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PROBLEMS WHILE GROWING UP: PRESENTATION OF THE CASE

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Abstract:

The case study presents a new example of bringing up a child while exerting excessive control and the influence of conjugal problems on a child's problems while growing up. The therapeutic work with the family in the presented example actually means working with the couple and a parallel individual therapeutic work with an adolescent with problems while growing up.

The transcription of the therapeutic dialog is an attempt to thoroughly present the use of external control psychology behaviours in the client's life and important relationships. The therapeutic process is orientated towards the client's replacement of destructive behaviours of external control psychology with a more effective choice theory, which enables him to regain control over his life.

Key words: young people, behavioural problems, individual therapy, partner therapy, psychotherapy, counselling

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Presentation of the case²

Two parents came to a meeting because they were worried about their seventeen-year-old son³. They described their son with a great measure of criticism and judgement, because he "still cannot find himself". They

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² The text has been published with the permission of the clients.

³ The recording was prepared in accordance with the therapeutic modality, of which I, as the author of the article, have a European diploma of psychotherapy, and supervised by a supervisor of reality psychotherapy.

answered the question about their son's good qualities by saying that "he definitely has potential, but he does not realize it". During the conversation, they focused on those "potentials", they talked about a promising basketball career in his elementary school years, about his interests for movies, which were excessive in their opinion. They believed that in the past their son was a "cinophile", but they "successfully saved him" from this obsession.

From the introductory discussion is possible to understand that the behaviour of their son Miha has been deviating for some time now, especially since he started high school, or when he entered his adolescent years, from the (ideal) image that they have in their "parenting" quality world. It seems that the parents, especially the mother, are very frustrated because of the situation in school. In their opinion, Miha should have entered the general high school and then continue his studies at one of the faculties of natural sciences. Miha's school grades were high enough to enrol in graphic school, where he has problems while entering the fourth grade. According to his parents, Miha does not show any interest for school, he also skips classes frequently. He spends little time at home, also at night, he hangs out with his friends a lot. His parents suspect that he smokes "something else" besides cigarettes and that he often gets drunk. They are worried about their son and his future.

The "material" that Miha's parents brought to the meeting within the context of the theory of "illness" shows that Miha is trying to reduce his frustration, using the chosen behaviours, but he has not found a behaviour that is effective enough in order to appease his needs and that would be acceptable for him and his parents. When Miha comes for a session we will talk about learning how to effectively appease his current needs and re-establish a satisfying relationship with his parents and other people. The parents wanted first to come alone, to present their son's problems, but I intend to invite them to the counselling process as well, since I believe that their son's behavioural problems are connected to their conjugal problems.

T: I think you told me a lot about your son. What do you expect from me, according to what you told me?

F (father): We'd like that you take our son for a consultation.

T: I'm, of course, willing to talk with Miha. I'm interested in your expectations.

F: I think that my wife and I have done everything we could. We'd do anything for Miha, he's our only child, but at the moment I don't know what else we could do. We're not a match for this situation, Miha needs

a professional that would help him from this mess. I think he's deep into it.

T: Maybe this would seem a little harsh, but there's no magic wand that would turn your son as you want him to be. The expectations that a professional can "fix" something that has been happening for years are excessive. Besides that, a person can only by himself change his life for the better, with the help of a therapist, of course. However, without the child's and the parents' collaboration, I cannot make changes for the better. I think it's important that we separate this responsibility from the start. Are you ready for that kind of collaboration? This means that you would be actively included in the therapeutic process as well, that you'd participate in the changes, which your son would try to introduce in his life.

M (mother): I want to participate as much as I can. Miha is the most important person in my life.

F: I'm also ready to participate, if Miha will play a fair game and won't do these stupid things behind our backs.

T: The three of us, we do have a certain influence on what Miha will do, but this doesn't mean that he will actually behave as we want him to. He's still the one who decides what kind of behaviours he'll adopt in the future and he'll be the one responsible for it. My work with Miha, depending of course on how much he'll want it, will focus on better choices – on learning how to appease his needs in a more successful way, that is not so threatening to him, and that you would find acceptable as well. The behaviours you use in your relationship with Miha are just as important. They help you build a better relationship and feel more satisfied. During our sessions, we could talk about how you could individually, and together, as a couple, choose new behaviours in your relationship with Miha, and also with each other. What do you think?

M: When you were talking about relationships I was thinking that I haven't felt close to Miha for a long time. As if I don't know my own child anymore. He changed so much. As a mother, I can see that he's unhappy, that despite everything, he is very lonely and I feel bad for him. It also makes me sad that he sees us as enemies when all we do is meant well, since we're his parents!

T: This means that you want to connect more with your son, to be close to him, as you said?

M: Yes, that would mean a lot to me. I want him to know that I still love him and that he can talk to me about his problems.

T: That's what you want. What are your thoughts, sir?

F: Of course, I want us to be more like a family, and not as we are now, but I think that my wife and I, we have already tried everything!

T: If you want, we can take a look at other existing possibilities together. I have in mind mostly new choices regarding choosing various behaviours, as I mentioned before.

F: I don't know what exactly is expected from me, but I'm willing to talk, of course.

T: That's good, however, in order to improve the relationship, you will have to make some changes, we could become aware of them during our sessions. Are you ready for that?

F: I'm ready to find out what more I can do.

T: We've been talking for an hour and a half. I suggest we continue our session next week. Do you agree that we finish for today and to meet again next week?

F and M: We agree.

F: Could we meet next week, same day, same time?

T: Agreed.

During the next session with Miha's parents I intend to get to know their quality world and not just the ideas and wishes they have regarding Miha, but about themselves as well – in their roles of mother, father, partner – and their marriage. I would like to assess the "condition" of their marriage. I think that they use controlling behaviours in the relationship with their son as well as in their relationship with each other. Regarding the objective that they want to attain, I will focus on their actual behaviour in their relationship with Miha and in their own relationship. I will orient them towards a self-evaluation of these behaviours in terms of how successful they actually are, how efficient they are, and for them to find new possibilities together.

T: During our first session, you said that you have already tried numerous approaches to feel better at home. What exactly did you have in mind?

F: As I said the last time, the problems started at the end of elementary school. We stopped him from going to basketball practice because of his bad grades, regardless of the fact that Miha was very fond of this sport. But we didn't yield and made him leave the club.

T: I don't understand the purpose of this.

F: We wanted him to do better at school.

T: Ok, I understand that you made this decision because you wanted to help your son and you believed that it'd help, even though you used an ineffective behaviour. I'd like to know how did Miha react to your decision.

F: I think that that was the turning point. It gave birth to all of his shenanigans.

T: How did they manifest themselves?

F: In form of defiance, disobedience, leaving home, resisting everything we said.

M: I remember that at the time the situation home was very bad. We pushed him, tried different approaches to make him listen to us, but Miha just got more and more crazy.

F: I think that at the time we started taking tranquilizers.

M: Some time later, maybe after a year. I have been taking antidepressants for two years now.

T: As I can understand, you realized that your decision didn't turn out the way you wanted, meaning that Miha didn't start to work harder in school. Actually, the opposite, you realized that you became even more distant and that this decision affected you too. Now, if you take a look back, do you have any idea on how you could have behaved so everyone would have suffered less?

M: I don't know what to say. What my husband said is true. The more we tried, the more Miha went out, and the discords at home just kept increasing.

T: I understand that Miha's reaction to your behaviour surprises you, but in theory we know that the children's needs change when they reach puberty – their need for power, assertion, freedom, they do increase, and the need for belonging, especially to parents, is marginalized. A lot of parents react the same way you did and a lot of them continue this behaviour even when they realize that it doesn't work. It's great that you decided to talk when you realized that your way wasn't working. However, a lot of adolescents, and also adults, would react the same way Miha did, because we're all sensible to punishments, threats... and that doesn't help to maintain a good relationship in any way. Something very important was taken away from Miha. I'm thinking about basketball. I think it was this activity that helped him successfully satisfy his psychic needs. Since you said that he loved basketball, I believe he was very good at it.

F: He had potential, that's what his coach told me.

T: This activity helped Miha experience what we all need – the feeling of being, being successful, important, free, of having fun, he had the possibility to be creative, and besides all that it was a team sport, so he was able to make friends, develop a sense of belonging. Miha's current behaviour, as you described it, shows that he isn't successfully appeasing this needs, moreover, he is trying to appease them in ways that are harmful and non-acceptable for you, otherwise you wouldn't be here. But I'll talk directly with Miha regarding the possibilities to find better choices for him, and we could talk about your choices of how to behave in your relationship with Miha. What do you think?

F: I don't know exactly what choices do you have in mind, but I understand that not letting him play basketball was a bad choice.

T: I believe that you made this decision believing that it would help, that it would change your son's behaviour. I also believe that after that, Miha started to rebel even more, because his attempts to maintain or to regain power, freedom and everything else I mentioned before. At the same time, I think that he let you know clearly enough, that you cannot change him. I'm sure that by choosing these extremely controlling behaviours, you and your son, influenced your mutual misunderstanding one another.

M: Earlier, when you asked me about the situation at home, the first thing I remembered was all the shouting. We shout a lot, all three of us. Maybe we're all trying to enforce our opinions. Speaking of control, Miha experiences it. We tried to control his every step, but it wasn't possible. Even when we tried to limit his curfew he didn't stick by it. He doesn't abide by us!

T: Let's go back to your behaviour, since we said that it's not possible to change Miha's or anyone else's behaviour.

M: Yes, ok. I just wanted to say that my husband and I, we were very hard on him. But it didn't help. We got the opposite, as we're realizing now.

T: Yes, we're talking about that. Coercion, threatening, extorting, buying off, punishing... as parents we use it all when we feel frustrated, when our child doesn't not behave as we want him to, so we use these behaviours in order to control the relationships we have with our loved ones. I remember you say that you didn't feel connected to your son anymore.

M: It's true. I have no idea what the reason can be, but Miha also contributed to the whole situation, it was not just me and my husband.

T: It's not my intention to make you feel guilty. The fact is that you're starting to realize that the situation at home isn't good and you want to change it. But before doing that, it's best to do some self-evaluation about the behaviours you use now, and whether they are effective or not. Miha is using his current choices to regain some control over his life, but unsuccessfully, there's no doubt about it and I'll try to work with him on that.

M: I believe what you're saying, I can see some truth in it. But at the moment I'm very angry at Miha and I find it difficult to accept that my husband and I are responsible for his stupid behaviour.

T: Do you think that you two, as parents, can be responsible for Miha's actions? Can you change his behaviour?

M: No, that's not it.

T: What I believe is that by using the behaviours we talked about earlier we destroy our relationships. And good relationships are necessary for appeasing psychic needs. Through these relationships we can appease our needs. That's why it would be good to work on improving your

mutual relationships. When I talk about relationships I also have in mind your marriage. How do you see your marriage, how satisfying is for you?

F: I don't know what our marriage could have to do with Miha's problems?!

T: We're talking about good relationships with which we appease our needs, which also makes us feel good. And marriage is a very important relationship. I also believe that eventual marital problems can be connected to a child's problems, an adolescent's problems, especially because of the use of controlling behaviours. This is why I'm asking how satisfying your marriage is in your eyes.

F: Our marriage is this... we consensually decided to stay together. We function as average partners, we have a quiet understanding with which we both agree.

M: It's no secret... I think... in a sort of way, we don't talk about it with friends, but we trust you, and I can calmly tell you that my husband has been having an affair with another woman for several years and I don't oppose it. We discussed it, we agree on it and we don't talk about it anymore.

I have some difficulties believing that the wife does not feel frustrated in her marriage. It is difficult to imagine any woman, whose image of her marriage in her quality world would represent her partner having a relationship with another woman. In this context, I imagine that she is appeasing one of her needs, maybe an existential one, but on a psychic level — I believe it is about the need of power in sense of concern, control and dependency of her husband from her — she feels to be a "cheated" wife. Regardless of the type of the need, I'm sure that they are both appeasing at least one need in this relationship and that is why they are maintaining their marriage. Consequently, I did not continue posing questions regarding the satisfaction with their marriage.

T: Do you want to make any changes in the relationship with your husband?

M: No, I don't want to talk about our marriage. We're here because of Miha.

T: What do you want regarding the relationship with your wife?

F: I want it to remain as it is. I agree that we should talk about Miha, I want to participate fully, but I also want the relationship between me and my wife to remain as it is.

T: Ok, I respect your decision. You wanted me to talk to Miha, that's why I'm inviting you to keep coming back for other session. It would be good to regularly examine the effectiveness of the new behaviours, the satisfaction with the relationship... what do you think?

M: These sessions are good for me. I'd like to come back.

F: Me too. I agree to meet at a regular term.

By asking them about their marriage and with the hypothesis of their conjugal problems influencing their child's problems, I risked that they would feel offended and that they would cease with the sessions, by which they would lose the possibility to improve their son's life. Nevertheless, they still want to continue with our sessions, which means that they realized that our meetings are good for them. However, they "overlooked" the fact that Miha's problems are connected to their controlling behaviours, which destroyed their marriage as well. In spite of the visible symptomatic of a dissatisfying marriage (taking antidepressants, extra conjugal relationships, etc.) they did not want to work on improving their relationship, although I believe that if they successfully change their controlling behaviours, it will reflect on and improve all of their relationships.

The two of them cannot picture having a more satisfying role in their partnership, but they do not want to abandon their role of parents, in fact they want to have a better relationship with their son, which I find to be very important for Miha and their mental health. In their relationship with the child, which took the form of a "pathologic" triangle (victim-persecutor-saviour), they had a concordant approach, and we never faced a possible discordant regarding the educational approach.

Miha's parents have been coming regularly to our sessions for some months and at the same time I have been having sessions with Miha. They had some difficulties giving up behaviours of external control psychology despite realizing that "house detention" they used in the past "does not work anymore", that it lost its power, and had a damaging influence on their relationships. With the help of these meetings, they are realizing that their relationship with their son is more important than some successes, and that precisely through this relationship, when connecting with their son, they can do more. A minimal communication and connection with his parents enhance the possibilities of Miha starting to do his school work and giving up damaging behaviours. This is why we moved from Miha's problematic to a form of behaviour that would help them get closer to their son – what can they do to improve their relationship with him.

In the following extract I expose a part of their learning process about the choice theory from the conversation we have had about Miha when he made an important decision for him, although it differed from the images in his parents' quality world regarding his future. Despite the fact that his parents learned about the choice theory and the importance of

good relationships, their first and basic belief about their son's news still originated from external control psychology.

F: You know, two days ago, our son really shocked us. We went together to a basketball game, like we discussed here, and we had a great time. Then he went out with his friends and later that day he presented us his latest news. I thought he was high but he looked very serious, almost like an adult, as he explained that he wants to move to another country.

T: What happened then?

F: My wife panicked and started yelling and waving her arms around, then pleading him...

T: What about you?

F: I became again the old Marko, I started yelling that he finally lost his mind, what on earth did he smoke and what else would he do to get on our nerves.

T: What did you want to achieve that way?

F: To stop him before making the biggest mistake of his life.

T: In six months Miha will be an adult. What will you do then?

F: I know that I can't actually prevent him from living his life. But I never expected something like that! And then he continued to develop his idea of going to Australia, to a ranch after finishing the third year of high school or in six months or so. My God!

T: So, he intends to finish this year?

F: Yes, he wants to finish the school year, as it seems now.

T: I think it's great news.

F: It is. We're happy about it. But the ranch, I think...

T: What is the problem, the ranch or going abroad?

F: Both.

M: Yes, both.

T: I'm not so sure that I understand what it is that you find so unacceptable. Young people have been searching for better opportunities abroad for quite some time now.

F: That's true, but with a degree in his pocket and not without even finishing high school. It's difficult to find a good job abroad.

T: Despite what you think, is there a possibility for you to express some interest in his idea, maybe supporting him in this plan?

M: I understand that this is how we should have acted then, but at the time I really couldn't bring myself to it.

T: Perhaps during your next discussion you could focus on your relationship?

M: I could ask him more about his plan, because it didn't seem very concrete, but I still don't agree with his idea.

T: I assume Miha didn't ask you for your permission to go.

M: Of course not, he just presented the idea with confidence, without any doubts of it.

T: Do you remember when we talked about attempts of control and the fact that they just increase the rebellion?

F: Yes. So, is there a greater chance of him doing that if we try to prevent him from going?

T: Maybe. I'm wondering whether Miha just needs more freedom and he's going to search for it abroad, or he's just trying to control you – what more can he do and have you two still accepting, loving him.

F: I had the feeling that he was just testing our self-control as well.

M: What should we do?

T: Yes, what can you do without jeopardizing the relationship with him? You worked a lot just to start talking with him again and I think you don't want to lose that.

M: Of course not. We could talk more calmly, tell him that we worry about him, that we want him to finish his studies first and then decide on his future. Maybe also tell him we know that we can't prevent him from carrying out his plan. What we discussed so far.

T: Yes, I think it's very good. To explain to Miha what are your thoughts, that behind all the yelling, blaming and threats lies your distress, worry about how he'll get around in a foreign country, his unfinished studies, insufficient knowledge of a foreign language...

F: I think we'll make him powerless. He expected us to get angry and try to prevent him from going. I think that our acceptance would completely surprise him.

T: It could happen. However, you also have to bear in mind that he may carry out his plan. What in this case? Could you accept that?

F: Maybe it's not so bad for him to experience being alone in a foreign country. He may start to appreciate more what he has at home.

T: He'll definitely have to take responsibility for his decision.

M: Yes, I think our reaction was too choleric. Depends on how serious he really is. Well, maybe he'll tell you too about his plans.

We slowly concluded the meeting. I could have found out more, what kind of future they want for their son, how they could support him in his ideas, which obviously became more creative, etc. But Miha's idea did not bring anything concrete, so I suppose that it was really an attempt to regain power, a message for his parents, that he will create his future according to his ideas.

During the therapeutic process, Miha's parents were presented with the choice and behaviour theory that could help them substitute external control psychology, which has been destroying their marriage and the family's happiness for some years. Regardless of Miha's behaviour, they

try to express support, acceptance, love, encourage him, help him, negotiate with him, etc., everything they were doing in the past, before becoming “yellers”, who have mistakenly believed that with coercion and punishments they could change one another. They are learning and getting to know, step by step, the freedom that the choice theory brings them.

Miha also came to a session. He tried to establish control over me and himself with an inaccessible pose and a scornful expression. His body language let me know that he believed he was there because “others wanted so”. He believed himself to be an involuntary client who has no choice and does only what others order him to do. Therefore, my first task was to establish a relationship, which would not include interrogation, blaming, slamming and other destructive behaviours, and would help Miha realize that he came to the meeting for himself. Without this realization, I do not believe that Miha would come back in the future.

The precondition to reach successful results, I realize, is that Miha is not affected by controlling behaviours, as he was at home, and certainly within the educational system, when he had to “go and have a talk”. I have to make sure that he feels good during our session so, as stated by the choice theory, he will be able to appease his needs with success. According to the meetings I had with his parents, I believe that it would be a good idea to make Miha feel some belonging, acceptance and also respect.

T: Hello. Is it ok if we are on first name basis?

K: Yes, no problem.

T: Was it difficult to get here?

K: Not really. I know this part of the town and I didn't have any problems. Also, my parents told me where you are.

T: What were you thinking on your way here? What were your thoughts?

K: Ha ha. I was thinking, yes. That I want it to be over soon.

T: Anything else maybe?

K: When they would stop taking me around, to professionals!

T: I don't see the two of them getting you here. Didn't you come alone?

K: Ha ha. I come alone, but they sent me.

T: You could have chosen not to come.

K: I could not have come, but I don't feel like listening to their lectures, that's why I'm here.

T: If I understand, you had to choose between not coming here and listening to your parents' lecture, and coming here?

K: Something like that, yes.

T: Perhaps for starters we could talk about expectations, mines and yours, regarding our sessions. I wanted to tell you that... as you know, your parents have been coming here for sessions. I would like to assure you that everything we will talk about will stay here, between us. I will tell your parents only about things that could endanger your life. In this case, I'm obliged to do that. For anything else that I'd like to tell your parents, I'll ask your permission first, or I'll advise you to talk to them. Is that ok with you?

K: It seems fair. But it wouldn't bother me if you told them something. But I was asking myself, also while coming here, before when you asked me... I'd like to know what my parents said about me.

T: Your parents presented the situation at home, as they see and feel it. They also described your behaviours, but we focused our discussion on them and their behaviours, because they expressed the desire to get more along with you.

K: I noticed that they made more of an effort with me. They seem ridiculous. The other day I asked them where had they been until now! Did they really had to come here to be able to see me?! My father never had time for me, others have always been more important to him, work was also more important. My mother made sure that everything at home was nice. I remember that she always read to me in the evenings, when I was in elementary school she studied with me. But she mainly followed dad.

T: There is still a possibility for you all to get along together.

K: Maybe. But what do they think ...

T: What worries you about their opinion?

K: Nothing worries me, but they have their truth and I have mine.

T: You'll have the possibility to present how you see and experience these situations. Do you want that?

K: I can also tell you something about them. Everything about me bothers them – how I dress, talk, my friends, the kind of music I listen to, and let's not even mention school.

T: We're not here to talk about each other. It's not about that. We won't talk about your parents, but about you, how you see yourself, experience things, weather you are satisfied with yourself, with your behaviour, with the relationships that are important to you... I think these questions are important for our sessions. But I still don't know what you expect from our meetings, except that they would end as soon as possible (laugh).

K: (laugh) I don't have any expectations. I didn't think about it. All that was more of an obligation than a desire to work on myself.

T: So, for our next session, could you think about what you want for yourself, what do you want to change, what do you want to work on, if you are still willing to come to meetings, of course.

K: I could come. I'll think about something I'd like to talk to.

T: Ok. If you won't be able to come, or you won't want to come, please tell me in advance.

K: Ok.

I purposely ended our conversation regarding his next visit in a concise and maybe a little casual way – I did not let him control me and he got the message that he alone decides about coming to sessions and that he is the only one responsible for his decision. I also gave him time to think about the things he was not ready for.

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In our introductory session, through which we mostly tried to establish a connection, as presented here, Miha started thinking about himself, his desires and needs. Until now his thoughts have been focused on his parents, their expectations and desires in the relationship with him. This is why he came to me. This is the client's explanation, positioning himself in the role of victim, who has no influence on his life and by that he avoids the responsibility for his own actions. Miha will be confronted with that during the discussion about his current behaviour.

Even if he would not have expressed the desire to tell his story, I had no intention of including what his parents had told me about him in our session. I want to get to know Miha's quality world, his desires and needs, the current behaviours he uses to attain his personal goals and orient him towards a self-evaluation of the efficacy of these behaviours.

...

T: Miha, for today we agreed to talk about your desires and needs, about the goals you want to reach.

K: I thought a little about this, yes. Talking about school, high school, I know I'll finish it, because I want to.

T: How about skipping the classes?

K: I skip just the number of classes I know I can. I study just enough to pass the school year.

T: It seems that you have enough control over that matter. How satisfied are you with the final result?

K: I'm satisfied, I don't need more.

T: Enough for what? What plans do you have, how do you see your professional career?

K: For me, high school is enough, I don't need more. The two of them can have their faculties... I'd like to work with computers, graphic design. That's it. I don't have any problems with that, they do because they think that I have to be something extra and super, as their friends' children. I'm completely satisfied with my current achievements. To me freedom is more important than success.

This is the source of conflicts in Miha's family – the appeasing of Miha's exceptional need for freedom and power and his parents' exceptional need for power and importance. I believe the key question in order for them all to understand each other is how would Miha keep or regain his freedom and his parents the importance, while maintaining a good relationship.

T: How do you imagine freedom in your relationship?

K: That they'd let me breathe, accept me and that I wouldn't have to constantly listen to them, about what, how... should I behave.

T: You're thinking about your parents?

K: Them, yes.

T: Does this bad relationship help you achieve your desired freedom?

K: They bother me for some time, then they give up and I finally have peace.

T: How do you feel at home?

K: Miserable, but I got used to it, it's been like that for a few years now.

T: Do you want to get along with your parents?

K: Why can't they accept me as I am?! What's wrong with me?! Am I not good enough for them?!

T: I think you're a nice boy, I don't know why there should be anything wrong with you. Everyone has different ideas of how someone else should behave, what should he do in his life. We do that especially to people that we love, who are important to us. It seems that your parents have some defined ideas about you and your future. When there's such deviation, you have to talk, to make compromises that are acceptable to both sides. Are you ready to negotiate with them in order to gain your freedom?

K: How would that look?

T: As you say, you gain your freedom by getting into a conflict with them, but afterwards you feel bad at home. Could you get your freedom in another way – one that would make you keep a good relationship with them? Do you want that?

K: The situation at home seems much more complicated to me.

T: Do you have something special in mind?

K: Yes, I don't know how honest my parents had been, because they behave like no one alive knows, but usually everyone does know. Well, in our case the wife also knows. And you can't believe it, my mother puts up with it calmly.

T: Are you thinking about your father's relationship with another woman?

K: Oh, they've told you. It's a pretty big thing, isn't it?!

T: It's their decision. I understand that despite that, they're still satisfied with their marriage. They know what it is that keeps the marriage alive.

I'd like to ask you how important this situation within their relationship is for you. How does it influence the relationship you have with them, or you personally?

K: His behaviour bothers me. It's a little easier because I know my mother is ok, as well as she could be. But his behaviour really bothers me. In the past, when we occasionally went to see a game together, I felt some warmth between us at moments, but in the same moment I realized that he really was a pig for doing that to my mum.

T: I believe that he's doing that for him and not to hurt your mother. But it probably is, no matter how we look at it, painful for all of you. Children often feel guilty for what's happening to their parents' marriage, which is, of course, completely unjustifiable. A marriage is the adults' responsibility, not the children's. Do you feel guilty sometimes? You seem angry.

K: I'm angry at him. I never actually said that partly may be my fault, but maybe subconsciously I feel sort of a guilt. Sometimes they had fights because of me, but now they seem more unified.

T: Why do you think that is so?

K: Maybe they're worried about me.

T: It's normal that a child with a "problematic" behaviour gains the parents' attention. The parents start to focus actively together on him. This also tells you, that you mean a lot to them. Even today. Would you like to talk to them about their relationship? What would it mean to you? Would you feel better?

K: I don't know. The current situation at home is too difficult.

T: Perhaps that could be an opportunity to get closer and realize that you could get along despite the choices that aren't optimal for all.

K: I'll see. I have to think and decide if I even want to deal with that.

T: Ok. Decide in accordance with the way to better your relationship with them. If we go back to your freedom... are you prepared to achieve it in another way?

K: I don't know, I don't have a real idea of what I could do differently. I am speaking to them currently. I haven't for some time in the past, because we always ended up discussing the same old stories about school, and the only way I could have my peace was by staying silent, by not communicating with them.

[...]

Miha is exerting a form of control over his parents by rebelling and not listening, but also by ignoring them, not giving them any attention or not communicating with them. This harsh behaviour towards them is not a solution for the loss of freedom and acceptance. I will focus the conversation with Miha on searching for less painful ways of appeasing his needs, especially the need for freedom.

[...]

T: How do you see yourself in this relationship? Who's responsible for the relationship?

K: I think all of us are, but I don't know if I have any need for this.

T: It depends on what you want. If you don't want to remain in this relationship, or you don't have any intention to improve it, no one can force you to do so. You decide what kind of relationships you'll have with other people. But your satisfaction depends on that. We can appease our psychic needs only through relationships we have with other people. You mentioned your need for freedom, belonging, acceptance, consideration, respect ...

K: I don't know what to say. Hanging out with my friends means a lot to me.

T: I believe you. You are in a phase where you find it easier to appease the needs I mentioned before through the relationships you have with your friends, because you all have similar aspirations. Your parents want something else for you, and for you not to skip school and stay out with your friends. I think it's normal that your friends are important to you, and these good relationships with them must mean a lot to you ...

K: They do, yes. Especially because there's no yelling and no one is telling me what to do. We listen to music, we talk, we feel good.

Miha is trying to get some satisfaction through social activities which include other people and demand from him the ability to maintain good relationships. I think this is good – he is not lonely and miserable, he is appeasing his needs through the relationships with his peers. He may have withheld some activities but I did not want to press further, because it would seem like an interrogation, which would not help. I continued by evaluating the relationships at home and searching for better choices. If Miha will not realize the importance of good relationships and his role in them – regardless of his parents' behaviour – there will not be any change.

T: Yes. Probably, the situation at home hasn't always been the same as today. What was it like when you still felt good at home?

K: The images I have are a little faded. I always told them everything, they wanted to know everything. The best memories I have are about the basketball matches. They always came to see and cheer for me, and afterwards we went out for pizza.

T: What are the behaviours you used at the time that helped you get closer to your parents? Or maybe even better, what types of behaviour in your friendships help you today to maintain good relationships?

K: It's different with friends, more carefree. Whatever I say is OK. But with them... When I was younger they could buy me with anything. Now things are different.

T: We're talking about the relationship, the behaviours that could help you get close again. What would it mean to you to get along with them again?

K: Maybe I'll be calmer inside or more satisfied with myself.

T: What can you do now to achieve peace and satisfaction?

K: I don't know if I'm even ready to do anything, I'm not sure that I even want to be closer to them.

T: You say that you don't feel good at home.

K: I don't.

T: And you want to feel more peaceful, satisfied. Are you willing to change anything?

K: What could I do?

T: You mean, how could you get closer with your parents?

K: I don't like that idea too much.

T: Could you obtain what you want in any other way?

K: I think I'm not ready. I don't feel like working on that.

T: What are you willing to work on? What do you think is important?

K: Only that I leave the house as soon as possible.

I dare to say that Miha's family has been divided by the criticism they used to change one another, to try to control their lives. This explicitly destructive behaviour brought them only division and alienation.

Actually, Miha cares a lot about school. He intends to finish the school year and until now he never had to repeat a year. This calculation is also Miha's form of exerting control over his parents. He knows exactly how much his school achievements mean to them, and that his attitude towards school bothers and worries them. He appeases his need for power and freedom by leaving them in the dark about his school grades until the last moment. But Miha believes in himself, in his capacities and potential to be successful (enough) in school.

Miha's parents used the control theory for their son's education. They had and still have specific images about their child, and their efforts, or in other words constraints, were focused on him achieving these images. Miha's self-destructive behaviour is his way of expressing the disagreement with his parents' desires – rebelliousness. Miha started to distance himself from his parents, he started appeasing his need for belonging and power with his "gang" and substance abuse. In Glasser's opinion, the behaviours he chose are typical for children with parents who did not take enough time for discovering what their child really wants and to negotiate about these differences when they present themselves.

It is evident that the parents did a lot of things for him, for Miha. When they were not willing to do that anymore, they replaced for him with to him and tried to make Miha a better student through yelling and threats. The control had its price. Miha stopped feeling good in the presence of his parents, their image in his quality world started to fade.

I believe Miha's creative behaviour is connected to the relationship he has with his parents, and that the improvement of this relationship is essential for him being satisfied with his life. This is why I focused on the aspect, which Miha has not yet recognized as important for his wellbeing. It is true that his parents jeopardized their presence in Miha's quality world by punishing, insulting and underestimating him. Regardless of the type of behaviour, the parents choose, in their relationship with Miha, to always be present in his quality world and Miha in theirs.

T: Do you want me to invite you parents to our next session and talk all together about your desires for the future?

K: No, I don't want to. I won't be here.

T: Why's that?

K: I was thinking about leaving the house, to be away from them.

T: That's what I understood. Do you intend to talk to them about it?

K: Not here. I'll let them know in due time.

T: Can I help you with that? How did you imagine an independent life?

K: I thought about it. Soon I'll be eighteen and I'd like to live alone.

T: What would that give you?

K: A feeling of freedom.

T: What are the real possibilities of you living alone? Realistically speaking, when could that happen?

K: Probably not so soon.

T: So, before you move out a lot of time will pass. Do you intend to spend this time not feeling good at home? This could go on for some time.

K: It depends. If they'd "try harder" at home, the possibilities are good. I don't know if they would do that. They would probably try to negotiate that over my studies.

T: Would you negotiate that with them?

K: I would. But it depends on how far they're willing to go.

T: How could this calculation influence your relationship with them?

K: Probably not so promisingly.

T: Since we're talking about calculations... I believe that your path towards independence would be much easier if you'd have a good relationship with your parents.

K: You think?

T: Parents that have good relationships with their children are usually more supportive. How probable you think it to be that your parents will help you financially to gain your independence if you aren't willing to do anything to better your relationship?

K: We're talking now, so I could ask them.

T: Aha, a better relationship makes it possible for you to talk with them about it. What is more convenient for you, to take care of your finances all by yourself, or to develop a relationship with them and consequently receive some financial support?

K: I understand what you're trying to tell me. I have to think about it.

[...]

At the end of the session Miha thanked me and expressed the desire not to come to any more sessions. He agreed on the suggestion about leaving the "option" to come again, if he wanted to. We decided that he would be the one informing his parents about the decision.

It is possible to recognise small changes in Miha's behaviour (communication with the parents, willingness to negotiate, learning to accept others' behaviours, thinking about his future, etc.). He is keeping some ineffective and damaging choices, he is not ready to turn them into positive ones. He is using some excuses and one of them may be his father's affair.

In his childhood, Miha did not have enough opportunities to create images that would help him achieve a sense of wellbeing and create a quality life. He would learn about taking an effective control over his life from his parents if they would do more things together, if they would substitute for him and to him with with him and by doing that, help him learn about independency and responsibility, which he needs as an adult. The roots of the problem are the parents' exactly defined images about what kind of an adult "their" Miha should become. The parents are now easing on their images and would be satisfied if Miha would just finish graphic design school and stop harming his health. Nonetheless, the period of a child's education through discipline (not punishments), that would help him to keep some control, is already over. Miha is thinking about an independent life, but he is not equipped for that. This may be the part of his life where he could start taking some responsibilities for, start to negotiate and discuss with his parents. It is his decision.

We did not get the chance to make some plans with Miha. When he reached the point where he would have to do something, make some changes in his life, which demand a more active role from his part, he was not willing to do any of that and he seemingly devalued the whole

situation. Perhaps, simply put, Miha is not unhappy enough, maybe he is rebelling just because the “help process” was initiated by his parents and not him. Although Miha is not coming to any more sessions, his parents decided, despite his decision, to continue with the sessions with me.

Final statements and interpretation

The construct of external control is typical for the parents-children relationships and for relationships between two partners. These are relationships that represent an important figure in a person’s world of qualities and to which great expectations are tied. The clients tried to attain these expectations with external control, in the context of universal, i.e. behavioural psychology, all to the realization that internal control is the only one possible, because people are internally (intrinsically) motivated beings, so no external motivational factor, stimulus is effective in a long term. Furthermore, the ethnographic material used in this article also proves that forced and controlling actions are inevitably destructive for a person and his relationships.

The socially acceptable and tolerated aggressive behaviour, characteristic of a general culture, remains a fixed educational pattern. Punishment and the use of the three Cs (criticism, correction, coercion) are the most common behaviours that the parents chose in their relationship with a child. Control psychology behaviours give children the feeling of being controlled, suppressed and slowed down, and stimulate the development of rebelliousness and self-criticism (Primason, 2004: 35). Even among modern education approaches, which are still based on two key tools for managing others – punishment and reward – the external control psychology behaviours are not recognized as unwanted and damaging. The controlling behaviours in school and the domestic sphere are destroying personal relationships with destructive behaviours, and are preventing individuals from successfully appeasing their psychic needs, which manifest in the so-called problematic behaviours of young people.

The reason why we perceive a great part of reality (life situations) differently than others is in our personal world, in the construct of our quality world (Glasser), which belongs to each individual, and in the construct of individual differences. The individual world, which everyone starts to create soon after birth and continues to do so all their life, is composed by specific images, figures, specific forms of appeasing the basic needs to which we strive our whole lives. This world includes the people we love, the things we like to experience and the ideas or belief systems that regulate most of our behaviour. The presented therapeutic

processes take into consideration the fact that, besides biological differences and different environments in which individuals live, our personal development is strongly influenced by individual behavioural choices, that people with different biological endowment and different environments, choose. With that, individuals develop specific quality worlds which again influence the diversity of people (Lojk, 1999: 19). An individual's mental health is directly linked to his personal, individual world. He reaches his well-being when a choice in the real world is close to the image from his quality world, the greater the deviation of the real image from the desired one, the greater is a person's level of frustration. He tries to reduce the frustration by choosing behaviours, which according to Glasser, are always holistic and intentional, regardless of their expedience or destructiveness (Glasser, 1998: 55).

The choice theory defines the construct of holistic behaviour as a simultaneous activity of four components: activity, thinking, feeling and physiology (ibid: 80). Although by choosing the holistic behaviour all four components still function, a person has a direct control over his activities and his thinking, while feeling and physiology depend on the two of them (ibid: 81–82). That is why the holistic behaviour (mentally and physically), even if unusual and pathological, of a disease (except when it is caused by a proved organic pathology) in the organismic sense is always intentional (Lojk and Lojk, 2011: 313). The integrity of a behaviour, when the change in one component – especially the key change of a belief – represents the change of the holistic behaviour, is thoroughly described in the therapeutic process recordings.

The explanation that people are responding beings is the basis of the external control psychology, as Glasser names a group of destructive behaviours, based on the false belief that it is possible to control another person's behaviour. With the mass use of traditional psychology, Glasser connects numerous unhappy relationships and of course persons, who cannot satisfy their basic needs in unsatisfying relationships. In opposition to the external control theory, the internal control theory or the theory of personal freedom (Glasser) asserts that a man consciously chooses his most complex behaviour connected to a personal system of values (images in the quality world). Consequently, he can also choose connective behaviours that enable him to establish and maintain satisfying relationships within which he will be able to appease more successfully his psychical needs.

The client's dissatisfaction originates from his comprehension that other people or external circumstances cause him suffering, which is why he perceives himself as a victim, without any power of influence to make better choices. The client tries to establish control over his life, by

changing other persons' behaviour even when they are not willing to do so. The client tries to change a person's behaviour and adapt it to his desires and needs through behaviours like criticizing, accusing, complaining, whining, bribing, extorting, threatening, punishing, etc., the sort of behaviours that cannot make a person change his behaviour and could have a destructive effect on the relationship.

The therapeutic process in the reality therapy implies a self-estimation of the disharmony between the client's words and his actions, a self-estimation of the connection between his actions and their consequences, (self) estimation, (self-) examining of the client with the therapist's support, how his convictions and his actions prove to be effective in practice within relationships, in which he lives, judgment and self-judgment of not knowing new and different ways of behaviour that the choice theory offers. The help process is focused on learning how to substitute the external control psychology by using the more effective choice theory. In the reality therapy the responsibility is clearly delineated and it is not identified by other's actions, but by what we are prepared to do by ourselves within our roles, to approach, to offer as much choices as possible. The choice is made by the individual autonomously and so he is responsible for it. In this context, he is also responsible for taking over once again the control over his life.⁴

Regarding the 'curative' theory, the reality therapy with a constructive and systematic theoretical background certainly does not have a universal method of guiding the therapeutic process, but it originates from a defined structure that is based on an authentic relationship between the therapist and the client. The therapist, working with the client, tracks axioms of the choice therapy: that we are not externally motivated, but internally, that all the important behaviours are chosen, that we are responsible for our behaviour and that there are still plenty of possible solutions. During the discussion, the therapist shifts the client's attention from the past to the present, from others to himself (we cannot control other persons' behaviour, but we can control ours), from circumstances to his own behaviour, from emotions and physiology to actions and thinking, to behavioural components, which we control directly – in the way of changing what he wants (the changing of images into the quality world) and/or changing what he does (actual holistic behaviour).

In the choice theory terminology, an effective control means that with our behaviour we are appeasing the images of our quality world in a satisfying way.

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