

Abstract

This heuristic study explored the experience of parental divorce in childhood and the impact of this experience on the therapeutic relationship in Gestalt psychotherapy. A critical literature review was carried out that particularly focused on potential meanings of the divorce experience for adult relationships. The lack of research on long-term impacts of divorce and the absence of research on the impact of divorce on the therapeutic relationship calls for further research.

The unfinished business (Perls et al, 1994) from parental divorce in childhood that emerged from meeting with four participants and engaging with the heuristic process included a deep sense of loss and feeling abandoned, shame (Kaufmann, 1992) from lack of support and loyalty conflicts. The impact on the therapeutic relationship was characterised by lack of trust, loyalty conflicts and a distinct sensitivity around endings. There was a need for a consistent and contact-full relationship over time. The study highlights the meanings of parental divorce for adult children of divorce and the importance of trust as an ethical dimension of the therapeutic relationship for this client group (Fuhr, 1993).