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The Systematic Review Study of Evolving Landscape of Domestic Relations: Psychological and Social Outcomes of Single-Parent and Blended Units

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Abstract: ***Recent domestic relations research demonstrates a dramatic movement and evolution between family forms. While nuclear and blended family and single-parent households remain prevalent, more diverse and complex arrangements such as communal living and cohabitation are on the rise. Following a twenty-study literature review and qualitative secondary data research on the datasets created on the sociology of family structures, this review aims to describe the social and emotional consequences of this phenomenon for the families in question. Restructured families can suffer from emotional distress due to decreased parental commitment and longer and more complex child adjustment periods. Blended and single-parent families try to cope with financial difficulties and emotional distress, triggering work role and emotional integration antagonism. Nevertheless, the families in question in this review do exhibit model and distress-appropriate psychosocial resilience. The presence and level of flexibility concerning social integration and the circulation of structural and normative resources modify the emotional consequences of family changes. Cohesion and emotional stability with family and social relations are linked with mental and emotional problems of distress. The review aims to highlight the problems families living in these provisions experience, and the probable issues this presents concerning relations and social provisions.***
Keywords: Landscape, Domestic, Psychological, Social, Single-parent, Blended

I. INTRODUCTION

The changes in society nowadays, such as the increase in urbanization, changing social norms, the development of single-parent families, and blended families, can pose difficulties for children. Nevertheless, the family functions and relationships are more significant than the family structure in the family and the predicted outcomes on the psychological and social functioning of the children. When children are in single-parent families, they may feel confused, sad, and abandoned, particularly when the divorce or separation was accompanied by parental discord. Stress, exhaustion, and financial issues in a parent can directly affect the children's emotional and psychological functioning, resulting in anxiety or depression.

Conversely, children in single-parent homes may become more resilient, responsible, and independent as they increase their household contributions. Over-dependence in a relationship can strengthen the parent-child bond. The absence of one parent, particularly of a father figure, may adversely affect a child's social development, resulting in trust issues and social awkwardness.

In summary, children in single-parent families can form a strong social support system, encounter a variety of individuals, and experience low parental conflict. Thus, single-parent families may provide a more stable home environment.

There are numerous advantages to children being members of blended families. These children are able to appreciate different viewpoints as well as varied experiences. They are also provided consistency and a sense of security. Nevertheless, the intricate nature of such families can result in sibling rivalry, conflict of loyalties, and ambiguity surrounding parental authority. Conflicts can occur when forming new relationships with step-siblings and stepparents, as new relational structures require much patience and tolerance.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature on the impact of divorce on adults and children within the divorce-stress-adjustment framework is reviewed. It answers five primary questions. Part of the questions include what explains the difference between the well-being of the divorced and the married, and the difference between what we consider temporary crises and what we consider long-term problems. It also examines the factors that mediate and the factors that shield divorce from negative consequences on personal well-being.

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Results show that divorce does disrupt social life. But for individuals, outcomes for adjustments are different: some people gain from a divorce, some experience a temporary decline, while others experience permanent negative consequences. There is a need to explain these outcomes. [Amato, P. R. (2000).]

As noted by Paul Amato, the effect of the latest shifts in United States family structures on children's cognitive, social, and emotional well-being is enormous. Amato compares children who grow up in stable, two-parent families with those who grow up in single-parent families, and observes that the former experience fewer cognitive, emotional, and social problems during their lives. While it is not possible to state that family structures are the direct cause of these differences, it is possible to state that the differences are, to an extent, the result of statistical correlation. Stable two-parent families experience less poverty, provide better parenting, and expose children to fewer adverse circumstances.

Even if attributes of marriage-promotion policies can only incipiently better child well-being, Amato, for instance, indicates, few cases of children experiencing social or emotional difficulties might correspondingly yield many cases that could be positively influenced.[Amato, P. R. (2005).]

Cooper states that according to data collected from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, maternal parenting stress can be explained by transitions within the family structure. Using multilevel modeling, the author explains how mothers who are in and out of relationships with biological fathers, and in and out of relationships with non-biological fathers, have different levels of parenting stress, and how the levels of stress compare to those of mothers who are in stable relationships. Furthermore, she states that mothers who become partnered with biological fathers and live with them, and are single mothers, have lower levels of stress than married mothers. According to the author, post-transition support is more critical than pre-transition support and is vital for explaining the gaps in mothers' relationships and resources, especially biological gaps and stressed mothers. Moreover, the educational level of the post-transition instrument impacts transition-related stress. Highly educated mothers feel educationally fair.[Cooper, C. E., (2009)]

A large body of research has investigated how family structure and children within single-parent households can be associated with negative outcomes. Using the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, this specific investigation focuses on the implications of family structure on economic well-being in adulthood. Single parenting during childhood has consequences that impact all family resources, and these consequences carry over to education, adulthood, marital status, and income. Yet, when considering demographic and early economic variables, the impact of family structure on economic outcomes in adulthood is not as significant as initially suggested. This would indicate that the initial relationships were largely a consequence of the economic situation in childhood. [Leonard M. Lopoo(2014)].

Changes in family structures, particularly family separation and the formation of stepfamilies, can adversely affect children’s health and well-being, particularly in relation to stress. This study uses data from the German Health Interview and Examination Survey for Children and Adolescents to examine the effect of single-parent families (n=117) and stepfamilies (n=80) on children’s C-reactive protein (CRP) levels, a biological marker of psychosocial stress. Results show that a change in the family structure to single-parent family status significantly heightens children’s chronic stress and CRP levels, while the transition to a stepfamily does not alter the level of stress. This illustrates the consequences of stress exposure in children, particularly in the transition to single-parent families. [Kleinschlömer, P. et. al.2024]

Different family environments and structures shape children’s development in various domains, particularly in mental health. Families are the primary source of education, and children rely on families for the structural and emotional supports of safety, belonging, and attachment. Therefore, changes in the family arrangements in family structures can negatively affect children. This is particularly evident in single vs. two-parent families. This review addresses the mental health ramifications of children's stress exposure in the context of these family structures. [Yang, W. (2022]

Research on family instability and its ramifications for children is growing. This article assesses the consequences of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study longitudinal research on children’s cognitive and socioemotional competencies during early and middle childhood. Various family structure changes, most determining fragile families' response over time, are analyzed alongside time-varying and time-constant confounding variables, including race/ethnicity and gender. The research shows that the development of a child is negatively impacted by family structure instability. Furthermore, a transition from a two-parent family is typically associated with the worst outcomes, especially in socioemotional development. Ending two-parent families negatively impacts White children, while beginning two-parent families negatively impacts Hispanic children. The research emphasizes the importance of the transitions in family structures while simultaneously highlighting the need for greater attention to diversity in the population. [Lee, D., & McLanahan, S. (2015)]

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This research uses the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to evaluate the consequences of transitions of parents' marriages and cohabitations on adolescent outcomes, which include delinquency, depression, and school commitment. Family transitions for adolescent children coincided with poorer outcomes in comparison to children from stable, two-biological-parent families. Although cohabitation was linked with poorer outcomes, a transition from a cohabiting stepfamily to a single-mother family was associated with greater school engagement, which also highlights the contradictory outcomes associated with family transitions. In contrast, the transition from a single-mother family to a cohabiting stepfamily had a greater adverse impact on well-being than the transition to a married stepfamily. Generally, stable cohabiting stepfamilies were less beneficial to well-being than stable married stepfamilies, and the addition of marriage had little effect on adolescents' well-being overall.[Brown, S. L. (2006)].

The impact of parental separation on mental health among adolescents has been documented in a study involving 16-19-year-old adolescents in Norway. This group demonstrated higher mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, problems with conduct, and ADHD, with an effect score of 0.15-0.20 standard deviations, as compared to adolescents with non-separated parents. While a greater-than-average negative life event exposure did moderate the effect of separation on mental health, the impact of negative life events did not mitigate the separation effect. This suggests that while the exposure to negative life events accounts to some degree the association of weaker mental health with parental separation, the effects of parental separation on mental health is not to be considered small. This means negative life events must be documented when providing mental health care to adolescents, particularly to those with parents who have separated. [Karhina, K., Bøe, T., Hysing, M. et al,2023]

The literature indicates that single parents of adolescents and children have ramifications on behavior, psychology, and well-being. During the adolescent years, which are of utmost importance for socio-psychological development, special attention is required to wellness and wellness promotion in a bid to ease adult transition. This study focuses on social skills, emotional regulation, and the behavioral components that predict resilience and overall wellness in single-parent adolescents. This was a cross-sectional study.

The participants in the research were 385 teenagers from the state of Kerala (179 boys and 206 girls, who were 15.03 ± 1.45 years young). For 185 (48.1%) participants, the family circumstances involved the loss of a parent. The remaining 200 participants were from divorced or separated families. The participants completed the measures of the study variables: self-reported resilience, social competence, emotional regulation (emotion suppression and emotion reappraisal), and psychological well-being. Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS and AMOS 24. Higher levels of psychological health in teenagers from single-parent families were associated with resilience, prosocial behavior, and positive reappraisal of emotion. Negative reappraisal of emotions, emotion suppression, and antisocial behavior, along with social competence, were found to be detrimental to the mental health of teenagers from single-parent families. While mental health is directly predicted by resilience, the negative links between prosocial behavior and cognitive reappraisal soften this impact. This research contributes novel evidence to the role of social competencies and adaptive emotion regulation in improving the mental health of single-parent adolescents. The results have implications for mental health support in clinical, educational, and community settings. [Sia SK, A. (2024)]

Internalizing and externalizing behavior problems are sometimes examined by comparing children in two-parent and single-parent families. This research compares and analyzes behaviors in two-parent families, single-mother families, and single-father families, using data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study. Findings suggest that children in single-parent households show behavior problems more as time progresses, but, after controlling for physical and social resource factors, behavior problems appear. Single parents who have comparable resources to two-parent families and are economically coupled show non-compliance and externalizing behaviors that are exceeded by children in two-parent families. The results confirm constructivist theories of parenting and the role behavioral income and parental involvement play in the child behavior outcomes. [Faulconer, S. C. M., et.al.(2022)]

Research also shows that children living in non-traditional family structures experience more cognitive and socio-emotional difficulties. This type of research is limited, however, and in Australia, it is limited in this context. This report fills this research gap using the Young Minds Matter survey data in Australia (N = 6310), linking family structure and child mental disorders. In assessing multiple mental disorders, the report shows that children in non-traditional families experience a greater burden of mental disorders. The amount of time that has passed since parents separated does not impact the occurrence of mental disorders. While the findings do not point to a causation, they do shed light on the link between mental health and family configuration. There is a need for intervention for children from atypical family structures to address mental health issues. [Francisco Perales et. al. (2018)]

Compared to children from nuclear families, adolescents from blended families are more likely to suffer emotional and psychological problems, especially in the transition to adulthood.

A narrative review of studies published between 2019 and 2024, considering romantic relationships, parent-teen relationships, lingering effects post-adolescence, violence, and the absence of intimacy and security, outlined the need for research on adolescent experiences. The findings are relevant for policy and social work. [Evans-Mayner, G. K. (2025)].

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This research focuses on how nonresidential fatherhood affects the quality of relationships and parenting of fathers with their adolescent and young adult children on the islands of Curaçao and in the Netherlands. For this, 450 Curaçao and 585 Dutch respondents filled in an online survey and participated in the research. Nonresidential fatherhood does not affect how we view father-child relationships in either case. Other factors like socioeconomic status and contact frequency are much more determining factors. This research shows the situation of nonresidential fatherhood in different countries and implies that the situation may be less problematic than expected, and implies the importance of further research in the area with different populations and outcomes for the children. [Osinga, M., et.al. (2024)]

The 2022 research, which included 5750 parents in Sweden, demonstrated how single fathers, single mothers, and partnered parents faced psychological distress. Single fathers and mothers experienced more distress as well. Economic problems and lack of support, which were the explanatory factors of distress, further specified the issues regarding coupled parents.

Moreover, a need for more parental support was associated with distress for all parents, irrespective of their relationship status or gender. The results suggest that due to problems with social and economic support, single parents are especially at risk for severe psychological distress. [Hallerbäck MU et.al. (2025)].

The qualitative study examined the feelings and psychological changes bio-childfree stepmothers experience as they become part of blended families. The interviews with the women in this study revealed five prominent issues: loss of identity and autonomy, emotional struggles, conflicts with stepchildren and the biological parents, mental health issues, and conflict in marriage as a result of unsupportive spouses. The participants experienced, overall, a positive blended family perspective. However, the consequences on the participants' emotional state revealed challenges that were previously unexpected. There were the implications of unsought, essential support encompassing the interrelatedness of counseling and relational frameworks, as well as the psychosocial adjustments of the systems surrounding bio-childfree stepmothers and their families. The implications were unsought and essential support incorporating psychosocial adjustments of the systems surrounding bio-childfree stepmothers and their families. The gaps of the study are addressed with urgency to the participants and the implications of the study. More focus on the relational coping perspective and the participants' relationships will provide a more complete picture. [[Cednick, J. (2025]].

Mom-infant interaction studies usually focus on variables, but this research focuses on infants as a unit in face-to-face interactions with mothers. Infants' gaze, face, voice, and head orientation were analyzed, and using k-means clustering, 132 infants were placed in 10 clusters of similar behavior. This exploratory work identified various patterns of affective dysregulation that were connected with risk outcomes such as temperament and attachment. Infants' unique dysregulation and behavioral patterns were identified as potential clinical risk indicators. [Margolis, A. E et.al.(2019)]

Developing socially as a child and as an adolescent can be affected by numerous factors, which can be both genetic and environmental. Significant genetic influence can be found on variables such as bullying-victimization, loneliness, and social behavior. Negative environmental conditions, which can even be influenced by genetics, are still a big factor for social development in addition to the quality of the relationship with parents and parenting. The genetics of parenting itself has been largely ignored, which has likely biased estimates of the parental influence on social development. This review focuses on the genetics of parenting using recent twin and molecular research and calls for studies on social development to be framed from a genetic perspective. [Kretschmer, T. (2023)]

The paper evaluates how gender, birth order, and innate ability affect the educational attainment gap of children in the same household in developing countries, predominantly Benin. For families where parents do not have formal education, birth order and gender explain over 67 percent of the educational gap, while in families with parents who have tertiary education, the explainable gap reduces to 33 percent. Moreover, the paper argues that the educational inequality among children in families where parents do not have formal education is 2 times higher. This paper also presents a structural model that demonstrates the limited impact of eliminating gender and birth order on within-family inequality gaps. It also states that, on average, educational inequality would improve if every child were guaranteed at least one year of schooling, although this is not the case in practice, where girls receive less education than boys. Most educational reforms are aimed at closing this gap, yet they fall short of the proposed impact in theory. [Zozoungbo, C. (2024)].

The influence of family on well-being is also limited to the relationships one has at a point in time, which explains the importance of marital, intergenerational, and sibling relationships. It is the number and quality of these relationships one has that will influence well-being in adulthood, and this is an area future research should look into, including the family type, social and structural order of relationships, expected and unexpected advantages of these relationships, and social order. [Thomas PA(2017)].

Objective: To investigate the psychological and social implications of single-parent and blended family structures, including how changing patterns of domestic interactions affect individual well-being, family dynamics, and broader societal adaptation.

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III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The analysis relies entirely on the availability of a wide range of research articles, found in a variety of publications, including books, journals, and magazines, as well as online from various sources.

IV. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The thematic analysis presented in this piece shows a developing perspective of personal relationships and families in relation to broader psychosocial factors and changes over time. Evidence throughout the years, including foundational work such as Amato's (2000) divorce-stress-adjustment model, along with recent cross-national and biopsychosocial studies (2024-2025), shows how changes in the organization and stability of families, as well as intergenerational relations, affect the well-being of individuals, especially children and adolescents.

Amato (2000, 2005) was one of the first to explain divorce and family dissolution as a complex and multifactorial process of stress rather than a singular life event. According to the divorce-stress-adjustment model, while some individuals of a family might recover fully from the dissolution, others might suffer a permanent loss in well-being, which explains the divergent adjustment patterns. The adjustment factors are parent-child relations and the level of parental conflict, while the loss in well-being is moderated by personality and coping styles, and social networks, which show the level of support. This work opened new lines of inquiry on structural changes and psychosocial distress.

Cooper (2009) builds on this model, explaining how longitudinal data demonstrate how maternal parenting stress increases with instability… especially when mothers move out of biological partnerships or become involved with non-biological partners. Effects were moderated by educational attainment, suggesting that socioeconomic capital cushions stress. This is consistent with Lopoo (2014), whose findings indicated that the economic context of childhood (not the structural form itself) predominantly accounted for disparities in income, education, and other long-term adult outcomes. Therefore, structural disadvantages are likely to work through economic deprivation, rather than troubled relationships alone, and form relational disinvestment.

Although the participants in this study almost entirely appreciated their blended family, the influence on their emotional state presented problems that were likely unforeseen. This study shows the need for integral support systems in the counseling and relational frameworks and the ecosystem adjustments regarding bio-childfree stepmothers and their families. This study also aims to provide participants with the implications that need to be urgently addressed. The study also aims to close the study's gaps on relational coping and the relationships of the participants.

During the last several years, new research in the empirical study of family change has integrated a more sophisticated biosocial perspective. Using the biomarker C-reactive protein, Kleinschlömer et al. (2024) showed that the transition to single-parent families triggers a child's physiological stress response, thereby confirming that structural family instability reaches the biological level. Concurrent psychological analyses (Yang, 2022; Sia & Aneesh, 2024) emphasize the importance of emotional regulation, resilience, and social competence as well-being-determining factors for children living in non-intact families. This is a significant shift from deterministic family structure models. This change introduces a dynamic, processual model of family structure that focuses on adaptation, coping, and support systems instead of family structure.

Lee and McLanahan (2015) looked at instability and negative impacts on families and identified differences based on the type and direction of transitions. The effects of dissolving a two-parent family are greater regarding socioemotional outcomes than those of entering one. The socioemotional, structural, and cultural intersections outlined include greater vulnerability for children, White children, especially when leaving a two-parent family, and Hispanic children when entering. Brown (2006) identified the difficulties that arise in the study of stepfamilies, especially the confusion caused by the distinction between cohabiting and married families. Poorer adolescent outcomes are associated with cohabiting stepfamilies. However, leaving a dysfunctional cohabiting relationship may, in some situations, improve the overall situation.

Likewise, in relation to the developmental perspective, Karhina et al. (2023) and Perales et al. (2018) discussed parental separation, mental health, and the cumulative impact of stressors and negative life events. There are relatively small, yet consistent effects on depression, anxiety, and conduct problems in adolescents (SMDs $\approx$ 0.15–0.20). These outcomes, which are consistent across the globe from the Nordic countries to Australia, underline the emotional risks non-traditional family structures pose to children, regardless of the varying cultural stigma associated with those structures.

The latest empirical research incorporates both gendered and cross-cultural angles. According to Faulconer et al. (2022), there are behavioral challenges with children of both single mothers and single fathers, which are similar once social and material resources are equalized, thus supporting constructivist and not essentialist explanations of parenting.

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In a similar fashion, Osinga et al. (2024) showed how nonresidential fatherhood does not always have negative consequences for children in Curaçao or the Netherlands, pointing towards the societal normalization and sustained father–child contact. In a later work, Hallerbäck et al. (2025) added to the adult side, showing that single parents of both sexes experience higher psychological distress, which is mainly driven by economic scarcity and social isolation, a pattern that coincides with the classic stress-adjustment model and aftermath.

The psychological impacts of family change are further advanced by research on blended and stepfamily adaptation. In family integration, Cednick (2025) showed the hidden costs stepmothers face, such as loss of autonomy, higher anxiety, and unmet emotional needs, which overshadowed their initial hopes. Evans-Mayner (2025) highlighted similar points in a narrative review concerning the romantic and relational deficit adolescents in blended families experience, which extends to adulthood and calls for social support.

Margolis et al. (2019) showcased a micro-developmental approach by clustering infant-mother communicative forms. They delineate patterns of early affective dysregulation that predict attachment disorganization and argue that the roots of familial distress are even evident within pre-verbal communication. Conversely, Kretschmer (2023) aims for a theoretical corrective by underscoring the influence of a parent's genes. Kretschmer argues that the effects of family must be understood within the framework of gene-environment interaction, as the variables of parent and child temperament are both heritable and within the control of the parent.

Moreover, Thomas (2017) offers the broader relational synthesis of the phenomena and places them within a family well-being across the lifespan framework, arguing that marital, intergenerational, and sibling relationships, even well after childhood, continue to influence and shape an individual's mental health. Zozoungbo (2024) builds on this to explain within developing contexts, illustrating that within-family inequality, driven by gender and birth order, also mediates educational outcomes and thereby linking micro family processes to social stratification at the macro level.

Emerging frameworks have noted the problem of chronic stress from family instability. The short-term and long-term consequences vary according to available economic, emotional, and social resources. Psychological resilience and parental support are mediators that lessen detrimental effects. The type and direction of family transitions—loss, reformation, or re-cohabitation—dictate the predictable adaptation trajectory in family coping, recovery, or decline. Length, gender, and educational and cultural variables shape norms, coping patterns, and access to tools and resources, and thus social and institutional support.

Recent integrated models that consider the family as a social and structural system have incorporated inequities alongside physiological, genetic, and biopsychosocial frameworks. From a reparative approach in domestic relations research, the complexities of family systems and their dissolution are understood as structurally adaptive and embedded in economic and biological systems. Structural changes present variable patterns of risk, while relational context factors of risk—economic, emotional, parenting quality, emotional regulation, and acceptance—shape the pathways to family structure and overall well-being.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

This analysis demonstrates how change and dissolution of a family are not merely disruptive phenomena but rather complicated, unfolding processes, which are shaped by psychosocial, economic, and biological influences.

Over several decades, from Amato's initial divorce-stress-adjustment model to the current biopsychosocial models, the most salient contextual mediators shaping the effects of divorce and family transitions on individual well-being include parental discord, emotional regulation, and the psychosocial and socioeconomic support available to the family. Enhanced chronic stress and emotional strain are likely to accompany structural alterations to a family unit, but maladaptive behavior and recovery are most likely to be driven by the resilience, psychological shifts, and adaptive functions of the individuals and family as a whole. New cross-national and biological research suggests that family structural instability extends to the inner workings of the family, relating to and undermining stress relationships, and the psychosocial impact of family dysfunction is profound. Unresolved tensions in domestic relations further emphasize culture and gender relations. Under-structuring of the family is less important in linking family disruption with adverse mental health and intergenerational consequences than economic deprivation, dysfunction, and instability.

More recent works suggest numerous strategic recommendations. First, addressing the impacts of social and economic safety nets on chronic stress related to instability is an important aspect of policy recommendations. Second, the family-centered approach should attend to strengthening parent-child relational dynamics, emotional regulation, and psychological support through transitions. Third, the education system, through community-oriented approaches, ought to implement social and resilience skills programming to help children adjust to the reconstruction of families. Fourth, the need to obtain an interdisciplinary perspective on the research continuum persists, particularly by coupling the genetic, biological, and social aspects to better detail family transitions.

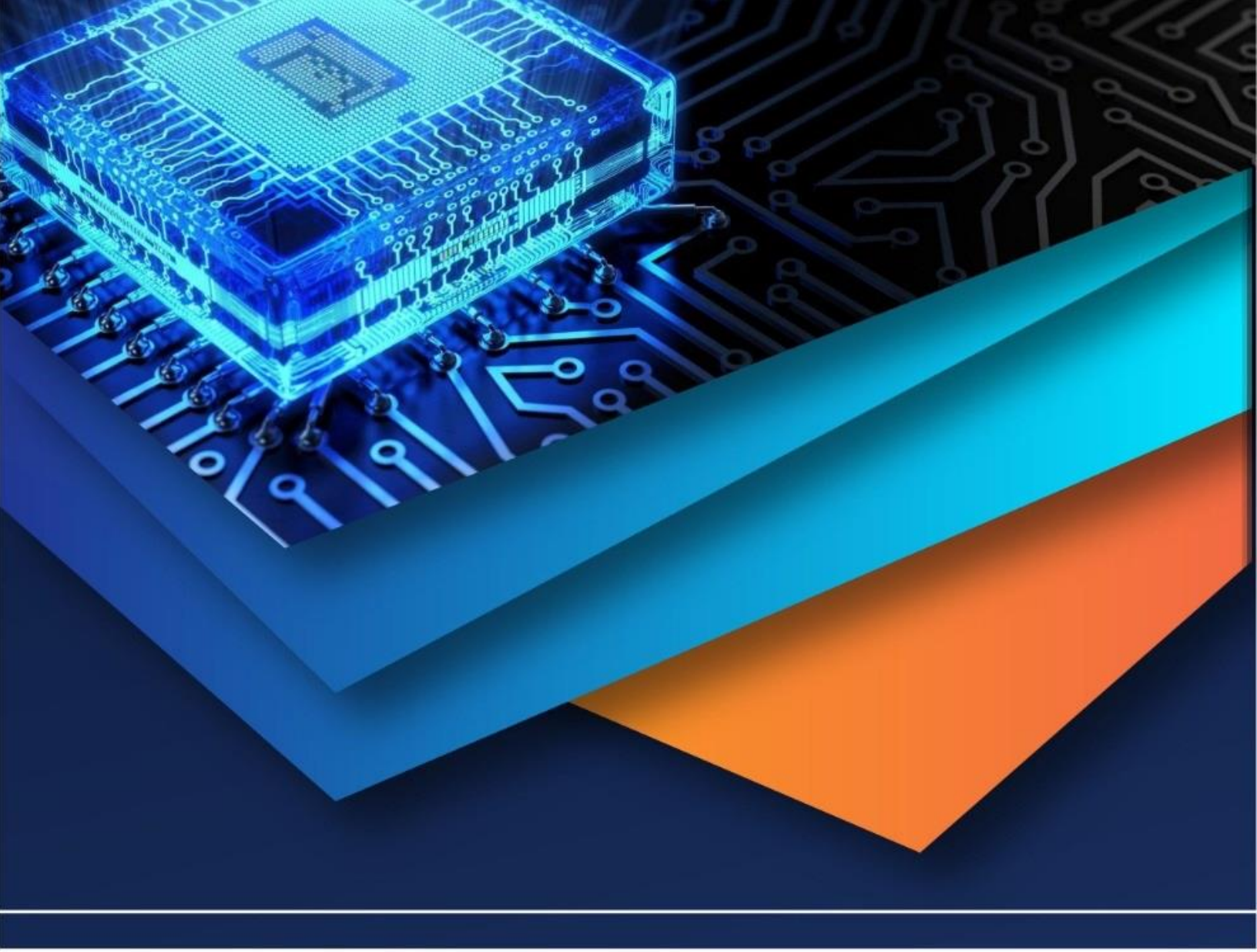
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Lastly, to ensure the availability of positive relational and emotional climates essential for lifelong development, along with social equity, the state and civil society should provide resources and support positive relational climates that reduce stigma around diverse family forms.

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