

SOCIAL WORK IN THE FACE OF NEW CHALLENGES: BLENDED FAMILIES

*EL TRABAJO SOCIAL ANTE LOS NUEVOS DESAFÍOS: LAS FAMILIAS RECONSTITUIDAS***Laura Domínguez de la Rosa; Mario Millán-Franco*****Universidad de Málaga; ldominguez@uma.es; mmillan@uma.es***** Corresponding author****Historia editorial**

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Abstract

In this study, we focused on blended families, which are a family type that is becoming increasingly widespread. The scarcity of current information on this type of family justifies scientific interest, but also means that there is a lack of appropriate social policies that address this phenomenon.

Thematic analysis was used as the research tool. A total of 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of blended families. Based on these interviews, three themes were developed: "What influences the decision to start a new family?", "Challenges to the family configuration: normalisation strategies" and "New ways of understanding family ties".

The results suggest that these families are still built around the basic pillar of heteronormativity. Thus, further research is needed on this new family model, while pressing for more legal norms that are aligned with the new family realities. Social workers should promote the acceptance of blended families through community education.

Resumen

En este estudio nos centramos en las familias reconstituidas, que son una tipología familiar cada vez más extendida. La escasez de información actual sobre este tipo de familia justifica el interés científico, pero también refleja la carencia de políticas sociales adecuadas que aborden este fenómeno.

Se empleó el análisis temático como herramienta de investigación. Se realizaron un total de 12 entrevistas semiestructuradas a miembros de familias reconstituidas. A partir de estas entrevistas, se desarrollaron tres bloques temáticos: "¿Qué influye en la decisión de formar una nueva familia?", "Desafíos de la configuración familiar: estrategias de normalización" y "Nuevas formas de entender los vínculos familiares".

Los resultados sugieren que estas familias siguen construyéndose en torno al pilar básico de la heteronormatividad. Por lo tanto, es necesario continuar investigando sobre este nuevo modelo familiar, a la par que exigir que haya más normas legales que se ajusten a las nuevas realidades familiares. Los trabajadores sociales deberían promover la aceptación de las familias reconstituidas a través de la educación comunitaria.

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Introduction

In recent decades, Spain has undergone a series of social and political changes, from access to assisted reproduction techniques to the consolidation of feminism. Some of these changes have been underwritten by regulations addressing the new concepts of family, such as Law 13/2005, which legalized marriage for same-sex couples. These changes have supported the emergence of new family models and other types of relationships (Ajenjo-Cosp & García-Saladrigas, 2016; Álvarez & Romo, 2018). In fact,

since the end of the 1990s, new discursive codes have appeared that consider the “family” as a social investment that requires inclusive public policies regarding diversity, the democratisation of family relationships, and the implementation of the principles of Human Rights (Palacio, 2020).

According to Ana M^a Rivas (2008), diversity in the economic, demographic, and cultural aspects of current Western societies has led to changes in the composition, practices, and representation of relationships in the category “family”. When separated or divorced people with children from a previous relationship form a new couple, the new partners are no longer the same ones as the biological parents. So-called blended families arise from the dissociation between marital and filial relationships.

The number of blended families continues to increase worldwide (Lam, 2006). In Spain, academic interest in these types of family is driven by the scarce information on them and the absence of appropriate social policies addressing them (Rivas, 2008). It has been suggested that gender dynamics are of great relevance within blended families and, therefore, the gender status quo should be questioned in relation to this family category (Schmeeckle, 2007).

In Spanish-speaking regions, the most common term used to refer to these families is “reconstituted families”, but other terms are also used, such as “blended families”, “multiparental families”, “mosaic families”, or “no-name families” (Ajenjo-Cosp & García-Saladrigas, 2016; Grau & Fernández, 2015). The latter term illustrates the particular difficulty in agreeing on a name for this ever-growing type of family structure (Rivas, 2013). However, there is some consensus on conceptualising the “blended family” as a family structure in which at least one of the partners brings a child from a previous relationship, thus making the other adult the stepfather or stepmother (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Ripoll-Núñez et al., 2013). María Isabel Jociles and Fernando Vilaamil (2008) consider these families to be “family constellations”, which are characterised by the continuous movement of children between the paternal and maternal homes, thus highlighting the dimensions of time and space.

Within blended families, different reconstitution processes that depend on different aspects give rise to a striking heterogeneity of profiles (Treviño & Gumà, 2013). As early as 1986, Germain identified 48 potential configurations based on gender, the status of the couple, the custody of children not in common, and whether the new couple have children in common or not (Ajenjo-Cosp & García-Saladrigas, 2016; Saint-Jacques, 2009). Gloria Álvarez and Nuria Romo (2018) noted that blended families are so diverse that various emerging types could be distinguished, such as blended families headed by same-sex couples (Saint-Jacques, 2009).

According to Katia Walters et al. (2006), despite the diversity of possible family configurations that fit the concept of the blended family, in general, three phases can be distinguished in the process of their evolution. In the initial phase, family members have the desire to create an ideal family, although they soon become aware of problems and negative feelings related to the family dynamics. In the intermediate phase, the members of blended families deal with their difficulties through negotiation, come to agreements, and set up rules for living together. In the final phase, there is a strengthening of the ties and bonds between family members. Blended families gradually implement strategies to manage various issues (e.g., parenting) (Ripoll-Núñez et al., 2013).

Among other factors, the rise of blended families is fuelled by the growing number of divorces and entails a reinvention of parenthood in which new partnerships emerge that break the traditional model of parenting by a mother and a father (Fernández-Resines & Bogino, 2017). Thus, blended families reflect the conflict between the agents involved, the dominant social representations around kinship, and an everyday experience in which the influence of “blood” is diminishing (Moncó & Rivas, 2007).

Studies on blended families cover a wide range of topics, such as the relationships between their members and their life trajectories, the modality of cohabitation, the problems encountered by teenagers, the way in which parents maintain a relationship with a child with whom they no longer share a home, the reconstituted fraternal dynamics, or the role played by the grandparents and step-grandparents in the relational dynamics (Ajenjo-Cosp & García-Saladrigas, 2016; Ebersohn & Bouwer, 2015).

Traditionally, blended families have been linked to a set of myths and stereotypes. Early research that incorporated intergroup comparisons (blended vs nuclear families) strengthened the negative social view of blended families (Espinár et al., 2003). Even terms related to kinship in blended families (e.g., stepfather, stepmother) still carry their traditional negative connotations (Stratton, 2003).

According to Álvarez and Romo (2018), research on these families has tended to address relationships between the children and their parents, while virtually ignoring the new partner. This invisibility, both theoretical and social, is reflected in the lack of a consensual term to characterise these individuals. Thus, the terminology of kinship makes explicit the dissonances and contradictions created by the tension between biology and society in its construction (Álvarez & Romo, 2018; Moncó & Rivas, 2007).

The foregoing aspects motivated us to develop a qualitative approach to this study with the aim of facilitating the development of more effective social interven-

tions to such families. The study primarily focuses on understanding the different lines of argument that blended families themselves use in the construction of their family dynamics. Specifically, we investigated the challenges facing these families, identified the resources they developed to face these challenges, and assessed the social and emotional cost of forming such a family. We also describe how the new family unit re-establishes the mechanisms of cohabitation, paying special attention to the figure of “the chosen love partner”.

Method

We used a qualitative approach to this study because it seemed the most suited to the type of data we were trying to collect. Specifically, we used a descriptive method to guide the analysis of the narratives used by these families. Thus, thematic analysis was used as the research tool. This type of design is heir to the concept of theoretical sampling, which was developed within the framework of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). According to this theory, the description of the phenomenon allows us to understand the experiences of the people who participate in it and, through this, better understand a collective situation through the explanations of the experiences of one or more individuals (Dantas & Moreira, 2009; Enell & Wilińska, 2022).

The social reality that shapes these families is a product of the way in which the participants explain, describe, and experience this phenomenon in their social and cultural settings (Cabruja et al., 2000). It should be noted, we not only collected the subjective information provided by these families regarding their experiences, but also attempted to determine their social reality and the settings in which they participate.

Data Collection

We used semi-structured face-to-face interviews to stimulate reflection and debate. This technique was used to identify and describe the central themes that make up the lives of these families (Domínguez & Millán-Franco, 2021). Interviews were based on a script, which contained the themes and sub-themes that could be used to provide answers to the research objectives. Textual formulations for the questions were provided, but without any answers being suggested. The script included some of the most relevant variables identified in the literature. In order to obtain narratives that formed coherent units, we deliberately did not provide clear guidelines so that interviewees were free to respond in the way they wished without intervention by the interviewer.

The interview script was structured in three sections. The first section collected sociodemographic information: age of the participants, the number of children they brought into the family, and their current cohabitation status. The second section addressed the initial research question, and thus the general objective of the study. The aim was to obtain a brief general overview of the established family dynamics, while the main focus was to investigate the challenges encountered by these families when forming the family nucleus, the resources they used to overcome these challenges, and the social and emotional costs of building this kind of family. The third section asked the interviewees about their perceptions and personal definitions of their families, as well as their personal experiences regarding its construction. Finally, we left a space for the interviewees to write any comments, suggestions, or specific messages (i.e. advice for other families). This aspect was relevant because it highlighted certain aspects of the development of these families within the community. This topic should be the focus of further research from a Social Work perspective (Domínguez & Millán-Franco, 2021).

The interviews were conducted in an appropriate location that guaranteed respect and intimacy, with the goal of helping interviewees to relax, thus stimulating participation. Most of the interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, with the exception of a few that took place in previously agreed locations (cafés and restaurants). The interviews took place during September and October 2021 and lasted from 54 to 73 minutes. Each participant was informed of the study aims, and the privacy and anonymity of their personal data and responses were guaranteed. The participants gave their consent to the interviews being recorded for their subsequent transcription and analysis.

Participants

The study sample consisted of 12 members of blended families (children entering the new family configuration, new spouses, and also biological parents). We had initially planned to interview at least 12 more members of these family unions, but we saw that the saturation point had been reached by the seventh interview. According to, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), the saturation criterion is used to stop the collection of data on the different groups in the same category, because it indicates that no further data will be obtained that would help describe the category. Similarly, Michael Grady (1998) suggested that when data saturation has been reached, the researcher would begin to hear the same comments in subsequent interviews. In this case, the discourse of the different participants revolved around the same themes.

The interviewees were recruited using the snowball sampling technique. It was essential to use this technique, given the difficulty in contacting and accessing families that match this parental model and are willing to participate. The search for blended families was mainly conducted using convenience sampling (Mejías, 2000). Thus, we were able to explore and characterize our research objective. We also used purposive sampling, and selected cases characteristic of the study population (Otzen & Manterola, 2017). However, we set up some criteria for the selection: being a member of a blended family in which at least one child came from a previous relationship; and, in order to ensure that the families were well established in some way, the couple had to have cohabited with at least one child for at least 1 year.

The selection criteria led to the inclusion of both homogeneous and heterogeneous characteristics because the particular situation of each family varied according to the circumstances in which it was created (e.g., divorce, separation, or widowhood).

Participant (pseudonym)	Age, years	Years of cohabitation	Children of the new family	Previous children living with the new family	Type of family	Previous marital status
CLP*	47	1 y and 8 mo	0	1	MNPM**	Divorced
CLP*	45	10 y	0	2	FNPF***	Separated
CLP*	39	5 y	0	2	MNPM**	Widowed
CLP*	42	2 y and 5 mo	1	1	FNPF***	Separated
CLP*	46	11 y	0	1	MNPM**	Divorced
Mother	45	8 y	1	1	MNPM**	Separated
Mother	47	12 y	0	1	MNPM**	Separated
Father	41	3 y and 4 mo	0	1	FNPF***	Divorced
Father	44	1 y and 3 mo	0	1	FNPF***	Divorced
Son	25	10 y	1	2	MNPM**	Divorced
Daughter	28	15 y	0	2	MNPM**	Divorced
Daughter	27	16 y	0	1	FNPF***	Separated

* CLP: "Chosen love partner"; ** MNPM: Mother and new partner (male);

*** FNPF: Father and new partner (female)

Table 1. Characteristics of the Participants

Participation was not limited by nationality, educational background, employment status, current marital status, sex, or the number of children that each member of the couple brought to the new family union. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participants.

Data analysis: Procedure

In order to identify common patterns in the data, we conducted a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. This analysis mainly focused on describing and revealing the meanings of the data obtained in the interviews. It allowed us to identify, organise, analyse, and specify the units of the categories related to the dynamics of these families by a detailed reading of the information collected and transcribed. This analysis enabled us to build the emerging categories that led to a reasonable understanding of the themes proposed (Díaz, 2018).

The analysis procedure consisted of six stages:

1. Collection, selection, and preparation of the materials for analysis.
 2. Literal transcription of the interviews. A detailed reading of the interviews to ensure that they included all the information obtained during the interviews.
 3. Familiarization with the material obtained in the interviews through repeated readings, confrontation of messages, and follow-up of the main lines of argument (citations). Specifically, the interviews were carefully read by two researchers with experience in qualitative analysis, in order to identify the lines of argument that were part of the general themes. This task was performed by each researcher independently.
 4. Organization of the information into same-meaning categories in order to code the data. This task was accomplished by establishing relationships between the lines of argument and same-meaning categories most frequently used by the participants to represent their cohabitation dynamics. We ensured that these categories were coded by the two researchers.
 5. Search for themes through the detection of patterns in the coded categories. These categories were reviewed to find common patterns that could then be used to construct the themes. This was achieved by using different techniques, such as identifying and classifying themes, searching for words in context, searching for coherence, and, finally, defining the prominent themes found during the analytical process that could be relevant to future research in the field (Escobar & Montalbán, 2021).
- In this part of the analysis, the Atlas.ti version 9.0 software package was used to check and confirm the relationships previously proposed by the researchers.
6. The researchers wrote a consensual report, explaining the common themes that helped us to understand the new dynamics of these new family configurations.

Results

Through a comprehensive analysis of the interviews, we identified the themes that helped us describe, explain, and construct the reality of blended families. The detection of regularities showed that the use of discursive categories focused on the dissociation between marital and filial relationships. The most frequent type of resources used in the definition and configuration of these new unions were normalising strategies.

Three themes were identified that were relevant to describing the experiences, challenges, and new dynamics of these families:

Theme 1: What influences the decision to start a new family?

Theme 2: Challenges of the family configuration. Normalisation strategies.

Theme 3: New ways of understanding family ties.

Table 2 shows the common themes and different codes identified in the interviews.

Theme 1: What influences the decision to start a new family?	Theme 2: Challenges of family configuration: Normalisation strategies	Theme 3: New ways of understanding family ties
Dissociation between marital and filial relationships The desire to share Acceptance in the family reconstruction process	Normalization Lack of previous experiences	Daily life and family dynamics Roles: the figure of the new partner

Table 2. Themes and codes

The following sections discuss how each theme is put into practice by the participants, the way they are prioritised, the links between them, and how the themes affect their discourse. Textual excerpts of the transcripts are presented to exemplify the themes, ending with the participant's pseudonym, age, and the type of interview.

Theme 1: What influences the decision to form a new family?

This block establishes the main pillar of the interviews under analysis. It comprises a series of discursive strategies indicating that the decision to form a family is shaped by different elements, which include the following: the dissociation between marital and filial relationships; the desire to share one's life with the person of choice; and the acceptance by the children of the family reconstruction process.

In general, most participants explained that the decision to form a new family is made after careful and thorough consideration, and that it usually occurs when the preconceived idea that the cohabitating couple should behave as if they were the biological parents is broken in the new family configuration.

We had to think long and hard about moving in together, and about how we wanted our lives to be... We were very afraid for our children, but we were very, very clear that the father, although he passed away, will always be their father and their mother will always be their mother, and that X is my partner. Although we all really are one big family now. (Chosen love partner, personal interview, September 2021)

The participants express that the separation between the cohabitating couple, the parenting couple, and biological parents carries a certain emotional cost for the people involved, because it breaks or challenges the two-parent model, in which sexuality, procreation, partnership, and filiation are linked.

I never wanted to know anything about the child. When the kid came, I disappeared from X's life... Not having contact with X and his child, I felt that maybe that slightly preserved the dream of being able to have a family. (Chosen love partner, personal interview, September 2021)

I'd give a strong piece of advice to families like mine or those who are in a reconstitution process: They should bear in mind that, unlike in other types of families, here parenthood comes before romantic love. (Chosen love partner, personal interview, September 2021)

I realised how the two bonds, the paternal-filial and the couple's, tend to compete with each other, and that's a mistake: they're not comparable bonds and, anyway, the loser will always be the couple's bond. First, because it comes after the family bond and, well, because whatever happens, X and Y are going to be children for the rest of their lives, and I'll be in the couple as long as we love each other and are good. And, as long as we want, and we are happy, we will be a big family. (Chosen love partner, personal interview, September 2021)

New couples usually show a strong desire to rebuild "the nuclear family after a separation or divorce" (Chosen love partner, personal interview, October 2021). In most cases, this desire not only leads them to a previously lost emotional stability, but also to the need for a new role model for the family, which, more often than not, is the hegemonic model. Participants explain that "in the new relationship, we can repair the needs that were not satisfied in our original family" (Mother, personal interview, October 2021).

We had been together for 8 years already..., he stayed home one day, then the next one as well... We had to take the leap and explain it to my son. He gets on very well with my son... he's like a great friend, an uncle, a very close family member... It's true that we needed stability as a couple, and create our own nest with our habits and ideas, and build what we are now, a family. (Mother, personal interview, September 2021)

These families are constructed and modified according to the experiences, interactions, characteristics, and expectations that are set up around the new family nucleus. Therefore, when the participants talked about their new family configurations, they did so from a normalising perspective. In fact, they used discursive elements, such as personal experiences and the time spent living together in the new relationship. Such discursive strategies are exemplified in the following extracts:

Sharing time together: we go on the road, we go camping, for family meals, for a walk with the dog... we do everything other families do. (Son, personal interview, September 2021)

For example, we always sit at the kitchen table to eat and share our day, we talk about our worries, about work, about the family... and that's something I value very much. (Daughter, personal interview, October 2021)

These families believe that similar interests, mutual solidarity, active listening, respect for differences, and reciprocal tolerance are principles that, in a way, help naturalise cohabitation in their families.

The families that work out are the ones that keep changing themselves, that don't clam up, that ask questions, that listen to each other, that are open to new possibilities. What holds a family together are their similar interests, mutual solidarity, active listening, respect for the differences, and mutual tolerance, not the shared roof they live under. (Father, personal interview, October 2021)

Theme 1 reflects the elements that jointly influence the decision to form a new family, showing that it is often a well-thought-out process that entails an emotional cost and involves breaking with the entrenched two-parent model. Thus, we had to delve deeper into the challenges faced by blended families. As described below, most family members seek to satisfy the needs that arise in the new family context by resorting to normalisation (i.e. participants try to re-establish the nuclear family after separation or widowhood).

Theme 2: Challenges of the family configuration: Normalization

The second theme comprises common and homogenising lines of argument closely linked to the previous theme. Theme 2 is centered around the need to balance equality and protect their families through normalization (i.e., by equating themselves with traditional families).

I think that our families are unprotected... It seems that the only thing that puts us on a par with normal families are the laws addressing large families, but there's so much that still needs to happen, in any case... and the life-work balance. (Father, personal interview, September 2021)

There is a predominance of discursive elements related to assimilation and comparison with hegemonic family types. Thus, they allude to strategies such as adaptation, everyday life, family customs, and sharing moments.

It's important, once everything was over... I mean, that my brother and I accepted X (the mother's partner)... or rather when we realised that my mother has the right to be happy. So, sharing moments together is necessary for our family, well, and for any family, not only for ours. X is the person my mother has chosen to be with us as well. Although it may not seem like it, adapting to new habits and making them our own... having a routine is good for creating a healthy family. (Daughter, personal interview, October 2021)

Members of blended families come up against difficulties during their process of configuration or evolution that may delay their integration and, therefore, their adaptation to the new family. In most cases, these difficulties have to do with a lack of previous experiences, resentment, and also to certain feelings related to jealousy.

We went from living just the three of us, my mother, my sister and me, to suddenly having a new family member, who we knew nothing about, and both he and I felt uncomfortable. (Daughter, personal interview, October 2021)

At the beginning I felt frustration, anger, sadness, lack of understanding. They were all negative feelings, I even wanted to leave home. I felt pushed aside, but I'm telling you... it was all in my head, because both my father and X were trying to make everything work, but I just didn't get it. (Daughter, personal interview, October 2021)

It was very hard, I went through a mourning process so to speak, at the beginning it was denial, anger, rage. Now I think that what I felt was jealousy... until I realised that my mother was happy and that I was being very selfish,

and I learnt to trust someone again. (Son, personal interview, September 2021)

In general, participants talked about the need to set up routines. They considered it necessary to share and organise daily activities involving the members of the new family union. This helps with the adaptation process. In fact, according to Rivas (2008), having common and individual spaces as well as spending time together and alone, can make living together easier for everyone.

Sharing, we have to share spaces and moments, although we respect that sometimes we want to be alone. (Mother, personal interview, September 2021)

As Roberto Pereira (2014) suggested, sharing moments is the best way to build new relationships and to feel part of a family group. In fact, the following excerpt is an example of this new conformation: “we always sit at the kitchen table to eat and share our day, now we talk about our worries, about work, about the family... and it’s something we value very much because now we really are a family like the others”. (Mother, personal interview, September 2021)

In some cases, their family model was presented as one more among the plurality of contemporary family types. They saw family diversity as a result of the evolution of current social trends.

The truth is that there are more and more new family models... children who have two mothers, two fathers... one parent is from one place and the other from another, increasingly extended families where friends act as aunts and uncles... in short, there’s a great wealth of family types in our society... and ours is just another one. (Father, personal interview, September 2021)

This is one of the ways in which they highlighted the idea that the traditional family model has been replaced by new family configurations, which reflects the complexity of our societies. They also stated that although there is no absence of family figures, these have sometimes been replaced, or rather, shared by chosen figures (meaning the new additions to the family).

Well, you have to be patient, you need time..., [it’s] very important to bond and gradually turn a chosen love partner... into a normative figure, right? Someone for self-reference, I would say it, because he’s still an adult chosen to live with us. (Son, personal interview, September 2021)

He’s been like a second father, because I’ve lived more time with him than with my father, and he’s really the one who raised me. To this day, my fa-

ther figure is my stepfather, or better, my mother's partner, because stepfather doesn't sound quite right (laughs). (Daughter, personal interview, October 2021)

Most interventions did not leave much room for transcending heteronormative boundaries. This is why there was a continuous attempt in their dialogues to justify their family model and to normalise their situation.

For his part, X tells us he would like us to be a family, a normal family. To be seen as a real family because we're a family with mothers, fathers, more siblings, but just like the others... Well now, my family seems to have grown, we have more of everything (laughs). (Son, personal interview, September 2021)

We do things just like other families, we get together, we talk, we go out on the weekend, and we also argue. (Daughter, personal interview, October 2021)

Theme 3: New ways of understanding the family

This theme shows the way in which the new couples and their children configure their spaces in terms of daily life and family dynamics. There are different forms of organisation in these families, depending on how they exercise their roles within them. In general, participants stated that "one of the main tasks when consolidating a blended family is to integrate the new partner into the new family system" (Mother, personal interview, September 2021), which necessarily implies a reorganisation of family roles. However, this task is often a source of stress and uncertainty.

This is certainly causing major problems... there's a lot of uncertainty, nervousness in the face of certain circumstances. There are urgent day-to-day situations that in the absence of the biological parent,... of both biological parents, maybe simply because they are travelling... someone has to make an urgent decision, a child is hospitalised, an intervention, a surgical procedure, any decision of this kind, related to health... the education of the child, he can do it, the one who is living with the child... (Chosen love partner, personal interview, September 2021)

In most cases, this stress and uncertainty are largely explained through the lack of prescribed social and legal roles for the new members of the family composition. Therefore, this is considered to be the main difficulty in consolidating and understanding the new family union. In line with this aspect, a participant stated that, "the legal hurdles are another struggle, another challenge that we have to get to grips with, and

that society has to assume in the face of this social reality”. (Chosen love partner, personal interview, September 2021).

The cover provided by a law gives us, I think..., to everybody, it gives us security, legal security, coverage. If we clearly know what our rights and duties are and, of course, for our children, the presence of other adults who look after them and who protect them..., well, it’s also a source of emotional and, of course, economic, security. (Mother, personal interview, October 2021)

These families, although new in their composition, continue to maintain patriarchal configurations regarding how they function. Although the relationships are more complex, the traditional distribution of gender roles are perpetuated. The current patriarchal system, and the very construction of gender relationships in this setting, lead to a certain “naturalisation” of childcare functions by the chosen female partners. In the following excerpt, it is clearly specified that the female chosen partner is in charge of childcare and domestic chores.

I’ve been living with them since X was 3 years old and Y was 5, I think they love me very much. I can’t imagine my life without them, although I’m not their biological mother (I get on very well with her, by the way), I think of them as my children. I look after them when they’re ill, I get them ready for school, I feed them, do everything a mother does. (Chosen love partner, personal interview, September 2021)

Furthermore, as a resource linked to the patriarchal status quo, the discourse of the participants frequently associated the parentality of fathers and mothers with the biological ties they have with their children. In other words, the roles of fathers and mothers are cast within a patriarchal, biologicist, heterosexual, biparental, and nuclear family framework. No thought is given to those who, without being the parents, are the parents’ new partners and share their day-to-day lives with their children, whether or not they perform all or part of the parenting tasks. This idea is reflected in the following excerpt referring to a chosen male partner.

I don’t want to get too involved in the upbringing of the children either, because, although their parents are not together, they have their father, and they have their mother (Chosen love partner, personal interview, September 2021).

The participants sometimes called the new partners “chosen love partners” and said that some of them take on the roles in a different way and share tasks in a more equalitarian manner:

I've taken on the role of companion, I'd already talked about it with my partner. I had it very clear, she has her father... and that was clear for me from the beginning. Besides, in the house we all do everything, if I make the beds today tomorrow it's X's turn,... life is changing (laughs). (Chosen love partner, personal interview, September 2021)

In general, the participants' discourse barely questioned the normalising-assimilationist view: in this sense, there would seem to be little room for further research. Obviously, it is not possible to generalise this statement. Each family is unique and gives rise to a plurality of opinions that have influenced the construction of a reality marked by a confusion of roles and an absence of norms and family role models.

Well, I sometimes act as a father, but I don't make decisions as a father because he has his father. And other times, well, I'm also a friend, I don't know, a special father I would say. (Chosen love partner, personal interview, September 2021)

This thing of not being legally recognised, I don't know... sometimes you just get confused, and you don't know how far you can go. It's true that it's best to reach a consensus with your partner... but I can also say that, in many cases, our families are real examples of change and of new ways of organising life together. (Chosen love partner, personal interview, September 2021)

Meeting more families like ours and sharing moments helps our family not feel weird... and there are more and more families like this... (Father, personal interview, October 2021)

Moreover, some participants stated that their families were peculiar, because they had special characteristics. In fact, they described themselves as families in transition: "We are families that are undergoing more changes and at a faster pace than other types of families".

We noted that in this type of configuration, there is no unitary definition of family, but that each of the participants has their own definition of who is or is not part of their family. This definition, as outlined in the previous themes, is established according to the different life experiences and emotional ties that may have been created between members.

My family is all of us, both my parents and my parents' partners, my siblings, my other siblings, my grandparents, my friends... the important thing is to respect each other, everyone has their own space and at the same time we share moments. What is clear is that close contact breeds affection. (Son, personal interview, September 2021)

Family is everybody who loves each other, who are there through thick and thin. Right now, I don't know who I would include in my family. (Daughter, personal interview, October 2021)

In most cases, the social definition of the family is changing, but it is true that we still cling to the image of the nuclear family: "We're all one family, a real family like the ones in the old days, that's what my family is like" (Mother, personal interview, September 2021).

Conclusions

We investigated, from the perspective of Social Work, how blended families are developing their family dynamics. We were interested in investigating the challenges these families face, the characteristics of the family union, and the pre-existing and re-established roles in the new union, while paying special attention to the figure of the new partner. We developed a qualitative approach to this study: specifically, a thematic analysis of the textual content of the interviews with the participants. This analysis identified three themes that allowed us to understand general and specific aspects of the family dynamics in these new unions: Theme 1: What influences the decision to start a new family? Theme 2: Challenges of the family configuration. Normalisation strategies; and Theme 3: New ways of understanding family ties.

The results section presents each theme and the relationships between them. We found that participants talked about their new family configurations using arguments that, in a some way, attempted to normalise their situation and assimilate it to the experiences of traditional or nuclear families. Our results show that, despite divided homes, duplicated figures in the family structure, and the new operating rules, this type of family continues to be built around heteronormativity, which remains the predominant pillar on which our society, and therefore blended families, are based (Rivas, 2013). When these families talked about their family dynamics, they usually did so subordinating their discourse to hegemonic social practices. This outcome is due to the fact that, in a society in which the perfect image of the traditional family has prevailed, these families have assumed for decades that they are "second-class families" (Espinar et al., 2003). That is, they see themselves from the perspective of a patriarchal, biologicist, heterosexual, biparental, and nuclear family framework.

Therefore, as with other emerging types of family, there is a widespread lack of information on blended families. This lack helps to maintain preconceptions and unfounded judgments about them, and can affect professional activity, particularly the discipline of Social Work. Thus, it is relevant for psychosocial intervention profession-

als, and particularly social workers, to have the knowledge and tools that would enable them to understand those aspects linked to social change that arise from the experience of new family forms. For years, social intervention has focussed on hetero-parental, nuclear, or traditional families. However, this fact does not mean that the Social Work profession should apply exclusively heterocentric strategies, but rather it should incorporate new strategies in line with the new realities.

Thus, further research is needed on new family models. These families lack social and legal recognition, especially in regard to the new spouses or the so-called “chosen love partners”. As reported in other studies, we observed that the new partners found it important to have the autonomy to make decisions that affect the children, although they recognized the importance of respecting and abiding by the final decision of the parents (Fontes et al., 2019). In most cases, although the new partners have been living in the same household for years, they cannot request time off from work or make decisions on health or education issues related to the cohabitating children with whom they do not have biological ties but do have affective and emotional bonds. This fact often leads to an ambiguity of roles in the new couple and to conflicts over the execution of these roles in the setting of the new family. Thus, when defining the roles of the chosen figures in relation to the upbringing of the partners’ children, this lack of legal coverage creates challenges for blended families.

William Marsiglio and Ramón Hinojosa (2007) suggested that, in many countries, the current regulations reinforce the nuclear family through social policies and institutional practices that limit the rights and obligations of the chosen love partners toward their partners’ children. In line with the results of other studies, our results show that traditional gendered behaviour rooted in the patriarchal system is common in blended families, with childcare and domestic chores mainly being the responsibility of the “chosen female love partner”. However, other studies have suggested that tasks are shared more equally in this family configuration than in normative families (Schmeeckle, 2007).

According to M^a Inmaculada López (2020), we should continue to conduct research in this regard and work to reduce the gap between regulations and current social realities. Social workers should encourage the acceptance of blended families through community education and family life education (Lam, 2006). Similarly, in the words of Tood Jensen and Kevin Shafer (2013), social intervention professionals have to help find a balance in these new family configurations. To this end, professionals should help blended families to achieve a level of stability that allows them to function well. It would be of interest to use family mediation as an intervention tool to improve cohabitation through dialogue during the period of transition or integration of new

members into the new family. We observed that, after the transition or adaptation period, people establish routines in much the same way as they do in other families. In fact, we found that the success of these families depends on several elements, but especially on the emotional stability of the new couple, which would be the catalyst for shaping new aspects of family life, including parenting.

According to Gladys Lam (2006), teachers should collaborate with social workers and parents in the school setting, to detect, and therefore be able to solve, the emotional difficulties that children may encounter in new family unions. It is essential not only to review social policies, but also to work with schools to encourage the acceptance of new family configurations and to respond to the specific needs of different families.

Blended families are simply another example of the transformation of social relationships and the creation of “different-from-traditional” social models caused by changes in cohabitation patterns and the emergence of new parent-child dynamics that need further research. Therefore, it is not enough to merely recognise these new family realities; rather, in terms of their social and legal rights, they should be recognised as equal to but different from typical nuclear families. The particularities or specificities of this family type should be addressed in the Spanish legal system, as has been done in relation to other major issues (e.g., same-sex marriage or parental and maternal leave in cases of adoption).

In conclusion, our approach allowed us to investigate new family dynamics in the context of blended families. We focused on families that had been living together for more than a year, in order to study the family relationships once the couples’ bonds had been consolidated. We found that, after achieving stability, new families naturalise their way of living together by making them similar to traditional families. However, further research is needed on the developmental trajectories followed by these families and on how their members come to identify with the new family group.

Thus, as stated by Karen Ripoll-Núñez et al. (2013), further research on their dynamics could facilitate the development of positive and effective psychosocial interventions. In this line, the present study attempted to obtain information that could be used to improve the internal dynamics of these new families and promote the well-being of their family members. Studies on family diversity have generally used quantitative methods, but we suggest the use of qualitative approaches or studies that combine both approaches (Domínguez & Millán-Franco, 2021). Indeed, learning about the experiences of these families can help build a theoretical basis for adapting professional practices in the area of family intervention.

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