one's ability to function generally in life. It thus follows that the individual's capacity, or incapacity, to emotionally process is an important factor in the process of creating problems, maintaining problems or resolving problems during a divorce. The high numbers of divorce and the associated challenges of the divorce process dictate the need for proper professional treatment and aid to families and individuals facing such an experience, who are particularly vulnerable to the development of various forms of psychological problems as well as physical illnesses (Lee et al., 2011; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). There are several forms of assistance and support available. Our results verify the need for approaches that help those facing divorce by also encouraging and developing emotional competencies as well as improving functional emotional processing. This in turn necessitates a deep process and many psychotherapeutic approaches have

proved sufficient for this. Psychotherapy plays a key role in helping individuals obviate the possible emergence of certain dysfunctional elements during the divorce process (Livingston & Bowen, 2006). In the event of divorce, professional psychotherapy helps to reduce the symptoms of depression, anxiety, and also to cope with general stress (Simonič & Rijavec Klobučar, 2017).

While our research did not measure the actual capacity to emotionally process, well-developed emotional competencies are certainly indicative. In the future, it would be useful to supplement the research of correlations between emotional competence, coping strategies, and experiencing strengths and limitations in the field of personal functioning by using measurement instruments aimed at exploring the specific dimensions of the functionality of emotional processing. It would also be helpful to use the instruments used to investigate the effectiveness of the psychotherapeutic treatment of individuals who opt for therapy in the face of divorce. This would provide some insight into the effectiveness of a particular approach towards promoting the development of appropriate emotion regulation capacity as well as into how this is reflected in the individual's functionality and ability to cope with stress.

7. Conclusion

Well-developed emotional competency as well as the development of suitable emotion regulation and responses, prove to be important factors correlating with more effective strategies for coping with stress and improved adaptation to the challenges presented by divorce. Our findings thus join those of other empirical studies and experiences from the clinical practice of working with individuals facing divorce. The circumstantial stress of the situation renders the individual vulnerable and is conducive to a complicated emotional process whereby emotional competency is crucial as ensuing complications tend to hinder the effectiveness of coping with the difficult challenges inherent to the process of divorce. Considering that emotional competence correlates with more functional forms of coping with stress, as well as with fewer individual problems and more strengths, this would seem to present a problem. This is the motivating factor behind our concern with individuals facing divorce, to pay particular attention to these dimensions, which if are appropriate, ultimately prevent possibly devastating consequences, such as extreme conflict between former partners, parenting problems, anxiety and depression, as well as other psychological and physical complications.

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