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## Experiencing parenthood in early adulthood

### Fenomenographic reconstruction in educational research

#### Abstract

*This article attempts to present ways of experiencing parenthood among 17 young adults who have become mothers/fathers. The study was carried out using the phenomenographic method, which sought to describe how the young parents gave meanings to the phenomenon of parenthood; what it meant for them to be a parent. Based on the approach designed by the creators of the phenomenographic research method, we made the epistemological assumption that there is no other world besides the one that an individual experiences. A family was recognised as a special place for learning and experiencing the world, which appears to young adults as a concept of parenthood in their consciousness. The detailed categories of description, revealing concepts of experiencing parenthood, proved to be discursive and strongly context-related. There was considerable ambivalence in the findings, indicating that parenthood fluctuates between polar interpretations of experience and significantly goes beyond an educational context of upbringing. The circumstances accompanying experiencing of parenthood are strongly connected with cultural messages conveyed to groups and individuals by various lifeworld agencies: our interviewees proved to be completely embedded in them. Our findings support the hypothesis that the problem of educational practice connected with experiencing parenthood places it in the world of contemporary culture, which is torn apart by ambiguity and chaos of changing offers, as well as complexity-saturated “reversible” culture, the contents of which are subject to constant reconstruction. This provides essential reasons for developing a theory of lifelong learning in the family.*

Introduction

*This study sought to reconstruct ways of experiencing parenthood among young adults between the ages of 20 and 35 (Erikson 1959) in the context of phenomenographic research. We aim to present the concept of parenthood in a particular period of the family development cycle: its third phase (Duvall 1977). The epistemological assumption of our article aligns with the assumption of the creators of the phenomenographic research method, who claim that there is no other world besides the one we experience as individuals. We recognised a family as a special place for learning and experiencing the world that young adults perceive as a concept of parenthood. Why? Well, the family has traditionally been the object of interest of representatives of social sciences, especially educators, whose scientific exploration has for centuries been accompanied predominantly by concern for the ideal, comprehensive development of the child. There have been numerous publications about family upbringing and the educational role of the family – the basic unit of society; contemporary researchers are advancing the thesis about banalisation of the primary socialisation problem (Marody 2016). An in-depth review of pedagogical reflection on the family suggests that it is focused on the process of shaping the personality of the child; consequently, adult family members are treated more like objects. They are generally perceived as those who are to take care primarily of the child's interests and his/her proper comprehensive development, and secondly, their general social interest – that is, raising offspring to become citizens who responsibly co-create the social reality. This discourse often assumes parental education – that is, preparing parents for the role of educators in the broad contexts of school, mass media, and creating an educational coalition; a process of collaboration among diverse social partners.*

*Keywords: Family, ambivalence, ambiguity of cultural message, life cycle, early adulthood.*

### **Abstrakt**

*W artykule podjęto próbę przedstawienia sposobów doświadczania rodzicielstwa przez 17 młodych dorosłych, którzy stali się matkami/ojcami. Badanie przeprowadzono metodą fenomenograficzną. Jego celem było dokonanie opisu sposobu znaczeń, jakie młodzi rodzice nadają fenomenowi rodzicielstwa, co dla nich oznacza bycie rodzicem. Za twórcami fenomenograficznej metody badań przyjęto epistemologiczne założenie, że nie ma innego świata jak ten, którego człowiek doświadcza. Rodzinę uznano za szczególnie miejsce uczenia się i doświadczania świata, które jawi się w świadomości młodych dorosłych jako koncepcja rodzicielstwa. Szczegółowe kategorie opisu, ujawniające koncepcje doświadczania rodzicielstwa okazały się dyskursywne i silnie powiązane z kontekstem. Ewidencyjnie zaznaczyła się kategoria ambiwalencji, co oznacza, że rodzicielstwo rozkłada się między skrajami doświadczenia i znacznie wykracza poza edukacyjny kontekst wychowania. Okoliczności towarzyszące doświadczaniu rodzicielstwa są silnie związane*

*z przekazami kulturowymi wysyłanymi do grup i jednostek przez różnego rodzaju agendy świata społecznego. Nasi rozmówcy okazali się całkowicie w nie uwikłani. Utwierdza to w przekonaniu, że problem praktyki edukacyjnej związanej z doświadczeniem rodzicielstwa lokuje ją w świecie współczesnej kultury, rozdartej wieloznacznością, chaosem zmieniających się ofert, nasyconej złożonością kultury, „odwracalnej”, której treści podlegają ciąglej rekonstrukcji. Dostarcza to istotnych przesłanek do budowania teorii uczenia się przez całe życie.*

*Słowa kluczowe: rodzina, ambiwalencja, wieloznaczność przekazu kulturowego, cykl życia, wczesna dorosłość.*

## Introduction

Today, research on the family is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary; it has been studied, among others, within sociology, theology, psychology, and anthropology as well as the economic and political sciences. Recent discourse on the family reveals, in the first place, ongoing dynamic changes – especially around interpersonal relations, emotional connection between partners, and quality of life. The level of analysis of these processes is increasingly focused on the individual – the private, intimate, individual side of life and its relational aspect – rather than on the family as a social group (Szlendak 2010). The dominant category in the research design becomes “everyday life”, usually defined as the “natural place of social life fulfilment” (Koczanowicz 2003, 54). The family is situated here between polar concepts, which on the one hand emphasise the qualitative meaning of family life, an understanding and reflective insight into intersubjective experiences, and on the other hand assume its passive acceptance of reality and external influences. This latter notion, however, ceases to be dominant in current socio-cultural conditions. It becomes more and more important to understand the stages of the family life cycle in different situational contexts, but also in the sense of historical duration as “recreating interaction structures, house microworld structures or home rituals” (Marody and Giza-Poleszczuk 2004, 187). The family thus becomes the subject of social changes and various socio-cultural phenomena: reproduction of the social system and the population, as well as social, economic, and political order.

Typically, the European tradition has placed the family on the borderline of the education and social care sector, paying special attention to the well-being of families living in poverty – those that are helpless, destructive, involved

in conflicts and pathologies (Mengel 2017). The family has a somewhat marginal position in education policy; it is still subordinated mainly to social policy. For instance, parents are less often perceived as a target group in andragogical professionalisation concepts than, for example, volunteers, although far more adults are parents than volunteers (Nuissl 2016). Undoubtedly, adult education is limited when it comes to the family: researchers question whether families are too complicated to constitute the object and context of andragogy, whether they resist pedagogisation, or whether adult educators are afraid of taking up activities in a field that imposes high demands on therapeutic, counselling, methodological, and didactic activities. From the perspective of adult education, the question arises whether it matters what ultimately happens in families because, from a pedagogical point of view, children and young people what really matters (Nuissl 2016).

The increasing attractiveness of adult family members in the education sciences is connected with the return of science towards the learning of an individual in their everyday life based on informal learning and their own life experience. The family is not just the undisputed place of primary socialisation, but also the space in which a person learns from an early age throughout their entire life. “The family ceases to be only an institution considered from the perspective of the functions performed for its members and wider social structures, and rather becomes a self-creating, reproducing, and modifying system in which the learning processes take place” (Wiatr 2013, 8). In this sense, the family is an environment that reveals both the temporal and processual nature of lifelong learning processes.

## 1. On the method and organisation of research

The methodological basis for identifying concepts of parenthood among young adults in the present study is phenomenography, developed as a research method in the 1970s in the education research centre at the University of Gothenburg by researchers associated with Ference Marton. It is

[an] empirical study of a limited number of qualitatively different ways of conceptualising, understanding, perceiving and feeling various phenomena and aspects of the surrounding world. The aim of the phenomenographic study is therefore to describe the way in which the respondents give meaning to the phenomenon that is the object of the researcher's interest. It is assumed that the meaning given to the phenomenon by in-

dividuals is the result of their personal experience in the field of this phenomenon (Męczkowska 2002, 18).

Phenomenography focuses on finding and systematising forms of thinking in terms according to which people interpret significant aspects of reality, shared by members of a specific society (Marton 1981).

Phenomenographic research seeks to provide a limited number of description categories that make up the *outcome space*. The description categories as elements of the outcome space can be subjected to a hierarchisation, enabling the establishment of logical relations between them and formulation of hierarchical relations regarding the criteria adopted by the researcher (Marton 1981). The result of such hierarchisation is the presentation of research results in the form of a structure of descriptive categories.

Consensus about the collective character of subjective conceptions of phenomena discovered during the research process plays an essential role in phenomenographic research. Despite assumption of the existence among individuals of differences in ways of perceiving the world, phenomenographic research allows one to discover the collective intellect (Męczkowska 2002), defined as a supra-individual system of forms of thought, disseminated through social processes of knowledge distribution, forming part of social heritage (Marton 1981). According to the central thesis of phenomenography, people ascribe various meanings to the surrounding world; however, the number of these meanings is limited. Descriptions obtained of subjective conceptions of the analysed phenomena show similarities that take the form of relatively constant and quantitatively limited sets of meanings given by study participants (Marton 1981).

The research procedure is reflected in the language of phenomenography. The object of phenomenographic analysis is text, which is a reconstruction of the statements collected with the technique of semi-structured individual or group interviews. Phenomenographers aim to define multiple concepts as described by people in the context of a specific phenomenon (Barnacle 2005).

The phenomenographic methodology includes the data collection phase, which consists of obtaining meanings given to the analysed phenomenon by the research participants, followed by a data analysis phase. The final results of the data analysis provide a description of the outcome space, in which the researcher presents ranked research results.

Reaching the description requires the following procedure:

- Familiarisation of researchers with interview transcripts;
- Summarising;
- Comparison of excerpts from statements selected at the summary stage;

- Grouping the answers based on visible similarities and differences;
- Identifying the criterion (essence) of similarities and differences that emerge on initial examination;
- Labelling the categories in such a way that the name corresponds to the domain of the described phenomenon and the various ways of experiencing (understanding) it by participants;
- Contrasting the selected categories of description with meta-theory and perspectives concerning the analysed phenomenon (Marton, Asplund-Carlsson, Halász 1992).

The primary method of data collection is a face-to-face interview, which is a specialised form of scientific quality interviews (Bruce 1994). Their distinctive features are as follows:

- They are focused on the lifeworld of the respondent;
- They aim to understand the meaning of the phenomenon in the lifeworld of the respondent;
- They are qualitative, describing, concrete, and free from presuppositions;
- They are focused on specific topics;
- They are open to diversity and change;
- They occur in the course of interpersonal interaction;
- They can be a positive experience (Yates, Partridge, Bruce 2012).

The starting-point for the phenomenographic interview is to look for differentiation in experiencing or understanding a given phenomenon. To do so, one needs to concentrate in the interview on the relationship between the research participant and the object, not on the research participant or the research object as separate entities. Although data can be collected at an individual level, phenomenography focuses on the collective consciousness and variations in the way a particular phenomenon is experienced. Thus, data collection at the individual level is the starting-point for constructing an impression of collective consciousness as it relates to ways of experiencing specific phenomena (Yates, Partridge, Bruce 2012).

The interview is in the form of a dialogue, during which the participant conveys their personal understanding. It aims to obtain material containing individual conceptions of the analysed phenomenon, present in the interviewee's consciousness. It is based on several questions, directly referring to the nature of the phenomenon under investigation, whose subjective sense we seek to reveal. Further questions may arise during the interview, enabling clarification of the subject's statements and their interpretation – such as a request to repeat the last sentence; request for clarification ('What do you mean by that?'); request for elaboration ('Could you elaborate on this subject?'); or

request for confirmation. “The function of the questions asked by the researcher is to facilitate the conceptualisation and verbalization of experience for the interviewee, that could not have taken place so far, and to create a situation of understanding between the researcher and the respondent in terms of meanings expressed by the interviewee” (Kossobucka 2013, 410–411). However, the researcher must remain detached from personal views and beliefs and continuously adapt to the interviewee’s understanding of the phenomenon as the dialogue unfolds (Viladrich 2005).

In phenomenographic studies, interviews are conducted on a specific research sample. Some researchers argue that the potential permutations of the phenomenon are exhausted when the sample reaches 15–20 cases, after which new ideas no longer emerge (Marton 1986). Other authors propose that there is no clear-cut indication of the recommended sample size, but it should be sufficient to identify the variation of the conceptions and allow the resulting data to be managed (Trigwell 2000).

The ultimate findings of phenomenographic research are the categories of outcome description, reflecting a set of different experiences that relate to the phenomenon. Therefore, the outcomes represent the phenomenon in a similar way to the description categories presenting the concepts (Barnard, McCosker, Gerber 1999). Consequently, in phenomenography, outcomes offer a representation of both the phenomenon and various ways of experiencing it (Marton 1994).

The research described here involved interviewing 17 participants (11 women and 6 men) who were living in marital or partner relationships. The interviews were conducted at the turn of the years 2018 and 2019 in two urban agglomerations, that is Warsaw and Gdańsk which were the dwelling places of our interviewees, not the places of birth. The crucial criterion of the sample choice was the age of our interlocutors, that is early adulthood as described in the life cycle (according to E.Erikson between 21 and 35 years) and being a parent of one or more children. The choice was undertaken using the technique of the snowball effect, without limits concerning education, social and cultural status. We have only decided to restrain to the rules of phenomenography’s creators, namely not to exceed the number of interviews (15–20). We have reached a sufficient (in the accepted phenomenographic research scheme) range of meanings to identify the differentiation of parenthood concepts and defining their collective phenomenon. The number of interviews allowed also the possibility of result data management.

**Table 1.** Index of persons covered by the research

	Gender	Age	Educational background	No. of children
1	M1	34	University education, economist	2
2	F1	29	University education, lawyer	2
3	M2	33	University education, physician	1
4	F2	33	University education, lawyer	1
5	M3	34	University education, economist	2
6	F3	33	Secondary vocational education, accountant, professionally inactive	3
7	F4	32	Secondary education, without a profession	2
8	F5	34	University education, manager	1
9	F6	30	Secondary education, gardener	1
10	F7	32	University education, court-appointed official	2
11	F8	30	University education, teacher	1
12	F9	29	Secondary vocational education, saleswoman	2
13	M4	30	Higher professional education, steward	1
14	F10	28	University education, state official	1
15	M5	30	University education, IT specialist	1
16	F11	30	Vocational education, culinary blogger	1
17	M6	34	Vocational education, trader	1

## 2. Ways of experiencing parenthood among young adults

We examined the concepts of parenthood as perceived by young mothers and fathers in their early adulthood. Exploring the experience of parenthood was carried out using a semi-structured individual interview, which is a kind of open conversation with parents, and the questions took the following form: What is parenthood to you? What does it mean to you to be a parent? Why did you decide to become a parent? What tasks do you take on as a parent? Is it easy to be a parent? How have you been learning to be a parent? What do you think you are doing well, and what needs improvement, when it comes to your parenthood? Are



you happy with yourself as a parent? Do you use someone's help when it comes to parenthood (explain why yes/no)?

During the interview, the following questions were also asked to yield more specific and nuanced responses:

- Can you tell me more about it?
- When you talk about that, what exactly do you have in mind?
- What do you mean by that?
- Could you give an example?

Analysis of the text of the statements under the research procedure as mentioned above and examining the transition from reading the transcripts of interviews several times to delineating the outcomes, allowed us to identify categories of description of parenting experience in the minds of young parents. In the process, some shared meanings became apparent. The detailed categories of description, revealing conceptions of meaning, given by young parents and identified using the researchers' language, are:

- A. Parenthood as a natural stage of family development;
- B. Parenthood as a result of internal and/or external pressure;
- C. Parenthood as a desire, fulfilment of dreams, love;
- D. Parenthood as meeting the expectations of a partner.

### A. Parenthood as a natural stage of family development

This category of description appears above all in the context of the question what parenthood is. The domain of descriptions was an apparent desire to move to the next stage of life. Here are excerpts from the statements that make up this category:

**M2:** This is a natural order of things to me. When two people are in a relationship, the next step is to create a family.

**M4:** To me, parenthood is the fruit of living together with my partner, and this is the consequence of our life plans.

**F10:** It is the next phase that life has given us; extremely satisfying and giving us a lot of love, but – which we didn't realise until now – full of fear for new family members.

**F8:** It is a natural consequence of what came before.

**M3:** It is a natural task, a certain stage of life. I am already mature enough to be a parent.

Parenthood is a natural stage of life to the interviewees; but at the same time, they recognise it as carrying a huge, ongoing responsibility – with a command, duty, moral obligation, resulting from one’s own need. They did not have such a strong sense of responsibility in the earlier stages of their lives.

**F7:** I always wanted to be a mother, it was natural for me. The sleepless nights, crying, or colic attacks do not really matter. What matters is the fear for a child, which will probably be with us till the end. It’s a never-ending responsibility. I understand that now.

**F4:** The family has always been important to me; I wanted to create a family with my husband similar to the one I was raised in. Parents always take care of their children. That’s just the way it is.

**M1:** I am overwhelmed by the responsibility for these little beings, for their health and development. It hacks me off when they cry, and I don’t know what’s going on or how to help them. I am waiting for better communication so that they can openly say what they expect me to do.

The interviewees also reflected on the level of their parental competence. They assessed it somewhat positively, although each time they emphasised the complexity and difficulties associated with the roles of mother and father.

**M5:** It’s hard to say whether I turned out to be a good father. I have too little experience to judge on that; this is a question for the future. I am happy with taking care of them; there’s nothing I can’t do. When it comes to their upbringing... well, we’ll see.

**F3.** Being a parent is the most challenging role in life. It makes me very happy, and I wouldn’t trade it for the world. Still, it’s difficult. Sometimes it is a quiet ride and sometimes a roller-coaster at breakneck speed, in the emotional and physical sense, when it is necessary to meet the needs of many family members at once and at various levels.

Several people pointed to the incompleteness of fulfilling the role, resulting from the need to combine different social roles.

**F8:** I resent myself a bit for sending my child to the nursery so that I could get back to work.

Some people stress their emotional immaturity, but – aware of their deficits – take corrective action.

**F6:** I thought it would be easier, I didn't realise how much I am still a child myself. I visit my counsellor to work on it.

**M4:** I am ashamed that I once put a crying child to bed and went to sleep, hoping that my partner would take care of him. That was a sign of my weakness, and I promised myself that I would never do it again.

The respondents also indicated patience, which can be considered as one of the dominant categories of description. Most of all, they ruefully emphasised its deficit. Collectively, they know that it is necessary and feel pangs of conscience whenever they fail to show it.

**M1:** I don't like to hurry, I know that then there's some sloppiness in taking care of my children, and my conscience is bothering me. I don't like monotony, that is, the repetitiveness of activities: feeding, changing diapers, putting the baby to sleep, and playing with cars with the older one over and over again. I am waiting for a new opening; I know I have to be patient.

**F5:** You must continuously strive to better yourself, especially not to lose your patience.

**F1:** I cannot play with my child for a long time; children's games bore me, and I just want to run away when my son shows me his cars again and again. Sometimes I cannot be patient when something isn't going my way. I know it's my flaw. I'm ashamed of it.

All statements involved the awareness of constant adaptation to the new role. The interviewees appreciated, first of all, their own experience and intuition, which they perceived almost as a genetic trait. They were more often open to the counsel of their peers bringing up children than to advice from their parents, who were sometimes asked for occasional help when the situation was overwhelming, but who were not expected to offer guidance as it was perceived as preaching.

**F2:** I learn by observing other young parents from my surroundings. I also learned from my own childhood home experience. I know the value of lessons I have received at home and I want to convey it to my child, but I also know what I would like to do differently and maybe a little better than it was in my family home.

**M5:** I don't expect any advice from my parents. However, I talk with my mother from time to time; she raised the four of us to be decent people, at

least I hope so. She cut her teeth on our problems, knows all the stuff about children; it's the kind of knowledge that I'd never find in any guide.

**M3:** We use the help of grandparents and nanny when the two of us want to go out and relax, but we don't do it often because we don't like to part with the children. My wife is fed up and wants to unwind more often; I prefer to stay at home. I guess I like to keep an eye on everything, or I have an extensive need for control (that's my wife's opinion). I believe that we know best what is good for our boys and us. That's why when we're at work, there's a nanny, but after work it's just us, swinging into high gear.

**M1:** Of course we use the help. We work a lot. Nanny is priceless, and there's my mother too, though we spare her the trouble, asking her for help only in exceptional situations. We try to sweep up the pieces after work. There is also a mother-in-law; she doesn't walk and is confined to a wheelchair since an accident, but the children visit her eagerly; they want to spend time with her as she talks with them a lot, probably because she cannot play with them due to her limited movement. And children learn from the start that we're not all the same; not everybody can do everything. This is an additional, exciting and challenging, experience for us all.

**M6:** I'm annoyed by the advice of my parents and parents-in-law; they already had their time to demonstrate their skills, now they should just support us.

## B. Parenthood as a result of internal and/or external pressure

The strongest internal pressure is due to biological age. Especially in the statements of women, concerns about the inevitability of the passage of time are apparent.

**F10:** The choice of a specific moment was due to my age and the right living situation.

Several respondents made their decision about becoming parents conditional on reaching a satisfying professional and material status.

**F11:** I wanted to have a child earlier, but I waited for a permanent employment contract. Now, during maternity and parental leave, I receive full remuneration.

This category of description also appears in the context of external conditions, especially cultural ones, related to the social role of a mother assigned to a woman and the lack of universal acceptance for alternative life scenarios.

**F4:** I was under pressure from my family, especially my mother, who said that ‘work can be work’, ‘medicine can be medicine’, and ‘biology is biology’, so you have to try to get pregnant now or it will be too late. Deep down, I knew she was right, but I delayed the moment of decision until I got my husband’s explicit declaration. We also reached material stability then.

In the case of fathers, a patriarchal approach is often visible, which may indicate that it is firmly rooted in the social consciousness.

**M1:** I wanted to leave something behind as my legacy.

**M6:** A man should build a house, plant a tree, and have a son.

The interviewees also emphasised their preparation for the role in adulthood, change of social status (material stability), maturity, and responsibility for a new family member. A cultural scheme emerges here too, according to which the family is, first of all, the culmination of the partnership and love of two people; and secondly, the destiny of every human being and the highest value at every stage of life.

**F2:** To me, the birth of my child is the essence of the family definition. It gives meaning to life.

**M5:** I wanted to strengthen my relationship. A child joins two people together even more strongly.

### C. Parenting as a desire, fulfilment of dreams, love

M5’s statement above may point to the instrumental nature of decisions around paternity. The man treated the birth of the child as an opportunity to strengthen the partnership. In principle, however, the research participants collectively revealed the instinct of parenthood as a desire to make dreams come true, express love, and satisfy the need for self-fulfilment.

**F1:** It was the complement to our love – the creation of a human being who would be a mixture of the two of us. We wanted to have an extra person to love.

**F5:** I have long dreamed about it, I always wanted to have a family.

**F6:** I felt a great need to be a mum and start a family.

**F9:** Love, closeness, responsibility, and acceptance are essential. I am raising a child with a sense of security, in harmony with myself.

**M4:** I wanted to build a happy family, in which everyone supports and loves each other and can count on each other regardless of the situation.

**M6:** I like our intimacy when we all hug, and it makes me proud that I have such a beautiful family.

#### D. Parenthood as meeting the expectations of a partner

The interviewees' statements show that they decided to become parents together. Several mothers postponed motherhood because of their partner's indecisiveness.

**F4:** I delayed the moment of decision about motherhood because there was no explicit declaration on my husband's part. To this day, I don't know whether he decided to have a child because of me or whether it was his inner need.

It is striking that the fathers who delayed their decision about the birth of a child gave their unconditional love and care from the moment of the child's birth, and felt happy as a parent.

**M2:** I didn't want to have a child, but my wife insisted on this. Now I am the happiest father in the world.

We also observed that the working men were entirely ready to take part in caring for the child and relieving the mother of her everyday responsibilities.

**M5:** I believe that, as a parent, I am a good support for my child's mother. I try to relieve her of her duties whenever possible.

The birth of a child in a family often generates conflicts resulting from differences of opinion, fatigue, and a sense of being overwhelmed. However, young

parents show readiness for dialogue and negotiations. The foundation of their parenthood seems to be mutually clear communication, aimed at working out a compromise.

**F3:** I think that I care most about the opinion of my husband when there is a crisis where we differ, disagree, there is no consent. However, we attach importance to the discussion, communication, collective solutions.

**F4:** Our older daughter is disabled. The sense of being carefree is gone; now there is mostly fear – I know that we must be her support throughout her entire life. That’s why we want to raise children in mutual love, so that the son would feel the bond with his older sister now and know that she must be protected. My husband thinks that I want to burden him with too much responsibility, but we talk about it a lot and look for solutions.

**F11:** We have to come to an agreement eventually. In the end, we both come from a good place as far as our son is concerned.

Thanks to previous investigations, we can map out the conceptions of the importance of parenthood as experienced by the parents we interviewed (see table 2).

**Table 2.** Conceptions of experiencing parenthood by young adults.

	A	B	C	D
Categories of description/ Outcome space	Parenthood as a natural stage of family development	Parenthood as a result of internal and/or external pressure	Parenthood as a desire, fulfilment of dreams, love	Parenthood as meeting the expectations of a partner
Contexts – resulting from the summarising of text excerpts, grouping and comparing statements	Preparation for adulthood, change of social status, maturity, responsibility	Duty, recognition of fate, fear of passing time	Making one’s dream come true, continuity of blood ties, tenderness, need for love	Expecting an explicit declaration from the partner about parenthood; it is to be a joint decision
The description domain – the discriminating criterion	Willingness to act and change	Inevitability, necessity, duty	Social bond, social roles	Strengthening the partner relationship, solving conflicts, negotiations

From the perspective of the procedure used here, the conception of the phenomenon described is constructed as a result of the category's saturation with excerpts of statements of various respondents, but sometimes an individual's statement can be broken into fragments that qualify for several different categories of description. That is why we consider each category as both individual and collective at the same time.

### **3. Meta perspective: the discursive conception of experiencing parenthood**

The project presented here posed some challenges concerning interpretation of the research results. The conception of parenthood is not clearly and sharply outlined. It stretches between the structural and functional experience of parenthood (Parsons 1951) and the life cycle (Duvall 1977; Olson 2011) as one of the family's developmental stages. The elements of symbolic interactionism in giving meanings to parenthood were also revealed (Turner 1970, 2003).

The heterogeneous distribution of the research results probably stems from the specificity of the (historical) moment in the life of the family about which our interviewees were asked concerning their experiences of parenthood. All parents were in the period when their first, second, or third child had come into the world. We are discussing a special time, because the basic category is created here by the change triggered by the birth of a new member in the family in its development cycle, during which there are problems specific to this life stage, together with tasks, events, and processes. However, according to the principle of the totality of the family system functioning, changes in the role played by the individual provoke changes in roles performed by other family members, which in turn leads to the reorganisation of the family system and its transition to a new level of development (Skelton, Buehler, Irby, Grzywacz 2012). Therefore, the family life of our interviewees required a reformulation of the existing styles of functioning and fulfilling different developmental tasks. It was also necessary for them to modify behaviour in order to protect themselves from dysfunctionality, such as the accumulation of conflicts and tensions.

All of our interviewees were in a period of relative economic stability: at least one of the parents had a stable income, and all interviewees had consciously decided on the birth of a child. The underlying variable was the birth of a child and a new allocation of roles and tasks related to their upbringing and care. The birth of a child required a reorganisation of everyday life and understanding of the generational transition/shift (from being a child, to becoming both



a child and a parent). Other members of the family system were also shifted to the next generation (parents of young parents became grandparents; siblings became aunts and uncles). The maturity of the parent, therefore, went through a test of the strength of the relationship. In the interviews, no problems were expressed concerning perceived importance in the relationship (what's more important: a child or spouse?) or feelings of jealousy observed about the position in the family. The most common difficulties were determining the assumption of responsibility for a newborn child, or difficulty setting boundaries in the adoption of roles (Haley 1993).

Consequently, parenthood appears as a natural stage in the family life cycle that family members long for, either spontaneously or as a result of external pressure. The family and parenthood placed in an obvious way in the life cycle meet most of the features described in systems theory, and especially in the Beavers model of family functioning (Beavers, Hampson 2008). The statements collected in the empirical material are based on key categories of competences and behavioural style in the family. We understand them as the family's ability to organise and manage their life. The parents' experience is characterised by a high degree of competence with egalitarian leadership, strong parenthood, constructive adult coalitions (especially between spouses and partners), and clearly defined generational boundaries. Grandparents (the parents of our interviewees) are important as a source of knowledge and experience about parenthood, support, and help with care when parents are overwhelmed, but do not take a direct part in the process of upbringing. Young adult parents do not want them to be involved. They rely more on their intuition, self-education, and the experience of friends, including parents in a similar age range. Therefore, a characteristic, structural and functional relativity is visible here, consisting, on one hand, in the permeability of information from the outside and openness (grandparents, the closest social environment), on the other hand, in clearly defined boundaries according to one's own criteria of belonging (Broderick 1993).

We also noticed another systemic feature in the conception of parenthood: its circular functionality – that is, feedback during difficult situations (e.g., child's illness). Then, the behaviours of mothers and fathers condition each other (tension, fear for the child); consequently, it is difficult to determine the causes and effects of certain behaviours. But according to the strong empirical evidence of homeostasis in the collected material, especially from rational fathers, there is an internal balance achieved – crucial, in the context of preventing family disintegration – often occurring under the influence of the change factor. After all, it is the change that allows the family to develop in the cycles of their life, thus transforming their structure.

The conception of parenthood as the implementation of primary functions (i.e., providing necessary means for living, finances, and food) is a theme that emerged only in isolated cases. On the other hand, concern for proper development of the child, their education and future achievements is commonly expressed. Concerns about crisis management are also important to the interviewees. Researchers argue that the effect of the newly emerging situation may be the appearance of a crisis defined as a state of imbalance, disharmony, and disorganisation in the family system (McCubbin, McCubbin 1996). However, what is characteristic of young parents, especially in crisis management, most often relates to difficulties with disciplining their children and differences of opinion on this issue; they attach importance to mutual communication as a clear and direct exchange of information. Among family system researchers, the criterion of clear and effective communication is used to regulate the emotional reactivity of family members as well as their ability to rationally manage behaviours under challenging situations (Miller, Ryan, Keitner, Bishop, Epstein 2008).

Stressful reactions to the birth of a child or children, in the case of our interviewees, clearly exposed the resilience of the family in terms of responsibility for its balanced functioning, stability, and harmony in interactions. Nevertheless, at this stage of the research it is difficult to determine whether this will result in personal change and developmental growth when faced with adversities in life. It is well recognised that every change can reactively undermine family cohesion or strengthen and enrich it. Therefore, it teaches adaptation skills related to difficult conditions in the social space, taking on new roles (becoming parents or grandparents), and using one's own resources. The perception of stress sources is more natural with the understanding of time and sequential steps in family development. Explaining the phenomenon of stress, therefore, requires different levels of analysis, paying attention to the individual as well as family/shared resources as well as cooperation skills. Indeed, understanding the typical development phases of a family makes it easier for members to anticipate stress, its sources, and family crises, facilitating adaptation to new living conditions.

The empirical material collected during the interviews enables us to explain marital/partner interactions and communication in the family during their experiences of parenthood. Clearly, patterns and forms of communication between family members that stimulate common/reciprocal activities align with those described in the literature on the subject (Moles 1986). In other words, the disclosed communication has the nature of feedback; it's interactive, lasts a particular time, and therefore has continuity and takes the relational/trans-

actional form. In the interviews, there were no instances of an authoritarian relationship style or didactic control on the part of one of the parents, nor any model of one-sided sender-recipient communication with no interest in feedback. By contrast, a relational (transactional) communication was shown that revealed persistent elements of family integration: cohesive emotional ties between family members and relationship flexibility (quality of family leadership and its manifestations, family organisation, allocation of family roles, negotiation rules and methods). Communication acquired a facilitating dimension for our interviewees, conducive to self-motivation for action, change, development, and commitment (Plopa 2005).

#### 4. Summary

The conception of parenthood that emerges from the completed research project demonstrates the discursive nature of social life and the impassable boundaries of the communication system (Luhmann 1987). It results from an awareness of the comprehensive and complex nature of the social system, within which it is difficult to explain the multiplicity of events in terms of cause and effect. Here, one can also talk about the principle of autopoiesis of the families examined – that is, internal self-reference regarding their organisation and communication; in this sense, it is not transferable to the language codes of other systems. Such an approach, although it may not permit objective consensus within the framework of the theory of family learning (Głazewski 2010), certainly allows us to propose explanations for the phenomena of learning and its communicative context. The emphasis here is not only on the functional but also the interpretive, meaning-making role of codes and systems. Although the experiences of parenthood among each of our interviewees is individual, it is not arbitrary. ‘Their essential category, as in hermeneutics, is the sense... This sense legitimises the specificity of individual codes and systems’ (Milerski, Karwowski 2016, 116). The key to the interpretation of parenthood in the family system revealed by us in the study is to identify the senses and meanings underlying its organisation and forms of communication. It is from this perspective that propose the merging of the structural-functional concept and the developmental concept in the life cycle, as well as the interactionist concept of experiencing parenthood by young adults.

In this context, the importance of research on the experience of parenthood concerning the phenomenon of learning is worth emphasising. Study participants assign meanings to their parenthood through the prism of their child-

hood and youth, as well as based on their relationships with parents and siblings; these all constitute the frame of reference for their daily functioning in the new role of parenting. Even if they independently and autonomously shape their reality with a newborn family member and learn in the course of everyday events and situations, they remember their past in the family home, constantly comparing it with the present. This research, by revealing some practices (e.g., allocation of roles, tasks, responsibilities, forms of communication between spouses/partners) that are the subject of parent's reflection on their role, undoubtedly provides the premises for building a theory of process-oriented learning that takes place throughout life. The cycles of human life, together with the social roles inherent in them, constitute an optimal basis for understanding the ongoing and fluid nature of learning. They not only make possible an empirical recognition of the essence of learning processes in specific phases of life, but also bring about the chance for a more in-depth, holistic exploration of lifelong learning.

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Data wpłynięcia: 2019-08-07,

Data uzyskania pozytywnych recenzji: 2019-12-14.