



## Family (systemic) factors influencing life standards and health of working class

Czynniki rodzinne (systemowe) wpływające na jakość życia i zdrowie dorosłych osób pracujących<sup>1</sup>

<https://doi.org/10.34766/fetr.v53i1.1129>

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**Abstract:** Adults function simultaneously in several areas, among which the most important ones are family and work. In these areas, they meet their needs and experience satisfaction as long as they are able to use them in a mature way. This, in turn, is largely conditioned by previous experiences—those from childhood. The article is a reflection on systemic factors affecting the quality of life and personality maturity of adults. Almost all of us are brought up in families. From the family we take behavior patterns, experience patterns and personality traits. Our traits, schema, and patterns of behavior affect our quality of life and maturity. Therefore, it is important that they are optimal and functional. The author uses the knowledge and research in the field of family psychology and family therapy. The definitions of a mature personality according to Irwin Yalom (therapist) and the concepts of a positive quality of life are adopted. Numerous Polish and foreign studies are cited to show the relationship between professional success and life satisfaction and the personality traits previously shaped in the family. The author presents the characteristics of families that are conducive to the maturity of their members. Special attention is drawn to the importance of the marital relationship and the sense of happiness of the spouses as the factors determining the functioning of the whole family and affecting it so that it becomes either healthy or dysfunctional. The author emphasises the characteristics of families related to their structure, communication, system boundaries and self-esteem. She writes about the dynamic balance of the family and the freedom to express one's own thoughts and feelings as the key features of a proper family system. When children experience family characteristics which are conducive to a mature personality, health and a sense of happiness, then, as adults, they succeed in various fields of life. Therefore, it seems extremely important to reflect on systemic (family) factors affecting the quality of life and human maturity.

**Key words:** family, mature personality, family features

**Abstrakt:** Człowiek dorosły funkcjonuje równocześnie w kilku obszarach, spośród których najważniejsze miejsce zajmuje rodzina oraz praca. W obszarach tych realizuje swoje potrzeby i doświadcza zadowolenia o tyle, o ile potrafi w sposób dojrzały z nich korzystać. To z kolei jest w dużym stopniu uwarunkowane wcześniejszymi doświadczeniami – z dzieciństwa. Artykuł jest refleksją nad czynnikami systemowymi wpływającymi na jakość życia i dojrzałość osobowości osób dorosłych. Prawie wszyscy wychowujemy się w rodzinach. Z rodziny wynosimy wzory zachowań, schematy przeżywania oraz cechy osobowości. Nasze cechy, schematy i wzory zachowań wpływają na jakość naszego życia i dojrzałość. Dlatego ważne jest aby były one optymalne i funkcjonalne. Autorka wykorzystuje wiedzę i badania z zakresu psychologii rodziny i terapii rodzin. Przyjmuje definicje dojrzałej osobowości według Irwina Yaloma (terapeuta) oraz koncepcję pozytywnej jakości życia. Cytuje liczne badania polskie i zagraniczne w których ukazano związek między sukcesem zawodowym i satysfakcją z życia a cechami osobowości ukształtowanymi wcześniej w rodzinie. Przedstawia cechy rodzin, które sprzyjają dojrzałości jej członków. Zwraca szczególną uwagę na ważność relacji małżeńskiej oraz poczucie szczęścia małżonków jako determinujące sposób funkcjonowania całej rodziny i wpływające na to, czy staje się ona zdrowa, czy też dysfunkcyjna. Zwraca uwagę na cechy rodzin związane z jej strukturą, z komunikacją, granicami systemowymi oraz poczuciem własnej wartości. Pisze o równowadze dynamicznej rodziny oraz wolności wyrażania własnych myśli i odczuć jako kluczowych cechach prawidłowego systemu rodzinnego. Kiedy dziecko doświadcza cech rodziny, które sprzyjają dojrzałej osobowości, zdrowiu i poczuciu szczęścia wówczas jako dorosły z powodzeniem realizuje się w wielu płaszczyznach życia. Dlatego niezwykle ważne wydają się refleksje nad czynnikami systemowymi (rodzinnymi) wpływającymi na jakość życia i dojrzałość człowieka.

**Słowa kluczowe:** rodzina, dojrzała osobowość, cechy rodzin

1 Artykuł w języku polskim: <https://www.stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/2023-1Litw.pdf>

## **Introduction**

Adults function simultaneously in several areas, among which the most important are family and work. Both work and family define people's identities, and their maturity is reflected in the proper functioning of both. Mental maturity is also manifested in the ability to enjoy work and close relationships (Lachowska, 2012, 2022).

The quality of life and health are to a large extent related to the current experiences of a person, but they are predominantly conditioned by the previous experience acquired in the family of origin. Human beings are born and brought up in families, which are their first environment, from which they draw patterns of behavior: how to cope with life and enter into relationships with others. It is in the family that the attachment style is formed, which in adult life determines a sense of security. It is in the family of origin that the foundations of personality and important interpersonal skills are formed, such as clear communication, understanding and expressing feelings, assertiveness, the ability to constructively compete and cooperate, or a sense of agency and responsibility (Braun-Galkowska, 2000 and 2008; Klajs, 2017; Marchwicki, 2009; Namysłowska, 2000).

High self-esteem, perceived as the belief that one is a good enough, valuable person, not necessarily better than others, is highly correlated in research with good quality of life, job satisfaction and health. Overall self-esteem corresponds closely to the indicator of self-compassion, kindness and understanding towards oneself and others (Dzwonkowska, 2011; Rosenberg, 1965, after: Kobus 2022).

Research shows that success is not only conditioned by possessing appropriate competences and knowledge in the field of specialization of the individual. It is appropriate personality predispositions and high and adequate self-esteem that are necessary (Klinkosz, 2016). Work performance decreases as worrying increases. (Perkins & Corr, 2005).

The research conducted by Zuzanna Klimek (2022) showed that high achievement motivation in people in early adulthood is associated with high self-compassion and low tendency to worry, and these features are shaped in family life during childhood.

Obviously, when leaving their family home, people develop further and have the opportunity to correct their ways of functioning through new relationships and their own activity, but it is the first family experiences that are crucial for the rest of their lives. (cf. Napier, 2008; Ryś, 2011; Winnicott, 2011).

## **1. Quality of life and health of working adults**

The quality of life has been defined in psychology in a number of ways, the literature also uses synonyms of this term, e.g. life satisfaction, sense of happiness, mental and physical well-being, absence of disease, good functioning. The emotional aspect of life satisfaction is defined as comfort and happiness, whereas the cognitive aspect is defined as satisfaction (Zalewska, 2003).

High quality of life is associated with a sense of meaning in life and resilience. The former depends on the level of satisfaction of existential needs – a sense of a clear and authentic identity, close and supportive relationships with other people, finding satisfying activities in everyday life, the ability to use self-distancing techniques (detaching oneself from one's own fears, conflicts, unpleasant states and events). Resilience is defined as the ability to withstand adversity and the ability to grow even in difficult conditions. The important interpersonal factors that need to be considered here are as follows: the ability to ask for help and evoke positive reactions, good contact, empathy, altruism, the ability to forgive oneself and others. As for problem solving skills, the following deserve attention: action planning, self-control, flexibility, creativity, resourcefulness, ability to use support, insight, critical thinking and self-criticism. Autonomy: internal sense of control, self-efficacy, positive self-concept, independent thinking, self-awareness, ability to distance oneself from other people's problems and opinions, sense of humour. It is also important to be aware of the purposefulness and sense of actions: focusing on achieving personal goals, interests and imagination, optimism and hope. (Cierpałkowska, 2004, 2007; Yalom, 2008, 2022).

In studies of adults on life satisfaction, resilience turns out to be the most important factor. It was found that in middle age it coexists with physical health, work commitment, mental well-being and the quality of interpersonal contacts. In studies of women between 27 and 43 years of age, resilience correlates with an increase in the intensity of positive emotions and a decrease in negative emotions, with a decrease in sensitivity towards oneself and an increase in self-confidence and an increase in pragmatic attitude towards tasks (Helsen, Klohn, 1993, after: Oleś, 2011).

In other studies, young adults with high levels of worrying showed low kindness, low understanding, and a sense of dissatisfaction with life. The tendency to worry correlates with perceiving parents as demanding, rejecting or overprotective. The rejecting attitude of the mother predominantly accounted for the tendency to worry in children and their low life satisfaction (Kobus, 2022).

Research on self-compassion showed a positive relationship between this variable and psychological well-being (McKay & Walker, 2021). Particular predictors of happiness turned out to be a high level of sense of community with other people and kindness towards oneself (Campas et al., 2016).

Psychologists formulate theses that the healthy personality development occurs when the needs of the child in early childhood are met, especially the need to feel safe, as well as a close and positive bond with caregivers. The importance of correct patterns of interpersonal relations in the family is also emphasized (Oleś, 2011; Ryś, 2011). A person's personal resources include a set of social skills learned from the family. According to Malcolm Gladwell (2010) they include: the ability to self-present, speak at the right time, establish contacts with peers, and teamwork.

## **2. The marital relationship of the parents supporting the maturity of the family members**

The definitions of a mature personality that can be found in the literature are usually formulated as a list of features that a person should possess. These features are conducive to optimal social functioning

and well-being. Particularly noteworthy is the definition of a mature personality by psychotherapist Irvin Yalom—a representative of an approach that emphasizes the importance of skills acquired in relationships.

Irvin Yalom defines maturity as the ability to take a fundamental human responsibility to create a life full of commitment, connectedness, meaning and self-fulfilment. Irvin Yalom calls such a way of life the most important existential task of man, giving meaning to one's life. The ability to live in this way is associated with the experience of good contact with oneself—one's own needs, emotions and fears, as well as trusting and close relationships with other people (Yalom, 2008, 2018, 2022 cf. Bradshaw, 1994).

Children's self-esteem and maturity are directly related to their parents' self-esteem and maturity. If parents' self-esteem is high and adequate, then children learn that their self-worth is also high. In healthy families, self-esteem is high in all members of the system (Satir, 2000a). "Family is the one place in the world where all of us can expect nurturing: soothing bruised souls, elevating self-worth, as well as getting things done. The family is the obvious place to learn this nurturing an growing" (Satir, 2000a, p. 76).

It is crucial since the sense of having important needs met in childhood, such as: care, understanding, a sense of belonging, love, acceptance, curiosity, results in a sense of security and self-worth in adulthood. In addition, it creates the so-called attachment style, i.e. a matrix of how to enter into all relationships in later life. If we developed a trusting attachment style in childhood, we can create close, satisfying and lasting relationships with other people (Marchwicki, 2009; Goldenberg, Goldenberg, 2020).

Research shows that both parental overprotectiveness and neglect hinder proper functioning in adulthood. Such attitudes of parents or guardians towards children in their childhood contribute to the emergence of personality disorders, narcissism and psychosomatic disorders (Tryjarska, 2012).

The well-known family psychotherapist Salvador Minuchin described the spouses as "family builders". He claimed that their satisfaction with the relationship determines the degree of satisfaction of all family members with what is happening in it. As the

root cause of emotional problems and disorders in children, he saw prolonged, unresolved marital crises of parents. (Minuchin et al., 2018).

In a properly functioning family, there is a so-called covenant between the parents. It's a special kind of bond that both of them care about. Such mature parents are honest and genuine in expressing their individual needs and embracing their partner's expectations. They set the rules that will prevail in their home regarding personal and common space. They determine the roles played in the family, the type of contacts with other people, everyday tasks. For the creation of the alliance, it is very important for the young partners to be emotionally separate from their families of origin and to create their own manner of functioning in their new family.

Mature spouses, apart from responsibility and efficiency in the roles of caregivers and educators, have a lot of space in their relationship, which is pleasant, spontaneous and joyful. They like to be with each other, talk, do everyday activities and enjoy themselves together. They have a sense of humor and distance to difficulties and their own weaknesses. And then children appear as a complement to their relationships and bonds. The ability to build a healthy relationship between spouses and their sense of happiness significantly affect the way the whole family functions and whether it becomes healthy or dysfunctional (Klajs 2017; Winnicott, 2011). It turns out that the condition of the family, i.e. the dominant emotions in it, the quality of mutual relations between parents and children and between the children themselves, the behavior of parents and children and their way of coping in the world, directly depends on what happens in the marital dyad and how parents–spouses experience it (Braun-Galkowska, 2018; Goldenberg, 2020; Janicka, Liberska, 2022; Namysłowska, 2000; Praszkiel, 1992).

The marital relationship affects children who, when they are born, know nothing about the world and who a human being is. Their world is the world of their parents—the norms, resources and rules they set. Children begin to adopt them as theirs. In addition, they feel the emotional climate at home, and by looking at the relationship of their parents, they learn the principles on which contact between people is based and what the relationship between a man and

a woman is about. Children are “infected” by the way parents think and experience. According to Erich Fromm, “(...) the most important prerequisite for the development of love of life in a child is the presence of life-loving people around him. This feeling is as contagious as the taste for destruction and death. It is communicated without words, without unnecessary explanations and without preaching the moral principle that <<life should be loved>>” (Fromm, 2000, p. 45, cf. Fromm, 2018; Winnicott, 2011).

The quality of the marital relationship affects various areas in the family. Researchers of family system and practitioners define and characterize these areas (Braun-Galkowska, 1992 and 2018; Beavers, Satir, 2000a and 2000b; Praszkiel, 1992). They include:

- flexible psychological boundaries that apply in the system (internal boundaries) and separating the family from the rest of the world (external boundaries). Here it is especially important to separate the parent subsystem;
- standards and rules respected by everyone and enforced by parents, which are set by parents with the participation of children;
- high self-esteem of everyone in the family and trust in the good intentions of other people in and outside the family. Open exchange with the outside world is also important
- meeting the individual needs of children and parents, exchange and community relationships
- effective communication,
- consent to express all experienced emotions,
- dynamic balance—dealing with challenges through the ability to adapt to changes that result from vertical and horizontal stressors.

A well-functioning family adapts to the changes brought about by the life and development of individual family members. It is a process of constantly returning to the constantly lost balance and developing new ways of functioning.

A family with an infant is different from the same family with an adolescent. Making the family rigid and adopting the “only right” concept of functioning is the worst thing that can happen to the system, because no one in such a family develops.

The essence of a full and happy life is to develop and mature into the best version of oneself. If parents care about it, they will infect their own children with this attitude. Maria Braun-Gałkowska, a professor at the Catholic University of Lublin, wrote about it:

“To go in the same direction is to strive together towards a goal. When the Big One and the Little One go this way, Big One shows the direction, helps the Little One not to get lost, teaches (...), and sometimes delights with the fresh look of the Little One. When you're the Little One, it's good to be able to go with the Big One, whom you can always count on. But it is also good for the Big One, for he is not alone and feels needed” (Braun-Gałkowska, 2018, p. 213).

In the next part of the article, the above-mentioned features of the family system will be described.

### **3. Family characteristics supporting the mature personality of its members**

Ryszard Praszkiel (1992) evokes ways of understanding normality in his considerations about a well-functioning family. He writes about the medical norm according to which a healthy family is one where there are no psychopathological symptoms in the identified patient (usually a child), who expresses the dysfunction of the system in terms of relationships, emotions, communication and structure. The ideal norm is an ideal family (utopian model), usually formulated as a set of features to which we compare the observed family. However, the most important perspective is the understanding of the norm (health) in the functioning of the system as a process of its adaptation to changes brought about by the life and development of each family member.

An example of a set of features characterizing a well-functioning family is the list according to Ryszard Praszkiel (1992, p. 46):

1. Clear and firm boundaries between the family and the environment (flexible external boundaries);
2. The parent subsystem is uniquely distinguished;
3. The family structure (norms, roles, hierarchy) is open and clear;
4. In the family, everyone gives and receives (balance of exchange), but also gives without expecting return;
5. The family has the capacity to make changes and overcome crises;
6. The family is open to contacts and exchanges with the world;
7. The epistemology of the family (knowledge about the rules of functioning in the system) is open, constructed jointly by all family members.

Maria Braun-Gałkowska defines the features of a healthy family:

1. It is durable (designed to last a lifetime);
2. The marital relationship is the most important in it (the quality of the whole system depends on its quality);
3. She is subjectively satisfied (happy) with her family life;
4. Performs tasks: satisfies individual psychological needs, takes care of and socializes children;
5. There is no pathology in it, such as violence, addiction or aggression (Braun-Gałkowska, 2000, p. 35-45).

The family features emphasized by David Olson (Simon, Stierlin, 1998, p. 174) are coherence, flexibility and communication. For a family to function well, it must communicate efficiently, maintain a medium level of cohesion (between confusion and alienation), optimal adaptability, and a medium degree of flexibility (between chaos and rigidity). In practice, this means that the family should communicate in every situation and in every individual and family matter, and its members retain their separateness while feeling loyalty to others. This makes the family flexibly adapt to current needs and situations.

The boundaries in the family should be flexible, i.e. clearly marked on the one hand, but also open enough to allow the flow of information and emotions between family members. In family psychology, the following boundaries are mentioned:

- external boundaries—separating the family from the rest of the world,
- intra-system boundaries—separating subsystems in the family, i.e.: parents, children, grandparents,
- individual boundaries for each family member
- (de Barbaro, 2020).

It is particularly important that there is a clear separation of the parental subsystem and clear and firm boundaries between the family and the environment. This means that parents should have their own world—separate from the one they share with their children—and their own affairs. They should also be the most responsible and caring for everyone in the family, and thus making the most important decisions regarding the entire system (Praszkie, 1992).

The norms and rules applicable in the family help to maintain the stability of family life, and thus contribute to the sense of security of its members.

The code of family rules should be adapted to the ability of individual family members to implement them, which means that, for example, one cannot expect the same from a ten-year-old child as we expect from an adult. Preferably, family norms are set by all family members, and if some rules are set by parents, it is important that children can have their say. Family rules should be clear, i.e. understandable to all family members, and open, i.e. stated directly, subject to negotiation (Praszkie, 1992; Satir, 2000a, cf. Braun-Gałkowska, 2020).

What is particularly important in the system is communication and its quality. How parents communicate with each other determines the way family talks. If their communication is clear, coherent and formulated directly, then children acquire good communication patterns through observation and identification with their parents.

Clear communication means expressing one's opinion in a manner adapted to the age and capabilities of the recipient. Coherent communication is the compliance of messages with the intention of the addresser and non-verbal communication with the meaning of words (Braun-Gałkowska, 2018).

Virginia Satir emphasized the great importance of non-verbal communication when she wrote: "Human contact is not about words. Human contact is

about eye connection, about voice, about skin, about breathing. Words are something you can read in a book, you can see on a billboard, and they can be totally differentiated from human beings. Words help when people are congruent." And congruent parents are emotionally mature (Andreas, 2001, p. 152).

Direct communication involves saying things directly to the person you want to say them to. In good communication, you can talk about anything, there are no taboos. One of the aspects of communication is the expression of emotions that parents model and name.

Expressing emotions in a well-functioning family is a common practice, i.e. all emotions from love to hate can be expressed. Even difficult feelings are expressed and family members deal with them, and above all, they recognize that experiencing them is something natural and needs to be watched.

In a well-functioning family, there are five freedoms:

- Freedom to perceive what is seen, not what should be seen.
- Freedom to feel what one feels, not what should be felt.
- Freedom to think what you think, not what you should think.
- The freedom to hear what is heard, not what should be heard.
- Freedom to say what you want, not what you should say.

These freedoms apply to all family members, but parents allow them (Satir, 2000a, 118-119).

The most common and most hurtful ways of communicating result from parents falsifying feelings, hiding a category of feelings, for example: warm and loving—"Because it's not appropriate", or negative, such as anger and dissatisfaction—"Because our family is perfect and you can't admit them."

One of the most important aspects of communicating feelings is authenticity, i.e. expressing emotional states in accordance with what we experience. Virginia Satir stressed the need for authentic parental expression. "A child feels very few feelings that the adult does not know something about from personal experience. Chil-

dren seem to thrive on the knowledge that their world of hope, fear, mistakes, imperfection and successes is a world also familiar to and shared by their parents.”

(Andreas, 2001). Parents’ openness towards the child shapes the child’s ability to accept various aspects of himself and the possibility of deal with them maturely.

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