

## SELF-ESTEEM AND COMMUNICATION IN THE PERCEPTION OF WOMEN AFTER THE FIRST AND SUBSEQUENT CHILDBIRTH

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The aim of the research is to increase the knowledge of self-esteem and quality of communication in marriage in women after childbirth, taking into account the number of their children. The research group included 95 women after childbirth who completed the authors' own sociodemographic questionnaire and two psychological standardized measures, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES) and the Marriage Communication Questionnaire by Kaźmierczak and Płopa. It was found that self-esteem proved to be a positive predictor of perceived support and commitment provided by the partner only among mothers of two or more children, whereas in single mothers perceived support did not depend on the woman's self-esteem. At the first birth, the support from the partner is not related to the mother's level of self-esteem.

**Keywords:** self-esteem; communication; marriage; women; childbirth; family psychology; parenthood.

The role of women as mothers has played a fundamental role in family research and has a long tradition. However, it is worthwhile exploring this issue further as the world is constantly changing. There are different scientific approaches to the family, however; it seems today that it is best to see it as a system. Researchers

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investigating the family pay attention to its composition, status, cultural sphere and other sociodemographic variables. When the family is the subject of psychological research, primary attention is paid to its relationships and attitudes, which may affect a number of variables. Psychologists are interested in both the marital dyad and the parents' influence on the children. The focus is also maintained on the changing family structure. Numerous studies compare so-called biological/natural families with incomplete and reconstructed ones. Answers are sought regarding the impact of changes in the structure of the system on various aspects of human functioning and, above all, on a child brought up in one family or another (Song et al., 2012).

Many women face various problems after childbirth, so it is very important to address this topic in psychological research. Supporting women in various areas is currently an important topic, hence the studies undertaken on self-esteem and communication with the partner. Issues related to having one or more children and the impact of this on various areas of women and family functioning are discussed in recent studies (Margolis & Myrskylä, 2015; Kuo et al., 2018; Zerle-Elsäßer & Gniewosz, 2021).

### **Parenting and Communication in Family**

For many years the father's figure was ignored. The family literature was focused only on the child's relationship with the mother. She was mainly responsible for upbringing, while the role of the father was limited to that of a breadwinner. Nowadays a tendency to share parental roles is observed. The family is the basic environment in which an individual is formed. The family system in which we live has an impact on all spheres of our lives, including our achievements (Gwiazdowska-Stańczak & Sękowski). The ability to reconcile the non-family and family roles depends on the resources we have and the level of requirements that these two roles place on man (Lachowska, 2012). The family's resources include its positive relations and communication, which appear to be the key resource. Positive dialogue within the family, ability to talk about one's problems—in this case also financial and burden-related ones—has an immense impact on the decisions taken. Family cohesion concerns the level of emotional bonds and the quality of support provided. In difficult situations that a woman faces, such as childbirth, the support of the spouse and the children is essential for the psychological and medical condition of a parturient (Lachowska, 2012). Good quality communication in the family is responsible for the positive relations among its members. A well-functioning family is characterized by the ability to resolve conflicts through common dialogue, friendly attitude towards each other, respect, mutual understanding and closeness. Positive,

open communication shapes attitudes of openness and empathy. In the process of supporting one another, the quality of communication is of great importance, because mutual understanding is essential in supporting each other effectively (Sękowski & Gwiazdowska-Stańczak, 2018). Partners find the appearance of a new family member very challenging. It is a significant change in the family system requiring special adaptation from the parents. Interestingly, researchers point out differences in parents' adaptation to the first and subsequent children. The first child puts people in a new role of parents (Margolis & Myrskylä, 2015). Shared parenthood is a huge value. It consists in sharing responsibilities and duties and noticing the needs of other family members (Le et al., 2016). The partner's support in raising a child strengthens the relationship between them. The commitment of both parents, especially during the first years of the child's life, is vital not only for the relationship with the child but also for the quality of their marriage. The greater the involvement and support, the lower the risk of divorce (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2019). The quality of the relationship between the couple at the appearance of the first child allows one to predict the probability of making a decision to have more children (Zerle-Elsaber & Gniewosz, 2021).

### **Self-Esteem and the Situation of Childbirth**

Self-esteem is a variable defined as a positive or negative attitude towards the Self. High self-esteem means being convinced that you are a fulfilled and valuable person, but this does not mean that a person with high self-esteem is considered better than others. Low self-esteem in this sense means dissatisfaction with oneself and even rejection of oneself (Rosenberg, 1965). Self-esteem must be understood in two aspects, a global and detailed one. It concerns the functioning of a person in different areas of life, roles, professions. Research shows that self-assessment in the dimensions including social skills, physical fitness or life resourcefulness correlates with self-esteem, but is not conceptually identical with it (Marsh, 1996). Global self-esteem is related to a cognitive approach, it is a kind of judgment about self-esteem as a person (Brown & Marshall, 2006). Individuals with high self-esteem have a positive and predictable picture of themselves, which means that they accept all positive feedback about themselves in harmony with their previous self-esteem. They are also capable of ignoring negative information. This means that they can overestimate their own possibilities or the level of acceptance of their views or ideas by their environment (Campbell & Fehr, 1990).

The childbirth situation is a crucial stage in a woman's life since she gains a new life but loses what has been familiar to her until now. Pregnancy, especially

the first one, is a critical point in the search of female identity. The period in which a woman is an independent and single being comes to an end. A new mother–child relationship begins, which is often the source of stress and uncertainty (Slade, 2005). A woman may experience loneliness, misunderstanding, anger or disappointment with motherhood and a lack of acceptance of her appearance after the birth. The visible and strong pressure to be the best and always happy makes women feel lost and even embarrassed by the feelings that appear. Daniel Stern, an American psychiatrist, pointed out that giving birth to a new identity can be as demanding as giving birth to a child (Louise & Bradley, 2018). Women with low self-esteem do not believe in the accuracy of their judgments because they do not have a well-defined picture of themselves. This image is unstable and inconsistent. The consequence is high sensitivity to external information about oneself as well as susceptibility to its influence. Women with low self-esteem feel threatened by negative information, but also more rewarded by positive feedback, which is associated with greater responsiveness to the social environment (Campbell & Lavallee, 1993). Research indicates that women with low self-esteem evaluate themselves as less attractive in terms of interpersonal and networking skills. This opinion is only one-sided and is only shared by a small percentage of other companions (Battisti et al., 1993). Females presenting low self-esteem are reluctant to take risks, prefer safe and neutral situations even at the expense of not achieving the success that has been assumed (Campbell & Lavalle, 1993).

### **Purpose of the Present Study**

The main aim of the research is to try to answer the question whether self-esteem of women after childbirth is related to the quality of communication they have with their partner and therefore the support, commitment and depreciation of their partners and whether the number of children moderates these relationships.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

The research was conducted at the maternity wards of the State Hospitals No. 1 and No. 4 in Lublin from January to April 2019. The study involved 123 women ( $N = 123$ ) who had just given birth or several days before. For further analysis a total

of 95 females ( $N = 95$ ) agreed to complete a set of questionnaires. 28 questionnaires were excluded from the study due to significant data gaps. The women surveyed were between 22 and 40 years old, the mean age was 30.81. The vast majority of 89.6% them declared being married. For 39.6% of the respondents it was their first birth, for 60.4% it was the second. 47.9% of the respondents were city-dwellers. A total of 15% lived in a medium-sized or small town, and 27.1% of the respondents were rural residents. All of them were informed about the scientific purpose of the study and ensured anonymity.

### Measures

The first part of the questionnaire contained socio-demographic questions concerned with the respondents' age, occupation, seniority, place of residence, planned resumption of work, education, material situation, mode of learning, sex of the newborn, as well as questions about the planned way of, knowledge and difficulties in breastfeeding the child. Then, in the second part, the respondent completed psychological questionnaires such as the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale (SES)—the Polish adaptation (Dzwonkowska et al., 2008)—and the Marriage Communication Questionnaire by Kaźmierczak and Plopa (Kaźmierczak & Plopa, 2008). The SES is made up of ten statements of a diagnostic nature. Answers are given on a four-point scale, from 1 = *I definitely agree* to 4 = *I definitely disagree*. The respondent is asked to indicate to what extent they agree with each statement. For each answer the respondent receives from 1 to 4 points, and the total of the results ranges from 10 to 40 points. The higher the score, the higher the self-esteem of the respondent (Dzwonkowska et al., 2008). The Marriage Communication Questionnaire is a measure comprising 30 statements evaluated on a five-point scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *frequently*, 5 = *always*). The questionnaire is made up of 3 subscales: Support, Involvement and Depreciation. The Support Scale defines respect for the partner as appreciating him, taking an interest in his problems, and actively participating in solving them as well as the care he takes every day. The Commitment Scale defines mutual understanding and closeness in a relationship, affection and conflict prevention. The Depreciation Scale refers to the degree of aggression towards the partner, the lack of respect for his dignity, the desire to dominate and control him (Plopa, 2008).

## Statistical Analyses

In order to determine the relationship between communication and self-esteem, Pearson's  $r$  correlation coefficients were calculated. In the further stage of the analysis the role of the number of children was checked—the first or the next child as a moderator of these relationships. For this purpose a moderation analysis was carried out using macro Process. Model 1 was used in the presented studies. The SPSS statistical program was utilized in the course of the analysis.

## RESULTS

Descriptive statistics and a correlation matrix (Pearson's  $r$ ) of perceived communication from the partner and the self-esteem of the woman is presented in Table 1. Table 2 presents the regression analysis results for self-esteem, number of children and their interactions as predictors of perceived communication from the partner in the Support area. Self-esteem proved to be a positive predictor of the partner's perceived support only among mothers of two or more children ( $\beta = 0.587, p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix (Pearson's  $r$ ) of Perceived Communication from Partner and Self-Esteem*

	Communication: support	Communication: engagement	Communication: depreciation	Self-esteem
Communication: support	–			
Communication: engagement	$r = .80^{***}$	–		
Communication: depreciation	$r = -.72^{***}$	$r = -.50^{***}$	–	
Self-esteem	$r = .23^*$	$r = .23^*$	$r = -.19$	–
<i>M</i>	43.54	34.34	18.42	31.35
<i>SD</i>	6.58	5.86	6.35	5.07

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 2**

*Results of Regression Analysis for Self-Assessment, Number of Children and Their Interactions as Predictors of Perceived Communication From Supporting Partner*

	$\beta$	SE	t	p
Fixed	-0.06	0.10	-0.64	.521
Self-esteem	0.39	0.11	3.76	< .001
Number of children	-0.34	0.10	-3.49	< .001
Self-esteem $\times$ Number of children	0.24	0.10	2.49	< .051

$R^2 = .21, MSE = 0.85$   
 $F(3, 92) = 8.04, p < .001$

In the group of single mothers, self-esteem did not predict the dependent variable significantly ( $\beta = 0.098, p = .429$ ). Graphical results of the woman's self-esteem and the perception of her partner's support among mothers of one and more children is depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*Woman's Self-Esteem and Perceived Partner Support in Mothers With One or More Children*

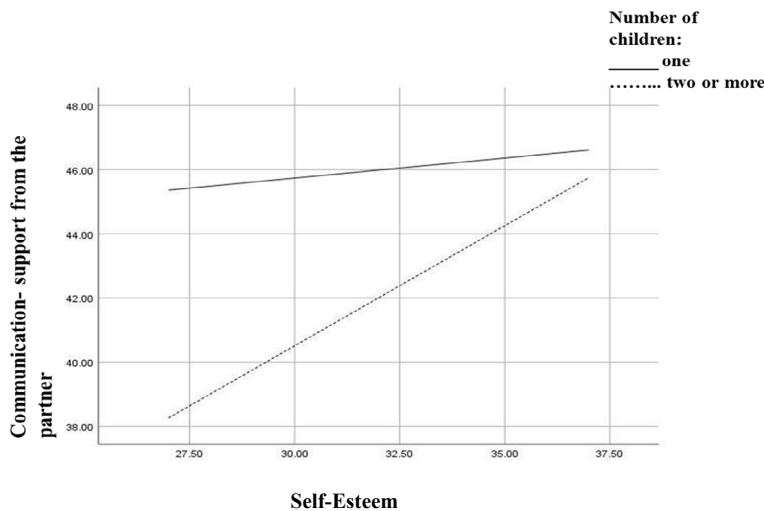


Table 3 is concerned with the regression analysis results for self-esteem, the number of children and their interactions as predictors of perceived communica-

tion from the partner in the area of engagement. Self-esteem proved to be a positive predictor of the partner's perceived engagement only among mothers of two or more children ( $\beta = 0.680, p < .001$ ). In the group of single mothers, self-esteem did not predict the dependent variable significantly ( $\beta = 0.046, p = .692$ ).

**Table 3**

*Results of Regression Analysis for Self-Esteem, Number of Children and Their Interactions as Predictors of Perceived Communication From Engagement Partner*

	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Fixed	-0.10	0.09	-1.13	.263
Self-esteem	0.43	0.10	4.34	< .001
Number of children	-0.37	0.09	-4.02	< .001
Self-esteem $\times$ Number of children	0.31	0.09	3.41	< .001

$R^2 = .27, MSE = 0.76$   
 $F(3, 92) = 11.36, p < .001$

A graphical representation of the woman's self-esteem and the perception of partner involvement among mothers of one child and more children is shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Woman's Self-Esteem and Perceived Partner Commitment in Mothers of One or More Children*

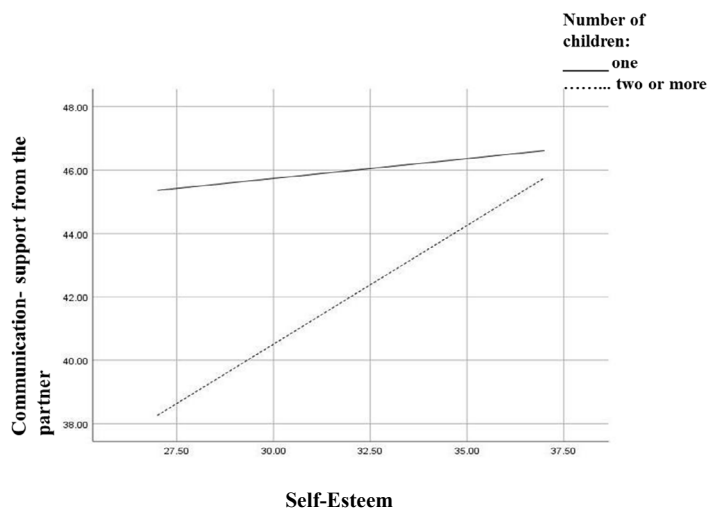




Table 4 presents the results of the regression analysis for self-esteem, number of children and their interactions as predictors of perceived communication from the partner in the area of Depreciation.

**Table 4**

*Results of Regression Analysis for Self-Esteem, Number of Children and Their Interactions as Predictors of Perceived Partner Communication in Area of Depreciation*

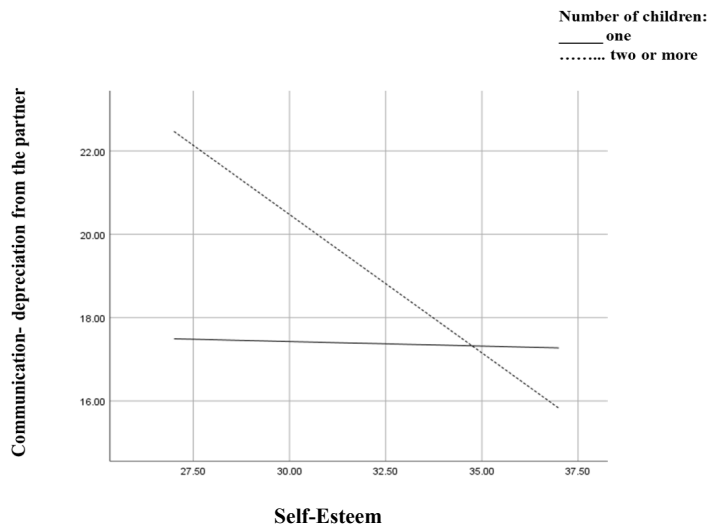
	$\beta$	SE	t	p
Fixed	0.06	0.09	0.65	.517
Self-esteem	-0.33	0.11	-3.03	< .01
Number of children	0.17	0.10	1.72	.088
Self-esteem $\times$ Number of children	-0.25	0.10	-2.52	< .051

$R^2 = .12$ ,  $MSE = 0.90$   
 $F(3, 92) = 4.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$

Figure 3 is a graphical presentation of a woman's self-esteem and perceived depreciation for the partner among mothers of one child and more children. Finally, Table 5 contains data on the perceived communication from the partner in the groups of mothers of one child and mothers of two or more children (Student's *t*-test).

**Figure 3**

*Woman's Self-Esteem and Perceived Depreciation by Partner in Mothers of One or More Children*



**Table 5***Perceived Partner Communication in Groups of Mothers of One, Two, or More Children*

	One child		Two or more children		Significance of differences		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Effect size
Communication: support	45.76	6.04	42.08	6.57	2.77	< .001	0.58
Communication: engagement	36.55	4.99	32.90	5.98	3.12	< .001	0.66
Communication: depreciation	17.42	5.74	19.08	6.70	-1.25	.214	0.27

## DISCUSSION

Women after childbirth declare seeing more support from their partners when it is their first child. This is probably connected with the fact that both of them enter a completely new role as parents. The appearance of the first child in the family is a breakthrough and affects the entire family system, requiring both parents to adapt to the new situation. The second and subsequent child in the family is another change for the family system; however it does not cause such significant adaptation problems as the first child does. As other studies indicate, the appearance of another child does not affect the wellbeing of the mother and the perceived satisfaction with the marriage (Zerle-Elsaber & Gniewosz, 2020).

When parents face the birth of another child they are already better prepared, have more experience, which makes it easier to make decisions; their expectations tend to be more realistic (Margolis & Myrskylä, 2015). This assumption corresponds to our results concerning the dependence of a woman's self-esteem and expected support from her husband when they already have one or more children. In women with their first child, perceived support does not depend on their self-esteem, while in subsequent births the perceived support of the husband depends on the mother's self-esteem: the higher the self-esteem, the greater the support. Self-confident and experienced women know what they want and what they should expect from their partners.

Co-parenting, i.e. fulfilling the role of a mother and father, is an important challenge for both partners. Positive fulfilment of this role involves a positive relationship, showing support for the partner (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2019). Having analyzed

self-esteem of women with respect to the issue of having children, it is worth noting a possible negative aspect. High self-esteem is not always the opposite of low self-esteem. Women with low self-esteem do not necessarily have a negative image of themselves but have less knowledge about the positive aspects of their functioning. Women with higher self-esteem are more likely to focus on and remember positive feedback about themselves according to their own beliefs. Therefore, they may ignore negative information and overestimate their abilities (Dzwonkowska et al., 2008). Overrating self-esteem can have negative consequences. The woman will not want to be supported by her partner in bringing up another child. She may deny his opinion, willingness to help and care, which may result in relationship deterioration and, in extreme cases, a complete rejection.

The greater the support from the husband in raising the child, the better the quality of the marital relationship. Importantly, as our research has shown, the husband provides less support when the second child is born compared with the time when the first one appears. This is in line with other studies on the essence of raising children together. Women are more involved in raising subsequent children than men, whereas, with the first child, both parents tend to be equally committed. This also depends on their beliefs and stereotypes about the role of the mother-woman. With the next child, the woman takes more initiative and becomes more involved in the role of the mother, which makes her husband's involvement weaker (Kuo et al., 2017).

The difference between parents who are both professionally active and when only the father works is important for the division of childcare. If only the father works, he is less committed than when both parents are active and have to share their responsibilities (Kuo et al., 2018). Having analyzed our results, it may also be important that in Poland, after childbirth, a woman is entitled to one year's maternity leave, so she resigns from work temporarily. This may cause her to be more involved in taking care of her next child, when her husband focuses on work and their maintenance. The role of psychological support provided by the husband during and before childbirth is significant. Marital conflicts can increase stress in the parturient and even affect the course of the birth itself (Khaled et al., 2020). Therefore, exploring psychological and relationship issues in the partners may be important not only for psychologists but also for health professionals involved in perinatal care. The study was conducted a few days after delivery, hence it could have affected the outcome of the study, especially this time is crucial when they need support from their partner. It would be interesting to conduct future longitudinal studies to determine if support and self-esteem changes at a later time.

## CONCLUSIONS

After childbirth a woman expects and needs the support of her partner. The situation in which she finds herself can have a significant impact on her self-esteem and on the quality of communication in the relationship. Importantly, the results of our research show that women who have the first child perceive much more support from their partner, while the mothers of two or more children declare less support provided. Perceived support, when the first child is born, does not depend on the woman's self-esteem, while after the subsequent births it does: The higher the self-esteem of the woman, the greater the support of the husband. The results of our research can be applied by employees of maternity wards and specialists in perinatal care to pay special attention to the relationship between the woman and her partner after childbirth, especially if it is their first child, because it can affect their mental well-being.

### CRediT Author Statement

SYLWIA GWIAZDOWSKA-STAŃCZAK (50%): conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, resources, software, supervision, validation, writing (original draft).

EWELINA OKONIEWSKA (50%): conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, resources, software, supervision, validation, writing (original draft).

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