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**PSYCHOLOGICAL FEATURES OF KINSHIP CARE FAMILIES:  
INTERVIEW VERSION FOR GUARDIANS**

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***Abstract***

Kinship care is one of the most widespread forms of custody over children separated from their parents. Psychological studies of kinship family relationships and its influence on child wellbeing remain few. One of the possible reasons for that is the lack of tools describing various characteristics specific to this type of family such as performance of kinship families, guardian's attitudes to education, perception of current life situation, role identity of guardians. This article presents the results of the pilot study of interview intended to reveal features of relationships in kinship care families. Interview is tailored for particularities of typical kinship care guardians: older age as requiring non-standard approach to interview procedure, sensitivity of issues related to difficulties with children as they may impose sanctions from guardianship authorities. Interview includes 72 questions (62 alternative questions and 10 open ended questions) grouped into 8 thematic clusters: socio-demographics of family, psychological features of family performance, current family situation and attitude to it, circumstances of guardianship, content and attitudes to the role of the guardian, relationships with guardianship authorities, attitudes to education and assessment of family perspective. Pilot study was carried out on 29 kinship care families and 42 nuclear and extended regular families. The results showed that the developed interview can be used as a tool to study psychological characteristics of kinship care families in relation to of psychological specifics of guardians in such families.

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**Keywords:** Interview, pilot study, children custody, kinship care, family relationships.



## 1. Introduction

Today, there are about half a million children in Russia left without parents. Approximately a third of them are put under kinship care. With a fairly lot of attention paid to psychology of child adoption, studies of kinships care families remain scarce. However, both the obtained results of studies and practice of psychological support for kinship care families indicate that such families have features that distinguish them from foster care families where the child is not related to guardians.

The most significant difference is an inevitable confusion of family roles, when a guardian is forced to play a role of parent in addition to his/her own role prescribed by blood relation (grandparent, aunt, brother etc.) (Bogomyakova, 2015). This may provoke the conflict between the child and the guardian (Ziminski, 2007). Another difference is specifics of child's image formed by the guardian under the influence of his/her own trauma from real or symbolic loss of the loved ones. Image of the child may vary from a small baby in need of excessive attention and care to a person who integrated all "vices" of the biological parents. Deformed image of the children tails changes in interaction (Oleynik, 2007; Osipova, 2013).

Despite all the difficulties kinship care is widely considered preferable to all other forms of child custody. In particular, kinship care allows maintaining certain safety in child's life, staying in contact with siblings, providing softer transition to the new form of family. All these factors in return facilitate child's personal development. Searching for answer to the question "Who am I?" which builds the core of child's identity is inextricably linked to answer to "Where do I come from?" originating from everyday experience of relationships in the family. J. Messing argues that if birth parents are not able to build environment for child's sense of belonging to family roots, one of the best solutions is raising a child in extended family (Messing, 2006). According to results obtained by J. Smith and A. Boone, children placed in kinship family forecast life analogous to peers raised by birth parents (Smith & Boone, 2007). P. Nixon underlines that kinship family provides continuity of culture on which identity is based upon (Nixon, 2007).

Metaanalysis of 102 studies by M.A. Winokur and colleagues revealed that children from kinship families generally have less difficulties in education, behavior and mental health than their peers from foster families or those who were left without parental care. In addition, kinship care children rarely suffer from behavioral problems, rarely have psychological disorders and generally are healthy (Winokur et al., 2018). Other studies suggest that these differences are connected to optimistic estimate of children by guardians or their reluctance to report behavioral problems and seek for psychological or medical care (O'Brien, 2012). It is known that, in general, kinship guardians are older, less healthy, less educated and have less income than not-related guardians. As a result, they face additional difficulties (Harris & Skyles, 2008; Tuzova, 2017).

Analysis of practice of kinship family support suggests that as a rule there are less strict requirements from authorities for guardianship in kinship care cases. Supervision and follow-up in these families is less intent than in not-related guardian care. There are a lot of families which can be classified but not formalized as kinship care or where the guardianship is not certified by law, so these families are not attended by supervising authorities. In general, we suggest that supervising authorities apply softer standards in assessment of relationships in kinship care families and child's life in it, and also provide them with less support (Farmer & Moyers, 2008). In these cases, protective factors for the guardian to ensure child's

comfort and development may be guardian's acceptance of the new family role, sustainable motivation for guardianship, sufficient knowledge and skills for child's education, and support from other family members (Denby et al, 2017).

## **2. Problem Statement**

Based both on the analysis of the studies and practice experience we suggest that among the most significant particularities of kinship families are characteristics of family performance, attitudes of guardians, their behavioral strategies and educational practices, attitudes to the family situation and its perspectives. To measure all of the above we would need a large set of diagnostic tools. When offered in a group, these tools combined may reduce motivation to participate and therefore reliability of results. That's why we developed an interview to collect the data from guardians and children. Interview reveals such features of the family as family composition, social success, adaptability, family relations and roles, attitudes to current family situation, personal reactions of guardians to family situation, social relations, and relationships with supervising authorities. The main research question constitutes the comparison of the selected numeric indicators of kinship families to the same indicators of biological families with birth parents.

## **3. Research Questions**

Based both on the analysis of the studies and practice experience we suggest that among the most significant particularities of kinship families are characteristics of family performance, attitudes of guardians, their behavioral strategies and educational practices, attitudes to the family situation and its perspectives. To measure all of the above we would need a large set of diagnostic tools. When offered in a group, these tools combined may reduce motivation to participate and therefore reliability of results. That's why we developed an interview to collect the data from guardians and children. Interview reveals such features of the family as family composition, social success, adaptability, family relations and roles, attitudes to current family situation, personal reactions of guardians to family situation, social relations, and relationships with supervising authorities. The main research question constitutes the comparison of the selected numeric indicators of kinship families to the same indicators of biological families with birth parents.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to test interview designed to estimate the performance of kinship care families, identify attitudes, behavioral strategies and education methods, attitudes to family situation by the guardians. This article comprises the result of pilot study of interview version for the guardians.

## **5. Research Methods**

Interview version for guardians is based on scales and questions from Attitudes to important life situations (by E. Korjova), Psychological autobiography tool (by E. Korjova), Assessment of family performance (by G. Smilkstein), Parental attitude research instrument (PARI) adapted by T. Nescheret,

Color association test (by A. Lutoshkin). Current version of the interview consists of 72 questions, 24 of them concern sociodemographic characteristics of the family. 48 questions are dedicated to psychological characteristics of the family, among them 38 are numeric Likert scales on family relations and 10 are open questions of qualitative nature. Interview sequentially includes: 1) choice questions on sociodemographic characteristics of the family, 2) choice questions on family performance; 3) open-ended questions on current family situation; 4) choice questions on attitudes to current family situation; 5) choice questions on circumstances of guardianship; 6) open-ended questions on content and attitudes to the role of the guardian; 7) choice questions on relationships with guardianship authorities; 8) color association test to assess role identity of the guardian; 9) choice questions on attitudes to education assessment of family perspective, and 10) open-ended questions on family perspective.

The study procedure suggests interviewing of the child and the guardian separately. The interviewer reads the questions and fills the answer list. The interview takes approximately 1 hour. The inclusion criteria to kinship family sample were: 1) consent from the guardian and the child to participate at the study; 2) legally confirmed kinship care guardianship; 3) child's awareness of the guardianship; and 4) lack of mental disorders in child or guardian that may impede understanding of the questions.

Pilot study sample includes 29 guardians. All of them are female, most of them are grandmothers (96.6 %), mean age  $57.6 \pm 9.3$ , mean age of children  $11.8 \pm 3.3$ , current custody experience  $5.27 \pm 2.04$  years. For 10 cases child custody followed after parents' death (34.5 %), for other 19 cases (65.5 %) – after deprivation of parental rights. 14 guardians of 29 (48.3 %) lived with the family of the child before they got custody of the child, others lived separately. Control group consists of 30 birthmothers of mean age  $40.7 \pm 6.0$  with mean age of children  $11.2 \pm 2.6$ , and 12 grandmothers living with born children and grandchildren of mean age  $60.6 \pm 9.7$  with mean age of grandchildren  $12.1 \pm 2.7$  years. All respondents live in Saint Petersburg, Russia. For more information about the sample see Table 1.

**Table 01.** Socio-demographical characteristics of the sample

Socio-demographics		Guardians	Mother	Grandmothers
Family income (for family member per month)	Less than 11000	2	2	1
	11000-33000	23	26	10
	More than 33000	4	2	1
Guardian's employment	Employed	16	24	8
	Not employed	13	6	4
Guardian's marital status	Married	11	21	6
	Not married	18	9	6

## 6. Findings

Table 2 shows the numeric indicators of psychological characteristics and relationships in kinship care families.

**Table 02.** Psychological characteristics in kinship care families (compared to nuclear and extended birth families)

Scale (range)	Indicator	Mean			Difference Z/p<	
		G	M	GM	G-M	G-GM
Family functions measured with Assessment of family performance (1-5)	I'm sure I can reach out to my family if I'm worried about something	4.00	4.50	4.60		
	I am satisfied with the way our family discusses the problems we face	3.71	3.90	4.20		
	I am satisfied with the way my family members express their feelings, including feelings towards me	3.68	3.70	3.50		
	I am satisfied with the way my family responds to my initiatives	3.82	3.80	3.60		
	I am satisfied with how we spend our leisure time together with our family	3.75	3.97	4.20		

Scale (range)	Indicator	Mean			Difference Z/p<	
		G	M	GM	G-M	G-GM
Attitudes to current family situation measured with Attitudes to important life situations (1-4)	It's good that our family has children. Being a guardian (mother, grandmother) is a valuable experience for me	3.43	3.67	3.80		
	The situation seems very difficult to me	2.39	2.13	2.20		
	I believe that everything will be fine	3.61	3.73	3.50		
	In this situation, little depends on me. It just happened	2.36	1.87	2.20	2.01/ 0.05	
	I take an active part in the situation that our family is currently in	3.61	3.53	3.30		
Attitudes to guardian (mother, grandmother) family role measured with Color association test (1-8, reversed)	My child	1.75	1.65	2.11		
	My family	2.61	1.88	2.33		
	Myself as guardian	2.75	-	-		
	Myself as mother (Myself as grandmother)	3.00	2.92	2.56		
	Myself	3.00	2.65	2.78		
	My life	2.64	2.77	3.11		
Attitudes to education measured with PARI (1-4)	Encouraging verbalization	2.69	2.48	2.50		
	Excessive care	2.43	2.72	2.70		
	Breaking the will	1.57	1.90	2.10		2.04/ 0.05
	Fear to offend	3.14	3.17	3.10		
	Irritability	2.29	2.17	2.50		
	Excessive severity	2.21	1.80	2.10		
	Excluding outside influences	2.29	2.23	2.10		
	Suppression of aggression	2.61	2.57	2.60		
	Comradeship and sharing	2.71	2.90	2.60		
	Approval of activity	2.64	2.60	2.80		
	Avoidance of communication	2.36	2.47	2.70		
	Suppression of sex	2.11	2.10	2.20		
	Interference into child's world	2.54	2.90	2.80		
	Equalitarianism	2.86	3.53	3.20	3.38/ 0.001	
Prognosis of family perspectives measured with Psychological autobiography (see the range in column 2)	Acceleration of development	2.50	2.37	2.20		
	Number of events (unlimited)	2.92	2.99	2.67		
	Mode of events (from -5 to +5)	4.48	4.24	4.17		
	Number of family events connected to respondent personally (unlimited)	0.80	2.24	1.50	3.98/ 0.001	2.00/ 0.05
	Number of family events connected to children (unlimited)	2.48	1.12	1.17	3.14/ 0.01	2.05/ 0.05
Prognosis depth (in years, unlimited)	2.73	1.56	1.87	2.13/ 0.05		

Note: : G – Guardians, M – Mothers, GM - Grandmothers

The obtained results show that guardians tend to estimate family performance lower than mothers and grandmothers (differences are significant as a trend), especially in the spheres of satisfaction with family support and shared leisure time. These data are consistent with lower estimates of stimuli “My family” and “Life of my family” measured with color associations. Also, guardians are inclined to external position in current family situation and often do not feel that they may influence on what is happening ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Educational practices of guardians are characterized by lower interest to feelings and motives of the child ( $p < 0.001$ ), larger emotional distance, more liberal approach to education (differences are significant as trend). Life perspective of the guardians are mainly connected to changes in child’s life ( $p < 0.01$ ) and clearly are concentrated around expected achievements usually of formal nature (“a child will successfully finish school grade”, “child will go to summer camp”, “child will graduate from school” etc.). Non-child family events are less frequent than those found in prognoses by mothers ( $p < 0.001$ ) and grandmothers ( $p < 0.05$ ) from control group families. These results are confirmed by analysis of qualitative data. With these data, we revealed the specific soft asks connected to guardian’s role. In comparison to birth mothers and grandmothers from extended families, guardians are significantly more often ( $\varphi^*$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) focus on “how to organize” the life of child. 39.1% of guardians answered a question “What tasks do you set for yourself in relation to the child under your care?” with providing domestic comfort and the opportunity to get education and profession. Most of the birth mothers and grandmothers from extended families mentioned tasks connected to child’s personal development (66.4% and 49.6 % respectively).

## 7. Conclusion

During the pilot study we noticed that guardians were reluctant to participate. Regardless of preliminary discussion, informing of research goals and ensuring confidentiality, guardians often refused to participate in fear of “possible leaks of information” to supervising authorities that may result in strict control and withdrawal of the child. Those who agreed to participate were noticed to embellish the reality, answering questions in social desirability manner. Despite that, the results demonstrate that the developed interview has sufficient distinctive power to estimate indicators specific to relationships in kinship families (compared to biological families) for all characteristics: family performance, guardian’s attitudes to education, attitudes to family situation, role identity of guardians. It was achieved by combining choice questions with open-ended questions, including questions of projective nature (by color associations and prognosis of family development).

Pilot study also confirmed that the results are influenced by the quality of contact between the interviewer and the respondent. The order of questions in the interview allows to move from “safe” topics of general demographic data to emotionally intense questions about circumstances of guardianship, current difficulties in the family, fears and hopes. It is critical that an interviewer possesses skills of establishing and maintaining contact, non-prescriptive conversation and psychological support.

In conclusion we must add that all the results presented in the current article are preliminary and require refinement on bigger samples with a larger set of variables describing circumstances of guardianship and current situation that kinship family faces. The obtained results are sufficient to demonstrate that the

developed interview may be recommended to study psychological characteristics of kinship families with regards to specifics of kin guardians.

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