

## **Does a breakup change the parent? Exploring parental identity processes in parents during and after separation: a longitudinal study**

Divorce became a common experience for many couples around the world. In Poland, on average, 65,000 divorces are adjudicated annually, and yet this number is one of the lowest in the European Union. It is worth emphasizing that, apart from the increase in the number of divorces, the number of marriages is decreasing, while people decide to form relationships in an informal way, which makes it difficult to collect accurate data on the number of separations. The issue of the breakup of a couple with children seems particularly important. Studies on families after separation underline the first year as a crucial period during which new relationships between the couple and between parents and children are reshaped. The research shows that after the separation, the children usually stay with the mothers, while, in most cases, fathers have contact with their offspring either every other weekend or less than once a year, gradually limiting the contact until the complete withdrawal. But what are the mechanisms underlying that process? Do parents who cease contact with their kids stop feeling like parents? And do the child's primary caregivers begin to see their parental role as more important in the process of self-identification? Answers to these questions can be provided by examining the parental identity of the parents during and after separation. Previous research on separated parents focused mainly on fulfilling the parental role and explored the issue of custody agreements. Meanwhile, the transformations in functioning as a parent following the separation (including an increased amount of time spent with the child by mothers and limited or entirely reduced contact with a child by fathers) indicate the need to fill the gap in knowledge about how these changes are related to identity processes in the parental domain.

To do this, we will perform an analysis of the identity processes of parents during and after separation. We will test whether changes in parental identity are related to the current state of separation, and in what direction they go with subsequent stages of separation (from the early stage, when one of the parents moves out, to later stages during which attempts to structure the family system occurs). Moreover, as a well-developed and established parental identity is related to mental health and can be a protective factor during crises, we will check the relationship of parental identity with the level of psychological well-being, depression, and parental anxiety.

As previous research on parents in the process of separation used only binary measures of gender, this study will look at parental identity using three different gender perspectives: sex assigned at birth, gender identity, and self-ascribed masculinity-femininity. A look at parental identity from the above perspectives will allow for a deeper understanding of the gender role in the context of changes in parental identity.

Additionally, this study uses the latest technology in natural language processing (NLP) to improve how we analyze data. We compare answers from open-ended questions about well-being, depression, and anxiety, processed by AI, with results from traditional questionnaires. We also experiment with using NLP to better understand how parents view their roles after separation.

In this study, we assume that parents' separation will lead to changes in their parental identity. On the one hand, it can lead to increased engagement of parents who become the primary caretaker. On the other hand, it can cause regret of becoming a parent in both: parents who are the main caregiver of the child and perceive parenthood as too burdensome, as well as in parents who have limited contact with the child. We also assume these changes will depend on biological sex, self-identified gender, and self-ascribed masculinity/femininity.

Previous studies of separation have not looked at parental identity using a longitudinal method. Meanwhile, to understand the process of identity changes, it seems necessary to systematically repeat measurements, which will allow for capturing these transformations in parental identity over time. The one-year plan of this study will bring a broader understanding of what happens to parents during and after separation, what mechanisms occur in their identity, and how they are related to the custody agreement.