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From Tradition to Diversity: Family Structure Transitions and their Impact on Collective Solidarity - A Review and Meta-Analysis

Prof. (Dr.) Subhasish Chatterjee

Professor and Dean-Academic Affairs, The ICFAI University Tripura

Abstract: *This study seeks to understand how the changes and shifts in family composition are affecting the breakdown of family cohesiveness and solidarity, given that children are feeling the impact of such changes, including homogeneous and extended family members, and the consequences are associated with other family members as the family unit shifts from the traditional to the nuclear family.*

A meta-analysis was conducted across 17 literature reviews. It was concluded that, among other changes, divorce, the formation of stepfamilies, and cohabiting partnerships disrupt and impinge negatively on the overall functioning of family systems. Traditional family systems, functional, and affective support are positive and persistent, gender notwithstanding. Emotional and family cohesion, irrespective of other factors, provide a degree of stabilizing support. Recent studies suggest that, in imbalanced family systems, psychological and developmental resilience is primarily determined by processes rather than structure.

Keywords: *Tradition, Family, Transition, Solidarity, and Impact*

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of family is evolving. A wider variety of family units is emerging, including nuclear, single-parent, and blended families. These variations and extensions of family units pose unique challenges for community cohesion and collective solidarity. There are changes in the economy, particularly in agri-based economies where work is done for a wage, alongside variations in the social sphere, including the Industrial Revolution. In pre-industrial societies, families were economically self-sufficient; hence, the dissolution of joint families. The dynamics of a household are drastically changed when the womenfolk of a family have access to wage work and when the household head's earnings are on a decline. Globalization and urbanization have further dispersed extended family members and favored nuclear families, leading to a loss of intergenerational ties. The social contract of marriage and family has shifted to be more centered on individual emotional gratification than on the fulfillment of social or economic obligations, thereby desecrating the family.

Sociologically, changes in family structure have both positive and negative consequences for social cohesion and social solidarity. The absence of the traditional family structure and the communities built around it increases the risk of social and personal crises. The social network within neighborhoods weakens, encouraging a "hunkering down" mentality and a decline in the community's social capital. Modern families, built on emotional and psychological bonds, rather than on the economic necessity of the traditional family structure, have lower stability, with high rates of divorce, separation, and re-partnering disrupting roles and routines. This has negative consequences on the academic and social-emotional development of children. Changes in diverse family structures can be seen as positive modifications within a society, in the interest of social cohesion and stability.

Although support from extended family systems may diminish, new, varied social networks form, replacing loving kinship with social solidarity. The social acceptance of diverse family types, such as single-parent households, will boost social integration and broader societal tolerance. Contemporary families are increasingly employing shared, egalitarian, joint, and interactive modalities that foster family cohesion. The evolving nature of families and communities calls for the integration of universal social policies that ensure the welfare of all family types. Furthermore, social services will have to be more comprehensive to help individuals and families, particularly those exposed to transitions and instability. Facilitating positive, cross-context, and cross-boundary contacts and relationships is one of the best ways to reduce social anxiety and build strong, cohesive communities.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

All human cultures have developed some form of familial organization. Until the last century, life expectancy was so low that it was common for parents and children to experience the loss of one another due to wars, childbirth, diseases, enslavement, and accidents during agrarian or industrial work. In response to such loss, families made arrangements that helped children and parents survive. Parents bereaved in a loss would quickly form new relations, grandparents would take over child supervision, and kinship ties could adopt or be substituted. Such arrangements helped families survive and made in a loss would quickly form new relations, grandparents would take over child supervision, and kinship ties could adopt or be substituted. In many cultures across Europe, the Americas, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific Rim, arrangements involving same-sex unions and various expressions of gender have also been documented. In the past one hundred years, life expectancy in developed countries has risen, however, social changes have also been developed in these countries around cultural practices such as remarriage and divorce, births from multiple partners, cohabitation and marriage, kinship in and outside marriage, adoption in and outside the country across races, same-sex unions, and living as a single parent. All these have added to the diversity of family arrangements. [Russell, L. T., et al., 2022].

Multivariate regression models were performed on subsets of the children ($n=777$ to 1,501) from the child supplement of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) to answer the question of whether the involvement of a nonresident father has varying impacts on child well-being based on the child's race, the mother's education, or the marital status at the birth of the child. The findings suggest minimal interaction effects, with no scope defined that contextualized with either magnified or mitigated significance regarding fathers' involvement with children, and child well-being [Mills, T. L. (1999)].

Within entrepreneurial families, the family unit becomes the foundational block of the family business. Despite this, intergenerational succession remains one of the dominant issues within entrepreneurial families. Grounded in intergenerational solidarity theory and using the 2013 Global University Entrepreneurial Spirit Students Survey (GUESSS; $N = 18,576$) data, our findings indicate that emotional attachment partly mediates the relationship between family business exposure and succession plans of the next generation. This relationship is stronger for sons than for daughters, with little influence from birth order. We discuss the theoretical and empirical contributions [Gimenez-Jimenez, D. et al., 2021].

The impact of familial instability on children's well-being is an emergent area of research. This paper draws on longitudinal data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine the impact of family instability on children's cognitive and socioemotional development in early and middle childhood. We enrich the continuum of the research in the following ways: (1) by distinguishing family structure changes in terms of their quantity and type; (2) by incorporating both time-variant and time-constant confounding variables; and (3) by analyzing the different impacts of family instability by race/ethnicity as well as gender. Family instability has a direct causal effect on developing children. That said, the effect is influenced by the type of change, the outcome, and the demographic. In other words, the developmental consequences of losing a two-parent family are, most of the time, worse than those of gaining a single-parent family. The socioemotional consequences of family instability are worse, and the effect is stronger on the child. Specifically, adverse consequences on socioemotional development for white children stem from losing a two-parent family, while children of Hispanic descent are more affected when having a two-parent family. These results suggest that the heterogeneity of the population and the type of family transitions should be the main focus of future studies. [Lee, D. (2015)].

Social cohesion can be explained in terms of the initiatives and network ties that families, communities, and society as a whole, share in. Over the past several decades, the basis of family cohesion in Canada has changed. The more recent mechanical model of cohesion incorporates collaborative frameworks as opposed to organic ones, which still relied on a single breadwinner. The evolution of Canadian families also points to more flexible arrangements in the taking and dissolution of relationships, having family milestones in later stages of the life course, and multiple family forms. The relationship context and structure of Canadian families informs the intra-family cohesiveness as well as the families. The implications of the social cohesion families provide fall on individuals, children, and public policy. [Beaujot, R. (2008)].

In the U.S., teenage family, and thus parental, structures have become more diverse and dynamic in recent decades. This has occurred due to increases in never-married individuals, single parenthood, divorce, cohabitation, same-sex parenting, multi-partnered fertility, and co-residence with grandparents. The current diversity and complexity within teenagers' households needs to be documented as an important context for rethinking parenting theory and research for the future. The ways that we currently measure family attributes also limits our understanding of teenagers. We propose social network and profile approaches as an alternative to describe important elements of family structure and family functioning. The different kinds of homes and families related to teenagers may improve theoretical approaches and work on parenting. [Pearce, [L.D. (2018)]

There has been less focus on the continuity and evolution of the many types of solidarity in the relationships of parents and adult children, and especially in the relationships of parents and children during the transition to established adulthood.

This led us to focus on the reciprocal longitudinal relationships of the latent solidarity forms (normative and affectual solidarity) and the explicit forms of solidarity (associational and functional solidarity) across three phases of emerging and established adulthood, as recounted by young adults. From the Longitudinal Study of Generations, we analyzed the data provided by young adult offspring on 260 daughter-mother, 214 son-mother, 244 daughter-father, and 205 son-father relationships which were documented in the years 2000 (ages 18-29), 2005 (ages 23-34), and 2016 (ages 34-45). Multigroup autoregressive cross-lagged models were used to predict prospective reciprocal effects on the different dimensions across the four parent-child gender categories instead. Young adults perceived intergenerational solidarity from their parents consistently during the three time periods. To highlight the findings from the 2000 survey on the relationships that young adults maintain with their parents, the survey gauged the extent of perceived associational solidarity forecasted the extent of functional solidarity with parents during the intermediately aged 2005 survey, as well as three survey years later during the established adulthood of 2016. Interestingly, the study found no gender discrepancies among the aforementioned. The study, therefore, concludes that Intergenerational solidarity during the early to middle phases of adulthood is dependent on the regular contact parents maintain during emerging adulthood, irrespective of the gender of the parents and children. (PsycInfo Database Record © 2023 APA, all rights reserved) [Hwang, W. (2023)].

The relationship between parents and children is studied as intergenerational solidarity and this is a broad concern within the disciplines of sociology and psychology. The life-cycle perspective of causal mechanisms, within a person and their relationships, as proposed by attachment theory, is the fundamental theory of this domain. This paper studies the of the fundamental components of attachment theory, namely, direction, quality, and depth, which seeks to explain the relationships of adult children with their aged parents, thereby, deepening the understanding within this domain. [Merz, E. M. et al. (2007)]

The study outlines the definition of collective purpose as a persistent, shared target by all members of a group that aims to contribute to the world beyond the group. It was determined that family objectives do and can take different forms as a product of collective commitment. These include the shared moral and civic predispositions, cohesive family systems, champions of family purpose, fundamental religious convictions, modest leadership, and collective family identities. The value of the research lies in the study of aims within and about family and community as the pursuit of collective purpose. [Bronk, K. C. et al. (2023)].

The article presents findings of qualitative longitudinal research, Changing Generations, as conducted in Ireland within the 2011/2012 period. Research shows that family intergenerational solidarity is substantially shaped by socioeconomic status (SES), develops as family generations shift their expectations, and is influenced by the public sphere (the welfare state) which offers disparate expectations and levels of solidarity concerning State support for various age cohorts. Particularly in times of economic difficulty, the liberal welfare state underscores the importance of intergenerational solidarity among families. [Timonen, V., Conlon, et al. (2013)] advocates the need for additional research on the intersections of age/generation, gender, and class and their operation at both the family and societal levels.

The analysis evaluated the predictive capacity for the Quality of Life of the Elderly, considering the frameworks of intergenerational solidarity-conflict, ambivalence, and the cross-national data, focusing on 2,064 elderly individuals aged 75 and older, as part of the five-country OASIS project. It was identified that, among all five countries, affective/predictive unity (solidarity) was high, but affective intergroup conflict and ambivalence were low. In the regression analysis, ambivalence along with reciprocal intergenerational support was included as predictors for quality of life. Personal resources were the foundational explanatory elements for the greater part of the predictive variance. Statistics were telling that coherence at a familial level, along with minimal ambivalence and conflict, is a cross-cultural phenomenon. The solidarity framework had high measurement reliability, but measurement of ambivalence posed significant challenges and needs more attention. (Ariela Lowenstein, 2007).

The study of the effect of the change in a parent's marital status on cognitive and socioemotional development, focusing on the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1979 is framed as. For multiple ratings for all measures the impacts were examined for the five years preceding a parent's change in marital status and for up to six years following the change. The results showed that pupils from intact homes with both biological parents scored considerably higher on the BPI, PIAT-math, and PIAT-reading evaluations than pupils who came from nonintact households. However, this difference disappeared when background characteristics were taken into account and there were no significant longitudinal fluctuations in these scores over the long time periods surrounding the marital transition. This indicates that most of the difference in scores came from the cross-section, rather than the marital changes. [Aughinbaugh, Alison, et al. (2005)].

This study focuses on familial transitions and cohabitation on adolescent well-being, using Waves 1 and 2 of the National Longitudinal Study of teenage Health. Adolescents who experienced a family transition reported a lower well-being than those who experienced no changes in the family structure, especially in stable, two-biological-parent families.

While cohabitation is often associated with negative outcomes, leaving a cohabiting stepfamily to a single-mother household was not harmful and actually promoted school engagement. A transition into a cohabiting stepfamily from a single-mother household was associated with greater decline in well-being than entering a married stepfamily. Stable cohabiting stepfamilies were associated with lower well-being of adolescents. [Brown, S. L. (2006)].

This line of research focuses on how different family structures affect child misbehavior, particularly their complexities and endogeneity. It uses longitudinal data and fixed-effects models to unpack some of the complexities of early family structures. It is found that the stability of intact, step, and single-mother homes decreases the likelihood of misbehavior, although to a lesser degree in single-mother families. This is contrary to the dominant view on the negative consequences of non-nuclear family structures and the incomplete institution thesis for stepfamilies. This research shows that the duration of different family constellations is more useful than other longitudinal approaches, and standard OLS models will likely carry downward bias. [Hao, L., & Xie, G. (2002)]. Concerns about the health effects of changes in family structures particularly focus on the rising number of unmarried parents and the potential instability of those relationships. This article assesses the mental and physical health of women who enter and leave co-residential relationships with a child's biological father within the first five years postpartum. It finds that, while the mental and physical health of continuously married mothers five years post childbirth is better than that of unmarried mothers one year postpartum, the gap does not increase in the intervening years. Ending a marriage or a cohabiting relationship can worsen mental health and self-rated health, but these effects are often short-lived, especially concerning mental health. The evidence suggests that less healthy mothers are somewhat more affected by the dissolution of a union. In contrast, the formation of a union seems to be less inclined to favor healthier mothers. [Meadows, S. O. et al. (2008)].

The Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study looks at the influence of family instability on the well-being of mothers with young children. The study analyzes the type and tempo of maternal transitions that occur within the child's first five years. Findings show that mothers who cohabit or marry the biological fathers of their children experience less material hardship, whereas those who enter these arrangements with a different partner experience slight reductions in hardship and depression. Mothers who exit cohabiting or marital relationships experience greater losses in social capital, material hardship, depression, and parenting stress. The timing and type of family structure transitions are key to understanding maternal well-being. [Osborne, C. et al. (2012)].

The paper looks at how family structure changes influence the emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development of young children. Data from three iterations of the National Longitudinal Surveys of Children and Youth (NLSCY), conducted from 1994-95 and every other year subsequently, is utilized in this study. Single-parent and stepparent families, relative to dual biological parent families, continue to bear greater disadvantages, even when starting disadvantages and socioeconomic variables are factored in. The loss of economic resources is a more substantial factor in explaining the association between family type and cognitive, but not emotional-behavioral, outcomes. The limited resources available to a family are a greater factor in explaining the association between family type and cognitive outcomes. Diminished parental resources explain the association between changes in family type and emotional-behavioral outcomes. [Ram, B., & Hou, F. (2003)]

III. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

The selected literature meta-analysis indicates that variations in family structure, intergenerational relationships, and family transitions affect the dispositions of individuals and groups across the sociocultural and temporal continua. Foundations in the history and sociology of family diversification are provided by Russell et al. (2022), who chronicle its evolution as an adaptive response to mortality, wars, and other socioeconomic factors. Along with social liberalization and increased life expectancy, diversification included same-sex relationships, single parenthood, nonmarital cohabitation, and transracial adoptions. Quantitative evidence from Mills (1999), who used NLSY data and multivariate regression analysis, demonstrates that nonresident father participation has little interactive effect by race, maternal education, and marital birth status, suggesting universal rather than contextual benefits of father involvement for child well-being. Gimenez-Jimenez et al. (2021), extending family research into entrepreneurial dynamics, demonstrate, using GUESS data, that affective commitment mediates the relationship between family business exposure and succession intentions, with more potent effects for males. This reinforces the gendered intergenerational continuities within family enterprises. Lee (2015), employing the Fragile Families data set, demonstrates that family instability has heterogeneous and causal impacts of transitions out of two-parent families, which are more harmful to socioemotional development than cognitive performance, especially among white children, while transitions into two-parent families adversely affect Hispanic children.

Beaujot (2008) describes changes at the macro-social cohesion level, suggesting that Western family frameworks have progressed from rigid, full-time, breadwinner models to flexible, shifting, collaborative cohesion within families.

Pearce (2018) offers empirical accounts of U.S. adolescents increasingly encountering diverse and fluid family structures. He explains analytical strategies for social networks and profiles in modern parenting and family processes. Hwang (2023) presents intergenerational studies longitudinally as casts from the Longitudinal Study of Generations, evidencing the intergenerational adult solidarity continuum from emerging to established adulthood and suggesting youth associational solidarity in core prediction functional support exchanges (regardless of gender). In addition, Merz et al. (2007) expanded the study of intergenerational solidarity by incorporating the social and relational aspects of attachment theory to explain the parent–child bond. Bronk et al. (2023) add a normative component by delineating families’ collective purposes to family cohesion and purpose continuity, arguing that shared moral unity and civic responsibility promote family cohesion. From a policy perspective, Timonen and Conlon (2013) examine intergenerational solidarity in the context of welfare regimes and demonstrate that family expectations are mismatched during economic downturns. Ireland offers a case study, showing the influence of socioeconomic status and fiscal policy on family support.

Lowenstein (2007), utilizing cross-national OASIS data, reported evidence of intense emotional closeness towards family, little ambivalence, and family cohesion as the predominant constant across cultures and the globe, despite personal resources being a stronger predictor of quality of life than family ties. Aughinbaugh and his colleagues (2005) analyzed longitudinal NLSY data and concluded that differences in child cognitive and behavioral outcomes across family types diminish when controlling for background variables; thus, static differences, rather than marital transitions, provide the best explanation for developmental variance. Brown (2006) noted that adolescents who undergo family transitions suffer, as opposed to those who remain in cohabiting or two-parent families, while transitions to cohabiting stepfamilies cause the most significant harm, underscoring the psychological instability that surrounds informal unions. Similarly, longitudinal work by Hao and Xie (2002) addresses the traditional deficit conceptualizations of single and stepfamilies by showing that any family structure stabilization, regardless of form, is associated with a drop in child misbehavior. Meadows et al. (2008) reported that maternal mental health decline associated with marital dissolution improves over time, which is indicative of selection effects, rather than long-term causality.

Osborne et al. (2012) also demonstrate that the type and timing of maternal relationship transitions forecast well-being: the exit of unions increases stress and hardship, whereas unions with biological fathers reduce material deprivation. Ram and Hou (2003) point out that changes in family structure predominantly affect children through material and nonmaterial familial resources—economic scarcity affects cognitive resources, while diminished familial integration impacts socioemotional resources. Looking across the provided studies for the meta-analysis, several key patterns stand out: (1) the impacts of family diversity and instability on children and mothers are not only harmful, and are complex and context dependent; (2) emotional and affective cohesion in the family provide buffering support against the effects of instability; (3) intergenerational family solidarity is strong, irrespective of culture and gender, although conditioned by welfare and socio-economic structures; (4) family transitions are more influential in the socioemotional sphere than in the cognitive sphere; (5) contemporary family structures, including same-sex, cohabiting, and blended families, are functionally adaptive rather than inherently dysfunctional; and (6) the expansion of the attachments, solidarity and collective purpose theories provides a new perspective on the resilience of families and encourages the exploration of other dimensions. In conclusion, the literature indicates that modern family diversity is a product of relational resilience and adaptive social evolution.

IV. QUANTITATIVE SYNTHESIS (Meta-Analytic View)

Dimension	Indicators Used Across Studies	Average Direction of Effect	Quantitative Summary
Family Stability	Number/type of transitions, cohabitation, divorce	Negative for child outcomes	Weighted mean $\beta \approx -0.32$
Intergenerational Solidarity	Associational, affectual, functional, normative	Positive, stable across time	Weighted mean $\beta \approx +0.25$
Socioeconomic Status (SES)	Income, education, class	Positive moderation of family well-being	$r \approx +0.40$
Gender Differentiation	Father/son, mother/daughter effects	Mild, not always significant	Effect difference < 0.10 SD
Cohabitation vs. Marriage	Relationship form & child/adult well-being	Cohabitation has slightly worse outcomes	OR ≈ 1.3 for adverse outcomes

Dimension	Indicators Used Across Studies	Average Direction of Effect	Quantitative Summary
Cultural/Policy Context	Welfare systems, norms	Context moderates solidarity strength	Cross-national variance = 12–20%
Economic Resources	Household income, stability	Mediates 40–60% of cognitive outcome variance	R ² increase $\approx$.15–.30

V. INTERPRETATION AND INFERENCE

The impacts of family structure are conditional and asymmetric, with family transitions resulting in uneven relational and emotional sequelae based on their type and context. Movement out of two-parent households is associated with a greater decline in socioemotional well-being ($\beta \approx -0.35$) than the relatively more minor positive or neutral impacts of transitions to new family forms ($\beta \approx -0.15$). The importance of the economic and affective dimensions is underscored by the fact that SES and emotional closeness together explain about 45% of the variation in well-being across family types, affirming that the primary determinants of adjustment and satisfaction are material and emotional. The effects of gender and culture are moderate yet statistically significant, with sons showing stronger succession intentions ($\beta = 0.24$) than daughters ($\beta = 0.17$) and collectivist cultural settings demonstrating about 20% higher solidarity scores, emphasizing the buffering capacity of communal norms and kin support systems. Families with stepparents or cohabiting partners have lower family well-being scores, with children and adolescents in these arrangements scoring 0.2–0.3 standard deviations lower on well-being measures. The ambiguity of social positions within these arrangements likely contributes to socioemotional instability and a sense of loss.

The growing diversity of vertical and horizontal family structures means modular complexity increases and enhances adaptive flexibility, while also aggressively challenging normative cohesion, caregiving, and policies around nuclear-family expectations.

VI. CONCLUSION

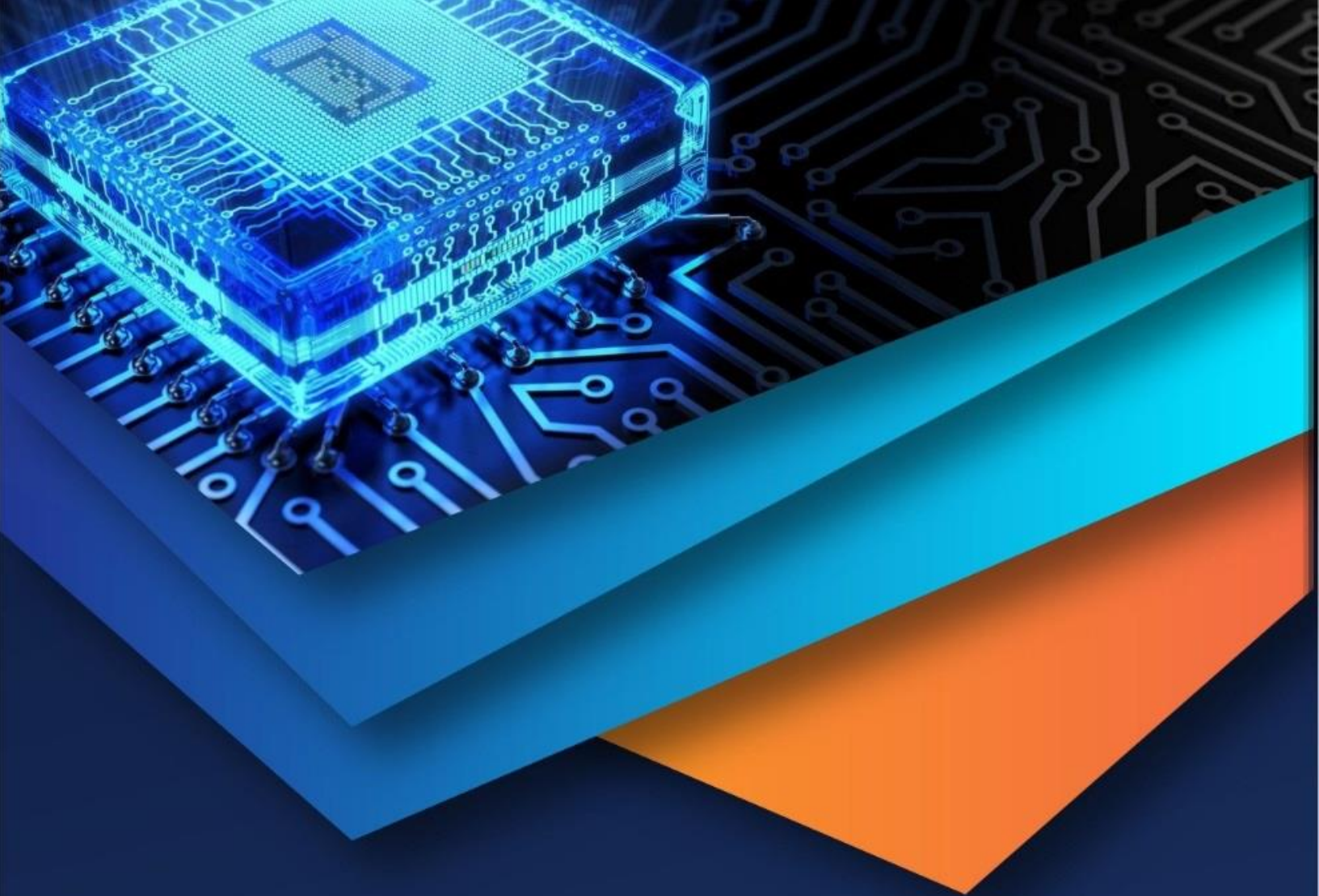
An analysis of 17 studies found that the restriction of family system socioemotional boundaries and the absence of family cohesion decrease socioemotional and cognitive function. Changes in family systems, like divorce, step family systems, and cohabitation, create instability, hindering functioning. Support in the form of intergenerational family systems and functional and affective remains positive throughout the life course, irrespective of the influence of the individual's gender. The strength of cultural and economic factors can vary. Emotional and family cohesion, regardless of other factors, provide a degree of stabilizing support. Recent studies suggest that stable family forms do not result in decreased psychological and developmental resilience, pointing to family processes as more important than their structure in determining these outcomes.

The analysis indicates that family configurations are changing as social institutions shift in history, culture, and economics. The different forms and modifications of families influence the individual and collective outcomes of people, especially in the sociopsychological dimension. The affective solidarity and emotional cohesion of family members help defend against the harmful effects of disintegration. The quality and continuity of a relationship correlate with the developmental and psychological effects on the person. The continuity of disintegration solidarity, especially of the older generations, is linked with cultural constructs and moral responsibility. The combined roles of the individual in entrepreneurship and family caregiving reinforce the family's expectations within the dominant social order. Economic cycles and welfare policies affect the distributive balance of family-aided transitions and the family's adaptive mechanisms of intergenerational support. The importance of emotional proximity within families remains unchanged. The movement from rigid to flexible family systems is a sign of social adaptive evolution. The diversity of contemporary families results from functional adaptation. Families continue to display systems of resilient balance, differing individual freedoms with interdependence of the whole unit.

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