

Karolina Skarbak-Jaskólska
ORCID: 0000-0002-0090-139X
The Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw

Małgorzata Kierzkowska
ORCID: 0000-0001-8288-1988
The Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw

Family Relationships and Parenting Dynamics in Blended Families

Relacje rodzinne i oddziaływania wychowawcze
w badanych rodzinach patchworkowych

ABSTRACT

The main objective of this pilot study was to learn about family relationships and parenting dynamics in blended families from the perspective of individual members. Previous research on blended families has typically focused on various aspects of their functioning from the viewpoint of selected family members. However, there is a lack of studies that cover all members of blended families and examine different issues from a systemic perspective.

This study was carried out using a qualitative research strategy based on an interpretive paradigm, employing the case study method. Five blended families were included in the research, and methodological triangulation was applied. The study provides a detailed description of family relationships in the sampled blended families in terms of structure, bonds, and parenting dynamics, within the context of parental attitudes and competencies, as well as resources for coping with the challenges of family life. Blended families with a longer

KEYWORDS

blended family, family relationships, parenting process

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

rodzina patchworkowa, relacje rodzinne, proces wychowania

SPI Vol. 27, 2024/3
e-ISSN 2450-5366

DOI: 10.12775/SPI.2024.3.001
Nadesłano: 19.06.2023
Zaakceptowano: 16.07.2024

shared history demonstrate better functioning principles, more effective communication techniques, and greater balance in terms of cohesion and flexibility.

ABSTRAKT

Głównym celem badania pilotażowego było poznanie relacji rodzinnych i oddziaływań wychowawczych w badanych rodzinach patchworkowych z perspektywy poszczególnych członków tych złożonych systemów.

Badania nad rodzinami patchworkowymi koncentrowały się do tej pory na różnych aspektach ich funkcjonowania z perspektywy wybranych członków tychże systemów rodzinnych. Brakuje jednak badań, które obejmowałyby wszystkich członków rodzin patchworkowych i analizowały różne kwestie z perspektywy systemowej.

Badanie przeprowadzono z zastosowaniem jakościowej strategii badawczej opartej na paradygmacie interpretatywnym, wykorzystując metodę indywidualnych przypadków. Badaniem objęto pięć rodzin patchworkowych. Zastosowano triangulację metod badawczych.

Badanie pozwoliło opisać relacje rodzinne w badanych rodzinach patchworkowych pod względem struktury, więzi i oddziaływań wychowawczych w kontekście postaw i kompetencji rodzicielskich, zasobów w radzeniu sobie z wyzwaniami życia rodzinnego.

Badane rodziny patchworkowe z dłuższą historią wspólnych doświadczeń wypracowały lepsze zasady funkcjonowania, skuteczniejsze techniki komunikacji i były bardziej zrównoważone pod względem spójności i elastyczności.

Introduction

The persistently high divorce rates, remarriage and cohabitation relationships observed in many countries around the world, including Poland, have resulted in the stepfamily becoming an increasingly common form of family life organization. In the Polish literature, it is also referred to as a multi-family, or a patchwork family (Lewandowska-Walter 2014; Burkacka 2017). This metaphorical term fully captures the hybrid nature of this family system, which is created by a couple of adults, and at least one of them has a child or children from a previous relationship. Children are the element

crucial for the formation of the family puzzle (Ganong, Coleman 2017; Eichelberger, Gutek 2017). Families of this type are extremely diverse structurally, since the siblings may be related biologically, through only one parent, or unrelated but forming a family through their parents' new relationship. The biological parent, who functions outside the primary family system on a daily basis, is also part of this complex family puzzle. This expanded system introduces changes in the kinship regulation that are necessitated by the situation prevailing in the family. New boundaries need to be set, establishing who will be part of the new family and who will be outside it. In this sense, family becomes a volatile concept that can encompass a wide range of people who are not connected by blood ties, but who are bound by affection and perceive themselves as relatives. Thus, stepfamilies are socially constructed (Sanner, Ganong, Coleman 2021). Patricia Papernow (2006) even writes about the "architecture of the stepfamily," whose structure is a challenge for both adults and children.

As the number of stepfamilies goes up, there is growing research interest in various aspects of their functioning. From the 1980s through the 1990s, when there was a significant increase in the number of studies devoted to them (many extremely interesting study reports and publications were printed, e.g. Amato 1994; Cherlin, Furstenberg 1994; Ganong, Coleman 1994; Hetherington, Henderson 1997; Ganong, Coleman, Fine 2000), interest in the subject has not diminished.

Researchers undertaking an empirical exploration of the stepfamilies' functioning are aware of the unique challenges that accompany them, most of which are negotiated through communication. The quality of communication between individual family members plays a pivotal role in the functioning of this complex system (Golish 2003). The molding of relationships in the new family system is also influenced by communication between former spouses (Amato, Rezac 1994; Golish 2003). This aspect was also taken into account in our study.

In recent decades, a great deal of attention in research projects has also been devoted to analyzing the relationship between stepparents and stepchildren (e.g. Coleman, Ganong, Fine 2000; Jensen, Howard 2015; Ganong et al. 2019), which is one of the key tasks the new family system faces. Negative relationships may lead to numerous

tensions and conflicts (Papernow 2013; Ganong et al. 2019). The authors emphasize that the more the stepfather/stepmother is involved in building a good relationship with the stepchild, the higher the overall relationship satisfaction of the partners and the greater the cohesion of the “new” family. Meanwhile, Catherine Cartwright (2005) analyzed the impact of remarriage and living in a stepfamily on the relationship between biological parents and their children from previous relationships. The researcher concludes that parents in stepfamilies may experience significant difficulties in building good relationships with their biological children from previous marriages, and children and adolescents may show difficulties in adjusting to the changes in their new family position (Cartwright 2005, 2008).

The extremely interesting research project “What works” (Sanner et al. 2022) focuses on effective parenting in stepfamilies (i.e. parenting practices that contribute to children’s physical, cognitive and emotional well-being). Caroline Sanner, Lawrence Ganong, Marilyn Coleman and Steven Berkley (2022), based on an analysis of research findings, pointed out that effective parenting in stepfamilies requires careful management of the competing needs of all family members. They emphasized the significance of, *inter alia*, balancing time spent together with time for parent and child only, and the significance of establishing open communication rules between parent and child in some areas and closure in others.

Polish research on stepfamilies has not been as extensive as world-wide research. Very different aspects related to the functioning of stepfamilies have been raised, although each of them analyzed only a certain section of the functioning of selected members of the stepfamily (cf.: Dobkowska 1984; Francuz 1986; Kwak 1990; Dobosz-Sztuba 1992; Kromolicka 1998; Walęcka-Matyja 2009; Jarzębińska 2013; Kołodziej, Przybyła-Basista 2014). Based on them, it can be concluded that there is a lack of studies in Poland that covers all members of the new system and looks at various aspects of their systemic functioning, including defining family relationships and parenting interactions, as well as identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their functioning. These premises were the inspiration for the preparation of this research project and carrying it out with the participation of Polish stepfamilies.

The study was carried out based on a qualitative research strategy in an interpretative paradigm, using the individual case method. The main objective of the pilot study carried out was to find out about family relationships and parenting interactions in stepfamilies studied from the perspective of individual members of these complex systems.¹ Within this overarching objective, the following specific objectives were pursued: (a) to define the relationships in the stepfamilies studied in terms of the structure and emotional relations in the family from the perspective of each family member; (b) assess the parenting interactions in the stepfamily: to identify parental attitudes and to measure parental competence; (c) to describe the parenting practices that may occur in a non-standard family system; (d) to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the parenting interactions occurring in the stepfamily, this includes both biological parents and stepparents.

Methods

Participants

Five stepfamilies were covered by the study. In adherence to the qualitative research paradigm, the sampling was purpose-specific. During the process of selecting families to take part in the study, we tried to differentiate families by length of family existence, form of relationship (married vs. cohabiting), organization of daily life, family structure, number and age of children raised in them. Here is a brief overview of the families that participated in the study (In order to preserve the anonymity of the families surveyed, the names of the individuals surveyed have been coded).

Mr. and Mrs. R's Family

It consists of a married couple, Anita (53) and Robert (50), and three children—Mrs. Anita's two now adult and independent daughters born during her first marriage: Paulina (30) and Patricia (29), and Robert's daughter, 15-year-old Olivia. Anita and Robert got

¹ The results of the research from different perspectives of analysis were also presented in our other publications, e.g. Skarbek, Kierzkowska (2022, 2023).

married in 2009. (This is Anita's third marriage, and Robert's second marriage). Paulina and Patricia's biological father also raised a new family. The daughters do not maintain contact with their biological father and his family. Robert has a 15-year-old daughter, Olivia, born during his first marriage. After the divorce, the girl remained under her mother's care, but was in constant touch with her father. Numerous conflicts between mother and daughter, lack of proper care for the child made Olivia move in to live with her father and Anita upon her own request several years after her parents' divorce. She meets with her mother occasionally, as she declares she does not feel connected to her.

Mr. and Mrs. Z's Family

It consists of the partners, Agatha (38) and Martin (39), Martin's son from his first relationship, Roman (4.5), and Agatha's daughter Susanna (10). The girl's parents separated when she was 5 years old. Susanna lives with her mother on a daily basis, but keeps in touch with her biological father. Agatha and Martin have been in a relationship since 2020. What makes this family different from the other respondents is the relatively short existence of the family as well as the way their daily life is organized. Until now, Martin has lived in France, where he provides alternate care for his son. The decision to raise a new family with Agatha and her daughter required a reorganization of his previous life. The partners agreed that the man would spend interchangeably a week in Poland and a week in France.

Mr. and Mrs. O's Family

Established in 2016, it consists of partners, Elizabeth (37) and Charles (44), and Karol's son from his first marriage, Philip (16). Elizabeth has no biological children. Charles separated from Philip's mother when the boy was 8 years old. Three years later, he started a relationship with Elizabeth. Philip lives with his mother on a daily basis, but according to the arrangements the boy's parents have made, he spends part of his week with her and part with his father and his female partner.

Mr. and Mrs. M's Family

It consists of four people: Eve (42), her partner Adam (44), Eve's son from her first marriage, John (17), and Peter (11), the couple's child. Eve and Adam have been in a relationship since 2007. John's biological father remarried. With his second wife, he has three children. The boy was in touch regularly with his biological father and his family for many years after his parents' divorce; nowadays the meetings are occasional.

Mr. and Mrs. W's Family

It consists of Monica (36 years old) and Mark (43 years old), and Monica's two sons from her first marriage—Jack (14 years old) and Tom (9 years old). Monica and Mark met in 2018 and decided to raise a family in the same year. The boys were 10 and 6 years old at the time. Jack and Tom's biological father is not involved in the process of raising his children and gets in touch with his sons only occasionally. During the interview, Mark emphasized that he dreamt of having a child together with Monica.

Materials

In order to capture the full picture of family relationships and the dynamics of parenting interactions in the stepfamilies under study, we decided to carry out the research process from both descriptive and causal perspectives. In terms of the selection of research methods and techniques, the following were used: in-depth and structured interviews, complemented with free statements from respondents and a sociodemographic survey. In addition, a critical part of the study was to carry out standardized questionnaires with high degrees of reliability and accuracy.

A Study on Family Relations, Structure, Communication and Satisfaction with Family Life

To examine family relationships and relations, the following were used: (a) *the Family Evaluation Scale questionnaire, a Polish adaptation of the FACES-IV questionnaire—Flexibility and Cohesion Evaluation*

Scales by David H. Olson (Margasiński 2013). It is a family survey tool for measuring various aspects of family life, such as cohesion, flexibility, and communication as well as satisfaction with family life. The questionnaire is dedicated to adults and adolescents; (b) the Family Relationship Test (Lewandowska-Walter, Błażek 2018), provides information on such aspects of family functioning as family structure and the quality of relationships between family members. The survey consists of two parts, in the first part we obtain information about the form of relationships, with the help of figures set on a board, the respondent presents the structure of his family, and in the second part about the quality of family relationships based on the messages sent and received. The test is designed to survey children and adolescents; (c) The Family Drawing Test is a projective method designed to study younger children's intra-family relationships. In the first part of the study, the child is asked to make a drawing according to the instructions: "Draw the family you would like to have." Part two comprises an interview with the child carried out on the basis of the drawing made. The drawing is evaluated in terms of its form and content, according to specific criteria (Frydrychowicz 1996).

Study of Parenting Interactions

In order to study parental attitudes and competencies from the perspective of individual members of the family system—biological and stepparents, as well as the children themselves—the following were used: (a) the Parental Attitudes Scale questionnaire (Plopa 2008), which comes in two versions—to assess the parental attitudes of the mother and father as perceived by the adults themselves. The questionnaire addresses five dimensions corresponding to six parental attitudes: accepting-rejecting, over-demanding, autonomous, inconsistent, and over-protective; (b) the Parental Attitudes Scale questionnaire, adolescent version (Plopa 2012), which is used to study parental attitudes, for both mother and father as perceived by adolescents themselves. The adolescent version, similarly to the version for parents, contains five scales corresponding to six parenting attitudes; (c) the *Parental Competence Test* (Matczak, Jaworowska 2017), which consists of 30 tasks composed in the form of short stories describing different parenting situations. Mostly, these are situations of a problematic

nature—related to the child’s troubles, misbehavior, hard-to-satisfy demands, but also referring to events of a positive nature. The short stories are about children of different ages and activities. In addition to the Parental Competence Scale, the tool comprises four additional rooms to assess a parent’s propensity to make mistakes: rigorism, permissiveness, overprotectiveness and helplessness.

Procedure

The study comprised the following stages: (a) conducting mixed interviews—individually with each member of the stepfamily; (b) filling out questionnaires on sociodemographic data; (c) filling out selected standardized questionnaires with individual members of the stepfamily; (d) holding a summary meeting with members of the families participating in the project.

Thanks to thus planned research strategy, it was possible to show the stepfamily system in a multidimensional manner—to bring out the motives, to identify the strengths and weaknesses of family relationships, as well as the potential and limitations of parenting interactions.

Results²

Family Relationships: Cohesion, Flexibility, Structure, Hierarchy, Communication, Satisfaction with Family Life as Perceived by Children and their Parents

When studying relationships in a stepfamily, taking David H. Olson’s (2008, 2013) Circumplex Model as a theoretical framework, it was important to look specifically at two family life dimensions: cohesion and flexibility. Both of these dimensions represent continua and can range in intensity from very weak through moderate to very strong. Family cohesion in this model is defined as “the emotional bond between family members” (Olson 2013: 7).

2 Selected aspects of the presented results and conclusions are also addressed in other articles we have published: Skarbek, Kierzkowska (2022, 2023); Skarbek-Jaskólska, Kierzkowska (2023a, 2023b).

The cohesion level indicators in the family under study include: the emotional closeness between individual family members, the quality of psychological boundaries between them, the presence of coalitions, having friends in common, the amount of time spent together, interests shared, ways of joint relaxation, and the degree to which decisions made are consulted with others in the family. Families that are characterized by proper cohesion reveal more positive emotions in relationships, undertake cooperation, and display cordiality. Three levels of intensity of family cohesion were distinguished: no bounds, balanced cohesion, entanglement (Margasiński 2013: 13). The cohesion dimension is perceived as a continuum from *being unbound* through the area of *balanced cohesion* to *entanglement* at the other end.

The second important dimension for the proper functioning of the family is flexibility, defined as “the quality and degree of changes taking place in the system, regarding leadership, roles played and the rules of mutual relations and resulting negotiations between family members” (Olson 2013: 7). Flexibility of perception is as an important condition for proper relations in the family system. Flexibility level indicators in a family are therefore: the extent to which leadership is assumed, negotiating styles, the roles assumed by family members, and the rules that define the relationships between individual members. There are three levels of flexibility intensity that also form a continuum: from rigidity through balanced flexibility to chaotic (Margasinski 2013).

The Circumplex Model further distinguishes an auxiliary dimension, communication, defined as “the positive communication skills used by a given partnership or family system” (Olson 2013: 7). Although it is an auxiliary dimension, it is at the same time essential, since through communication it is possible to shape a certain modality of all dimensions. Kept at the right level, it allows families to adjust the scopes of flexibility and consistency to meet situational or developmental demands.

Another important variable describing the family appeared in the Circumplex Model, viz. satisfaction with family life. The author of the Model defines it as “the degree to which family members feel happy and fulfilled with one another” (Olson 2004 after Margasinski 2013: 15).

The obtained performance profiles of cohesion and flexibility, as well as communication and perceived satisfaction with family life vary, both within the five stepfamilies under study, but also already within each family, taking into account individual family members' perceptions of the family situation within the aforementioned dimensions—adults and older children. It happened many times that individual members of a particular family had a completely different perception of the functioning of a particular family system than other members of that family. In the perception of individual family members, their family system was perceived as unbalanced, despite the fact that the global index, calculated on the basis the arithmetic means of the results of all family members, indicated that the system was balanced. Such a situation occurred when, in the overall evaluation, the family was balanced in terms of cohesion and flexibility, and only one of the people in the system was not able to find their way in the family reality. In general, it can be seen that most of the families surveyed achieved a balanced profile in terms of cohesion and flexibility, which shows that these families can cope well with daily inconveniences and emotional tension. There were no completely unbalanced families among the stepfamilies surveyed, although some families revealed performance profiles that indicated some problematic nature of the family systems in question.

In the stepfamilies under study, the external boundaries of the different systems are not clear. It happened quite often that individual family members found it difficult to clearly define who belonged to the family. This was particularly accurate for the perception of boundaries and hierarchy in the family as perceived by the children belonging to these complex family systems³. One could also observe a reversed hierarchy in the family. These are phenomena specific to the post-reconstituted families.

In the stepfamilies under study, the relationship with the biological parent living outside the family system in question is often problematic, conflicting. Children in these families often experience internal conflict related to feelings targeted at the biological parent

3 The perspective of the children interviewed has been discussed in more detail in the following articles: Skarbek, Kierzkowska (2023); Skarbek-Jaskólska, Kierzkowska (2023b).

functioning outside the system. Sometimes it happens that the image of the biological parent outside the stepfamily is full of ambivalence in perception or even negative, and the child often cuts themselves off emotionally from such parent. The relationship between the adults in a stepfamily, i.e., the biological parents, adoptive parents and possibly their new partners, affect the actual relationships in the whole system, as well as the image of this reconstituted family in the eyes of the child and their sense of comfort and security. When these relationships are at least correct, children experience fewer conflicts of loyalty vis-a-vis their biological parents.

Parenting Process in The Stepfamilies under Study

Parental Attitudes and Competencies

Based on the results of the questionnaire survey, it can be seen that parents in the stepfamilies under study usually display appropriate and highly desirable parental attitudes towards their children, both the biological parents and the stepparents who function in these families on a daily basis. Typically, both parents (one biological and one stepparent) in these family systems manifest parental attitudes that coincide with each other, which is a very favorable set of attitudes towards children. Unfortunately, it was not possible to study the parental attitudes of biological parents who live outside the family system in question on a daily basis (They did not agree to participate in the study). Instead, it was possible to study children's perceptions of the parental attitudes of both biological and stepparents living within and outside the family system. It happened quite often that there were different perceptions of biological and stepparents in terms of their parental attitudes. Frequently, a stepparent functioning daily in a stepfamily was rated higher in terms of parental attitudes than a biological parent living outside the system in question. Moreover, quite often the perception of parental attitudes from the children's perspective differed from the declared parental attitudes of the parents themselves, who tended to view their parental attitudes in a more favorable light. Nevertheless, it can be noted that the parents from stepfamilies under study were characterized by average or

high parenting competence. No parent received a score indicating low parental competence.

Parenting Practices: Strengths and Weaknesses of Parenting Interactions

In the stepfamilies under study, whose family existence is relatively short, it is the biological parent who has the final say on the upbringing of (their) child/children, with the stepparent providing only support. Often adoptive parents mitigate conflicts between children and the biological parent. Stepparents in families with short existence keep their distance in relation to the parenting efforts of the biological parent. Giving the biological parent feedback on the observed parenting interactions (they can do it from a distance), they optimize the process. They do not respond directly to child-rearing situations but provide information to the biological parent, who is heavily involved emotionally, on what it looks like from their perspective and in this manner, in a way, they influence child-rearing interactions without direct intervention on their own. In the family systems under study that have existed for longer, parenting interactions of both parents (biological and stepparent) undertaken towards children are similar. The difference between “my” child and “your” child becomes blurred. In the family under study, in which the couple also has their joint child, the father, when taking parenting (disciplinary) measures, takes it easy on his biological son. In the families where the relationship between former partners/spouses is correct, then it is the child’s biological parents who make the key decisions about the child’s upbringing, and they do co-parenting. Stepparents are more critical about the parenting interactions of partners who have a child from a previous relationship. They try to discuss and make attempts to change the perceived errors, but the biological parent has the final say in this area. Stepparents believe that the partners’ children (although they are raised together) have few household responsibilities, and if they have any, they are not systematically enforced.

The age of the children at the time of creation of the stepfamily plays a significant role in good functioning of the family and perceived satisfaction with family life. Based on our interviews with the children and psychological tests, we have observed that the younger the children, the more easily they adapt to the new situation.

Stepparents in the case of younger children are more easily involved in their upbringing, are more flexible in their roles of stepfather or stepmother and are more accepted by the children. The surveyed men who chose to have relationships with women who have children from previous relationships came from stepfamilies. Having the experience of functioning in such family systems, they try to avoid the (parenting) mistakes made both by their biological and adoptive parents. As stepfathers, men are more willing and involved in the process of raising stepchildren than women in the role of stepmother.

Conflicts between adults at the background of upbringing in the stepfamilies under study most often concern two issues: children's nutrition—improper diet of the youngest, selective eating, eating disorders, and the division and performance of household chores (unclear clarification of mutual expectations to this extent, lack of constant division of tasks). In the families under study, it is the men who need clearly defined and assigned tasks and responsibilities. Individual family members often have very subjective perception of their responsibilities. Parents are more flexible in the allocation of responsibilities and enforcing the fulfilment of those responsibilities with respect to their biological children. A less flexible approach to this extent applies to parents and adoptive children. Conflict situations between partners in most of the families under study are resolved through negotiations, talks, joint arrangements. Only in one of the stepfamilies surveyed have there been quarrels, loud and heated discussions. Functioning in a stepfamily enables adults to look at their partner's educational interactions from a distance, from a slightly different perspective, to provide feedback, to share insights.

Undertaking joint actions, activities is highly valued by the people under study. In the interviews, the children emphasized how important it is for them to undertake activities together with all members of the newly formed family. They enjoy their time together and play an important role in the integration process—the parents' declarations show that they undertake many joint activities. However, not all children are so enthusiastic about this issue as their parents. The adults under study highly value the peace and sense of security they have achieved in their new relationship and family, which is of considerable importance in terms of creating an optimal family parenting environment for children.

The strength of the stepfamilies under study is open, frank communication that allows for clear expression of needs and mutual expectations. In families where problems, difficulties are discussed and solutions are jointly sought through compromises, conflicts or quarrels occur rarely. For the majority of respondents, decisions concerning the family and individuals are made jointly, and children also participate, although their opinions do not always have decisive power.

Conclusions and Implications

Building a stepfamily is a complex process determined by many interdependent factors. Both for the building of close family relationships and the development of effective parenting interactions in these families, one of the key factors is the length of family existence. The completed project showed that the studied stepfamilies with a longer history of shared experiences had developed better rules of operation and more effective ways of communication, which corresponds to the findings of Mavis E. Hetherington (1993, 1999). The family systems studied where the family members were longer together were also more balanced in terms of consistency and flexibility. In cohesive families, more mutual cordiality and cooperation as well as a positive focus on children in the parenting process could be observed (cf. Plopa 2008). In these families, one of the drivers of the family life stability was a strong relationship between partners. It is the strong relationship between the partners, characterized by commitment and mutual support, that plays a pivotal role in the development of a proper parenting process. The adult couple's presentation of a loving and secure marital bond to their children is one of the basic adaptive tasks of the stepfamily (Hetherington 1999; Golish 2003). Threatened relationship stability between partners implies parenting based on parental competitiveness (Plopa 2008). Under such circumstances there is a danger that children may start to form alliances with the biological parent because their subsystem is already cohesive, making the adoptive parent feel pushed away (Visser, Visser 1993, cited after Golish 2003). Such a trend could be observed in the case of families with a short family existence, where a stable relationship between partners had not developed, and the base for the family

operation was the relationship in the parent-biological child dyad. This is not a favorable situation for the formation of a new family system. According to the findings of Kenneth N. Cissna et al. (1990), the partners under their study, in order to counteract the power imbalance, in addition to stressing the relationship integrity in front of the children, also took care to build up the parental authority of the stepfather. Through such actions, they were able to build a united stance in front of the children, further strengthening the bond between the couple and reducing the likelihood of alliances. Another difficulty in the couple's ability to build a united stance in front of the children is the lack of social recommendations regarding the role of stepfathers as co-parents in such a family system (Schwebel, Fine, Renner 1991). Most studies suggest that the stepfather should act as a friend to the stepchildren while supporting the parents' disciplinary actions (Bray, Harvey 1995; Schwebel et al. 1991 cited after Golish 2003).

Families with more years of living together are more aware of their strengths and weaknesses, have developed more effective strategies for dealing with conflict, are quicker to identify inflammatory issues causing possible disagreements, and more easily decide on compromise solutions. Families with longer existence and, at the same time, those with a more balanced family system evaluate the level of communication in the family better and are more satisfied with functioning in a given family system. In some respects, the results of our study correspond with the findings of Nick Stinnett and John DeFrain (1985), Douglas Kelley and Debra Sequeria (1997) and Tamara D. Golish (2003). Based on their studies, Stinnett and DeFrain (1985) created an inventory of family strengths that comprises six basic characteristics: mutual appreciation, spending time together, open communication patterns, commitment, a high degree of religious orientation, and the ability to cope with stress in a meaningful manner. Empirical findings by Kelley and Sequeira (1997), who used an interpretive approach to study functional and dysfunctional families, indicate that well-functioning families were characterized by openness, they managed conflict in assertive manner, spent time together, developed a supportive environment, were religious and had a sense of unity. The above characteristics may also be present in stepfamilies, but it should be born in mind that communication in them is often more complicated due to the fact that

their members build relationships from two or more pre-established family systems (Golish 2003).

Conflict situations in the stepfamilies under study, if any, are most often related to the division of responsibilities between partners, but also to the separation of duties related to the daily functioning of the family in relation to children. Sometimes partners have trouble with clear-cut division of responsibilities. Frequently one party feels unsupported in carrying out the family's day-to-day operational responsibilities and the other complains about the lack of space created to undertake these commitments. Individual family members often have very subjective perception of their responsibilities. Parents are more flexible in the allocation of responsibilities and enforcing the fulfilment of those responsibilities with respect to their biological children. A less flexible approach to this extent applies to parents and adoptive children.

We observed during interviews, that members of stepfamilies quite often try to make some positive self-presentation, thus creating a somewhat wishful thinking about their family. Meanwhile, on the basis of the questionnaires, one can see more difficult operational aspects of these families. It can be assumed that by completing the questionnaires, the individual members of these families did not activate such a strong control related to the social approval variable. Thus, time and again one can see a certain discrepancy between the picture that emerges during the interview and that which emerges from the questionnaires. The stepfamilies under study volunteered eagerly to participate in the study, wanting to learn more about themselves through their participation, with greater awareness to develop themselves during day-to-day activities. Parents who form such non-standard family arrangements show great concern for their children, who, as a result of the ups and downs in life, have found themselves in these specific family configurations. Thus, all participants showed high motivation to participate in the study. As a result, they shared their experiences, not always easy ones, with willingness and commitment. Through participation in the scientific study, they also wanted to contribute to the development of knowledge about family relationships and parenting interactions in such families. All these factors facilitated the collection of research material, learning about the history of these families, their successes, but also the

difficulties plaguing them, which in a broader research perspective contributed to broadening our perception regarding the hybrid family model of the stepfamily.

Finally, we would like to emphasize that we are fully aware of certain limitations of our study resulting from the use of the case study method. Due to the qualitative nature of our project, the results we obtained are not representative and the conclusions cannot be reasonably extended to the entire population. The final analyses we conducted within the interpretative paradigm should be treated as one of many possible proposals for interpreting reality. However, the findings we have made regarding the psychological functioning of patchwork families, while not being representative in the statistical sense, are certainly interesting and may be useful for other researchers as inspiration for further exploration and for practitioners, other patchwork families as important guidance in the parenting process. Discussions in relation to the generalizability of case study findings are undertaken by many authors (cf.: Yin 2015; Gomm, Hammersley, Foster 2009; Stake 2014). Among others, analytical generalization rather than probability extrapolation, i.e. statistical generalization, is recommended (Yin 2015; Gomm, Hammersley, Foster 2009). Furthermore, various authors emphasize that a case study provides knowledge that randomized controlled trials cannot provide. Social phenomena and problems tend to have complex causes involving a variety of interactions that cannot be fully investigated by experiments, and this is when it makes sense to use a case study. A case should be treated, as Yin (2015) emphasizes, as an opportunity to empirically illuminate certain concepts or principles. By using the individual case method, the researcher aims to transcend the boundaries of the case, and should aim for conclusions through analytical generalization, going beyond the conditions of the case being analyzed. The aim of analytical generalization is to generalize to other concrete situations and not to contribute to the construction of an abstract theory.

Bibliography

Amato P.R. (1994). "Father-Child Relations, Mother-Child Relations, and Offspring Psychological Well-Being in Early Adulthood," *Journal*

- of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 56, no. 4, pp. 1031–1042, <https://doi.org/10.2307/353611>
- Amato P.R., Rezac S.J. (1994). "Contact with Nonresidential Parents, Interparental Conflict, and Children's Behavior," *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 191–207, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X94015002003>
- Bray J.H., Harvey D.M. (1995). "Adolescents in Stepfamilies: Developmental Family Interventions," *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 122–130, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-3204.32.1.122>
- Burkacka I. (2017). "Monoparentalność, wielorodzina i rodzina zrekonstruowana. Współczesne nazwy modeli życia rodzinnego," *Artes Humanae*, vol. 2, pp. 61–94, DOI: 10.17951/artes.2017.2.61
- Cartwright C. (2005). "Stepfamily Living and Parent-Child Relationships: An Exploratory Investigation," *Journal of Family Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 267–283, <https://doi.org/10.5172/jfs.327.11.2.267>
- Cartwright C. (2008). "Resident Parent-Child Relationships in Stepfamilies," [in:] J. Pryor (ed.), *The International Handbook of Stepfamilies: Policy and Practice in Legal, Research, and Clinical Environments*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 208–230.
- Cherlin A.J., Furstenberg F.F. (1994). "Stepfamilies in the United States: A Reconsideration," *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 359–381, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.20.080194.002043>
- Cissna K.N., Cox D.E., Bochner A.P. (1990). "The Dialectic of Marital and Parental Relationships Within the Stepfamily," *Communication Monographs*, vol. 57, no. 1, pp. 44–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637759009376184>
- Coleman M., Ganong L., Fine M. (2000). "Reinvestigating Remarriage: Another Decade of Progress," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 62, no. 4, pp. 1288–1307, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.01288.x>
- Dobkowska D. (1984). "Więź uczuciowa w rodzinie zrekonstruowanej," [in:] L. Wołoszynowa (ed.) *Materiały do nauczania psychologii. Seria II: Psychologia rozwojowa, wychowawcza i społeczna*, vol. 11, Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, pp. 363–464.
- Dobosz-Sztuba A. (1992). *Być macochą, być ojczymem*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Profesjonalne.
- Eichelberger W., Gutek A. (2017). *Patchworkowe rodziny – jak w nich żyć*, Warszawa: Zwierciadło Sp. z o.o.
- Francuz G. (1986). "Psychologiczna analiza relacji zachodzących w rodzinach zrekonstruowanych," *Roczniki Filozoficzne*, vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 87–102.
- Frydrychowicz A. (1996). *Rysunek rodziny. Projekcyjna metoda badania stosunków rodzinnych*, Warszawa: Centrum Metodyczne Pomocy Psychologiczno-Pedagogicznej MEN.
- Ganong L.H., Coleman M. (1994). *Remarried Family Relationships*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Ganong L.H., Coleman M. (2017). *Stepfamily Relationships: Development, Dynamics, and Interventions* (2nd ed.), Dordrecht: Springer.
- Ganong L., Jensen T., Sanner C., Russell L., Coleman M. (2019). "Stepfathers' Affinity-seeking with Stepchildren, Stepfather-Stepchild Relationship Quality, Marital Quality, and Stepfamily Cohesion Among Stepfathers and Mothers," *Journal of Family Psychology*, vol. 33, no. 5, pp. 521–531, <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000518>
- Golish T.D. (2003). "Stepfamily Communication Strengths: Understanding the Ties That Bind," *Human Communication Research*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 41–80, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hcr/29.1.41>
- Gomm R., Hammersley M., Foster P. (2009). "Case Study and Generalization," [in:] R. Gomm, M. Hammersley, P. Foster (eds.), *Case Study Method*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 98–115, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857024367>
- Hetherington E.M. (1993). "An Overview of the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage with a Focus on Early Adolescence," *Journal of Family Psychology*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 39–56, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.7.1.39>
- Hetherington E.M. (1999). "Family Functioning and the Adjustment of Adolescent Siblings in Diverse Types of Families," *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, vol. 64, no. 4, pp. 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1540-5834.00045>
- Hetherington E.M., Henderson S.H. (1997). "Fathers in Stepfamilies," [in:] M. Lamb (ed.), *The Role of the Father in Child Development*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, pp. 212–226.
- Jarzębińska A. (2013). *Zachowania rodzicielskie macochy (normatywny i realistyczny aspekt roli)*, "Opuscula Sociologica", vol. 4, no. 6, pp. 63–79, <https://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.desklight-957a75fa-e0fe-4e06-bff9-6beb52ac30d5/c/jarzebinska.pdf>.
- Jensen T.M., Howard M.O. (2015). Perceived Stepparent-Child Relationship Quality: A Systematic Review of Stepchildren's Perspectives," *Marriage & Family Review*, vol. 51, no. 2, pp. 99–153, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2015.1006717>
- Kelley D.L., Sequeira D.L. (1997). "Understanding Family Functioning in a Changing America," *Communication Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2, pp. 93–107, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510979709368494>
- Kołodziej A., Przybyła-Basista H. (2014). "Przekonania osób rozwiedzionych na temat powtórnych małżeństw – ich pomiar i rola w osiąganiu satysfakcji małżeńskiej," *Polskie Forum Psychologiczne*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 190–208, <https://doi.org/10.14656/PFP20140202>
- Kromolicka B. (1998). *Rodziny zrekonstruowane. Dziecięca percepcja postaw rodzicielskich a ich sytuacja szkolna*, Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego.

- Kwak A. (1990). *Więź osobowa w rodzinach rekonstruowanych*, Warszawa: Uniwersytet Warszawski, Instytut Profilaktyki Społecznej i Resocjalizacji.
- Lewandowska-Walter A. (2014). "Rodzina zrekonstruowana," [in:] I. Janicka, H. Liberska (eds.), *Psychologia rodziny*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, pp. 305–330.
- Lewandowska-Walter A., Błazek M. (2018). *Test Relacji Rodzinnych TRR*, Gdańsk: Pracownia Testów Psychologicznych i Pedagogicznych.
- Margasiński A. (2013). *Skale Oceny Rodziny. SOR. Podręcznik*, Warszawa: Pracownia Tekstów Psychologicznych Polskiego Towarzystwa Psychologicznego.
- Matczak A., Jaworowska A. (2017). *Test Kompetencji Rodzicielskich. TKR. Podręcznik*, Warszawa: Pracownia Tekstów Psychologicznych Polskiego Towarzystwa Psychologicznego.
- Olson D.H. (2008). *FACES IV Manual*, Minneapolis, MN: Life Innovations.
- Olson D.H. (2013). *Kwestionariusz FACES IV i Model Kołowy: badania walidacyjne*, trans. A. Margasiński, Warszawa: Pracownia Tekstów Psychologicznych Polskiego Towarzystwa Psychologicznego.
- Papernow P. (2006). "Blended Family' Relationships: Helping People Who Live in Stepfamilies," *Family Therapy Magazine*, May, pp. 34–42.
- Papernow P. (2013). *Surviving and Thriving in Stepfamily Relationships: What Works and What Doesn't*, New York: Routledge.
- Plopa M. (2008). *Skala Postaw Rodzicielskich. Wersja dla rodziców. Podręcznik*, Warszawa: Vizja Press & It.
- Plopa M. (2012). *Skala Postaw Rodzicielskich 2: Rodzice a młodzież*, Warszawa: Vizja Press & It.
- Sanner C., Ganong L., Coleman M. (2021). "Families are Socially Constructed: Pragmatic Implications for Researchers," *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 42, no. 2, pp. 422–444, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X20905334>
- Sanner C., Ganong L., Coleman M., Berkley S. (2022). "Effective Parenting in Stepfamilies: Empirical Evidence of What Works," *Family Relations*, vol. 71, no. 3, pp. 884–899, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12703>
- Schwebel A.I., Fine M.A., Renner M.A. (1991). "A Study of Perceptions of the Stepparent Role," *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 43–57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/019251391012001004>
- Skarbek K., Kierzkowska M. (2022). "Szanse i zagrożenia w procesie wychowawczym w rodzinie patchworkowej. Studium rodziny zrekonstruowanej," *Roczniki Pedagogiczne*, vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 101–119, <https://doi.org/10.18290/rped22144.9>
- Skarbek K., Kierzkowska M. (2023). "Rodzinna mozaika w rysunkach dzieci wychowywanych w rodzinach patchworkowych," *Problemy Opiekuńczo-Wychowawcze*, no. 2(617), pp. 55–72, DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0016.2876
- Skarbek-Jaskólska K., Kierzkowska, M. (2023a). "Bonusowe rodzicielstwo – zasoby, wyzwania i zagrożenia związane z rodzicielstwem przybranym

- w rodzinie patchworkowej,” *Roczniki Pedagogiczne*, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 63–90, <https://doi.org/10.18290/rped23154.4>
- Skarbak-Jaskólska K., Kierzkowska M. (2023b). “Wybrane konteksty relacji rodzinnych w percepcji dzieci wychowywanych w zrekonstruowanych systemach rodzinnych na podstawie badania testem relacji rodzinnych,” *Horyzonty Wychowania*, vol. 22(64), pp. 123–135, <https://doi.org/10.35765/hw.2023.2264.12>
- Stake R.E. (2014). “Jakościowe studium przypadku,” [in:] N.K. Denzin, Y.S. Lincoln (eds.), *Metody badań jakościowych*, trans. K. Podemski, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, pp. 623–655.
- Stinnett N., De Frain J. (1985). *Secrets of Strong Families*, Boston, MA: Little Brown.
- Visher E.B., Visher J.S. (1993). “Remarriage Families and Stepparenting,” [in:] F. Walsh (ed.), *Normal Family Processes*, New York: Guilford Press, pp. 235–253.
- Wałęcka-Matyja K. (2009). *Zachowania społeczne młodzieży a uwarunkowania rodzinne i osobowościowe*, Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego.

Ethics Declarations

All procedures in the designed study comply with the ethical standards of research in the social sciences. Prior to the start of the study, participants were provided with information about the study (a brief and comprehensible description of the purpose of the study, the methods used, the course of the study and the form of the respondent’s participation in the study), information about the person who will conduct the study (name, profession, place of work) and information about their rights (that is, voluntary participation in the study, confidentiality and or anonymity of the data, the possibility to resign from the study without any consequences at any time during the study). All respondents gave written consent to participate in the study and to the recording of the interviews. Consent forms to participate in the study and to be recorded were prepared for each adult and each child. The consent form for participation in the study includes information on: 1. the subject area of the study; 2. the anonymity of the subjects; 3. the voluntariness of participation in the study; 4. the possibility to opt out at any time; 5. the sharing, collection and storage of anonymized data obtained during the study. Upon completion of the study, participants were provided with detailed information about the purpose of the study and any doubts were clarified. The research project received a positive evaluation from the Research Ethics Committee of The Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw.

Financing details

The article presents the results of a pilot study funded by the National Science Centre under Grant No. 487639. The research project, the results of which are presented in this article, received a positive assessment by the Research Ethics Committee of The Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw.

CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESSES:

Karolina Skarbak-Jaskólska
The Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw
The Institute of Human Development Support and Education
E-mail: kskarbak@aps.edu.pl

Małgorzata Kierzkowska
The Maria Grzegorzewska University in Warsaw
The Institute of Human Development Support and Education
E-mail: mkierzkowska@aps.edu.pl