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## ***“We are so hermetic” – families’ social isolation as an essential feature of family life in contemporary Poland***

### ***Abstract***

The paper reconstructs relationships between families with children and their social environment consisting of both individuals and institutions. The relationships are identified from the perspective of families. I posit the following research questions: (1) What individuals and what institutions compose the social environment around families and have influence over them? (2) Which individuals and institutions do families trust, and which do they distrust? (3) Which individuals or institutions, in the eyes of interviewees, support their families, and which go against them?

Edward C. Banfield’s concept of amoral familism and Stefan Nowak’s notion of sociological vacuum – both linked to social trust – provide a theoretical framework and serve as starting points for my study. The article is based on qualitative research findings. The study applied an inductive approach.

I argue that families’ isolation from institutions – I propose the term “families’ social isolation” – is one of the most significant aspects of family life in contemporary Poland. I identify three key components of Polish families’ social isolation: the absence of social institutions that families can trust, families’ disposition to cut themselves off

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from institutions, and a perception of the family as a safe space as opposed to a “dangerous area” outside.

**Keywords:** amoral familism, sociological vacuum, families’ social isolation, social trust, qualitative research

## *Introduction*

Opinion polls conducted in Poland since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have consistently demonstrated a high level of distrust in institutions, especially those related to politics. Currently, political parties are distrusted by 70% of respondents, Parliament by 65%, the Government by 62%, and the Constitutional Tribunal<sup>2</sup> by 60% (CBOS, 2022). In this respect, Poland and other post-communist countries differ from the rest of Europe, where confidence in political institutions is ordinarily higher<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the majority of the Poles do not trust people they do not know. In 2022, 77% of respondents selected the statement: *when interacting with other people, you have to be very careful*, while 19% agreed that *generally speaking, most people can be trusted* (CBOS, 2022). Only 30% of respondents reported that they trusted strangers, 58% claimed they did not (of which: 11% strongly distrusted), and 12% chose the answer: *difficult to say* (CBOS, 2022). Poland (along with other post-communist countries, as well as Portugal and Greece) is among the European states with a low level of “trust in people”<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, the results of the European Social Survey conducted in 2020–2021 show that in Poland, compared to other post-communist countries, the group of respondents who chose the edge answer on a 10-point scale: *you can’t be too careful when dealing with other people* is extremely large, reaching 32%. In Slovakia, 14% of respondents chose this option; in Lithuania 8%; in Czechia 7%; and in Hungary 6%<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, Poles have a significantly high amount of confidence in people considered as “close”: 98% trust their immediate family (parents, children, spouse), 95% trust their friends, and 89% trust their extended family (CBOS, 2020).

The coexistence of distrust towards institutions and strangers together with high levels of trust in family members and other intimates lends itself to analysis involving the notions of amoral familism (Banfield, 1958; Tarkowska & Tarkowski, 1990; Ferragina, 2009; Alesina & Giuliano, 2011; Reay, 2014; Herreros, 2015; Foschi & Lauriola, 2016; Bigoni et al. 2016; Huyseune, 2019; Jhang, 2021) and sociological vacuum

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<sup>2</sup> Due to its victory in the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections in Poland, the Law and Justice (Pol. Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) party started to control the Constitutional Tribunal (Sadurski, 2019). Therefore, the Constitutional Tribunal is mentioned here among other political institutions.

<sup>3</sup> The following categories were taken into consideration: confidence in Parliament, political parties, and Government (Evaluate, n.d.).

<sup>4</sup> Two categories: *feeling that people can be trusted and trust completely of somewhat: people you meet the first time* were examined (Evaluate, n.d.).

<sup>5</sup> European Social Survey (2020–2021).

(Nowak, 1979; Pawlak, 2015; Woźniak et al., 2020). These two concepts, both linked to social trust, constitute the theoretical framework and starting points for my study.

The main objective of the paper is to reconstruct the relationships between families raising children and their social environment, which consists of both individuals and institutions. I answer three questions: (1) What individuals and what institutions compose the social environment around families and have influence over them? (2) Which individuals and institutions do families trust, and which do they distrust? (3) Which individuals or institutions, in the eyes of interviewees, support their families, and which go against them? In effect, I offer a qualitative analysis and an in-depth, multidimensional reconstruction of how families perceive their social environment or “psycho-social living space” (Pol. *psychospołeczna przestrzeń życiowa*, a notion proposed by Nowak, 1979). My analysis of the interviewees’ responses leads to the diagnosis of the families’ isolation from institutions – I propose the term “families’ social isolation” – as one of the most significant aspects of family life in contemporary Poland. Combining families’ social perceptions of individuals and institutions is an example of how family life has clashed with what is public and political. It can be assumed that a high level of trust in social institutions (including political ones) serves as a “link” between the spheres of the private (which involves family life) and public domains. In contrast, a low level of trust indicates a separation of the two spheres, a separation of the “world of individuals” from the “world of institutions” (to use Nowak’s terminology).

The paper is divided into the following sections. Initially, I present the key notions of the theoretical framework: amoral familism and the sociological vacuum. This is complemented by a brief overview of the relationships between families and institutions in Poland before the systemic transformation. Then, I detail how the qualitative data were gathered and analysed. The main body of the paper is devoted to presenting the results. In this section, I begin by describing the individuals who were indicated by interviewees as having an impact on their families, then I characterise the respondents’ perception of influential institutions. In the discussion of the results, I address three essential components of families’ social isolation identified through my analysis. The research’s and paper’s limitations are also discussed in that part. Finally, in closing remarks, I combine a reflection on the notions of amoral familism and sociological vacuum with the findings of my study.

### *Theoretical framework*

The concept of amoral familism was developed by Edward C. Banfield (1958) in his analysis of the social and political backwardness of the southern Italian region in the late 1950s. Stefan Nowak (1979) offered the concept of a sociological vacuum in the social context of the Polish People’s Republic, particularly, in the 1970s. Both concepts were developed more than a half-century ago, focused on the poor and rural society in the first case, and the society under a communist regime in the second. Thus, it is reasonable to ask why these concepts are still useful in a liberal-democratic Poland in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After presenting and discussing the findings of my research, I will be back to this question in the closing remarks. Now, I concen-

trate on the main assumptions of both Banfield's and Nowak's conceptions and provide a brief overview of the links between families and social institutions in Poland before the systemic transformation.

Banfield's main claim is that individuals in a society consisting of "amoral familists" follow the rule: *maximise the material, short-run advantage of the nuclear family; assume that all others will do likewise* (1958, p. 85). Amoral familists will not support the interests of a social group or society unless it benefits them personally. Expressing genuine concern about public issues by amoral familists would be considered strange, if not inappropriate, given that any group in power is likely to be corrupt and care only about itself. Alesina and Giuliano sum up: *amoral familism leads to low civic engagement, low political participation, low generalised trust, and a lack of confidence in political institutions. As a result, amoral familism prevents the development of well-functioning political institutions, creates a situation where politics is simply a private affair of those who control it, common goods are completely disregarded and there is very little interest in participating in public affairs* (2011, pp. 817–818). In this type of society, a family is a provider of services, insurance, and transfer of resources (Alesina & Giuliano, 2011). With their trust in family members only, the amoral familists do not believe that the democratic structure based on rules and institutions can serve the family's interests (Foschi & Lauriola, 2016). Reay (2014), after John Rodger, emphasises that amoral familism is the antithesis of social solidarity and commitment to the common good because it is based on the family as opposed to the community. Ferragina (2009) claims that the general context of non-cooperation in amoral familism society makes the law (which can be treated as a social institution) difficult to uphold and easy to disregard unless it is enforced by the prospect of punishment.

Banfield's concept has been criticised for its unconvincing methodology (see: Ferragina, 2009). Also, the thesis that familism, strong family ties, and low levels of social trust are mutually linked has been disputed (see: Herreros, 2015). Nevertheless, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Banfield's thought has been brought back to light in the context of interest in social capital (Ferragina, 2009), most notably prominent in Putnam's (1993) and Fukuyama's (1995) theories. Moreover, the concept of amoral familism still remains intellectually inspiring, especially in research on high-trust and low-trust societies (see: Füzér, 2020).

Tarkowska and Tarkowski (1990) rely on the concept of amoral familism to describe social reality in the Polish People's Republic throughout the 1970s and 1980s. They contend that the separation of the private from the public, the "world of individuals" from the "world of institutions" (Nowak's terminology) was a transparent feature of Polish social life at the time. The private sphere and informal networks centred around family and other small groups (colleagues, neighbours, friends, acquaintances, etc.) were perceived as intensive, authentic, and vivid, while the public, official, and institutional sphere was distinguished chiefly by appearances and facades. Tarkowska and Tarkowski (1990) emphasise the distinction between "insiders" – those who are familiar, recognised, comprehended, and who create a social environment ruled by defined and obvious norms, and "outsiders/strangers" – individuals and institutions who are unknown, unpredictable, disruptive for the existing order, and sometimes even threatening or scary.

Wnuk-Lipiński (1982) proposes the notion of “dimorphism of values” to demonstrate the duality of moral attitudes and values depending on whether the possible partners are familiar individuals or social institutions. Koralewicz and Wnuk-Lipiński (1987) as well as Bojar (1991) claim that small groups (particularly family and friends) have a compensatory function against malfunctioning public institutions. These authors stress that strong emotional connections within small groups were one of the essential features of the Polish People’s Republic. Individuals not only particularly valued the opinions of those close to them, but also were ready to sacrifice health and peace of mind, should that prove beneficial to their family and friends.

Nowak (1979) postulates the existence of a sociological vacuum between the level of primary groups and that of the national community. Nowak’s concept clearly and strongly distinguishes a “nation” and a “state”. The nation, as seen by the Poles, was a kind of moral community with an autotelic value, while the state as a system of organisation evaluated exclusively in instrumental terms. Nowak writes: *If we wished to draw a gigantic “sociogram” based on people’s bonds and identifications, the social structure of our society perceived in those terms would appear as a “federation” of primary groups, families and circles of friends united in a national community, with rather insignificant other types of bonds between those two levels* (Nowak, 1979, p. 266)<sup>6</sup>. Nowak argues that institutions were often perceived as unfriendly, uncooperative, unreliable, and sometimes even threatening, and he emphasises that these perceptions were significantly linked to the strength of the relationships in primary groups.

Among the reasons for the existence of a sociological vacuum, Nowak enumerates a perceived lack of influence over institutions, a sense of “alienation”, and a perception of the “institutional system” as a bureaucratic obstacle rather than a means of support. Woźniak et al. (2020) favourably refer to Nowak’s noticing: *the growing sense of alienation among the masses and the subsequent loss of identification with the existing institutions owing to the decline of social trust in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The bonds between primary groups and individuals on the one hand and the institutions on the other are weakened or broken* (2020, p. 519). Pawlak (2015) stresses that Nowak describes sociological vacuum as a Polish peculiarity. According to Nowak, the “objective” social structure in Poland and the institutional structure are as complex as in many other industrialised countries, but the “subjective” social structure, based on individuals’ identifications, is different.

To summarise, there are three attributes that Banfield’s and Nowak’s conceptions have in common. Firstly, they have to do with the relationship between families (or primary groups consisting of related individuals) and broadly defined social institutions, which include, e.g., the law, the workplace, political institutions of the State, and the Church (in both cases, the Catholic Church). Second, they both assume that the strength of family ties (and bonds in other primary groups) can stimulate, and be stimulated by families’ proclivity to distance themselves from institutions. Finally, both notions have been employed as starting points for examining the issue of social trust, even though Nowak, unlike Benfield, did not explicitly use the terms “trust” and “distrust” in his essay on the technicalities of sociological vacuum.

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<sup>6</sup> Translated by Pawlak (2015, p. 7).

### *Data and research method*

The data was gathered through the realisation of the project: “Parenting practices in modern Polish families: daily routine reconstruction”<sup>7</sup> (see: Sikorska, 2019). The study employed qualitative methodologies. Two rounds of in-depth interviews were conducted with 24 parent couples (regarding dyadic interviews; see: Żadkowska et al., 2018) and six single parents. A total of 54 respondents were interviewed in 2016 and 2017. Each participating family had at least one child under the age of six. There were 13 families with two children, and in five of them, the oldest child was older than six (9 to 15 years old). The respondents were aged from 25 to 45, the average age was 35. All respondents stated that they were heterosexual. Including an additional sampling criterion (sexual orientation) with such a small sample size (30 households) was not methodologically justified.

The sample consisted of 30 families: 15 interviews were conducted with middle-class families in Warsaw, while the remaining 15 interviews were conducted with working-class families in a medium-sized town (approx. 45,000 inhabitants). Quotes from the first group were marked from 1 to 15; from the second group: from 16 to 30. However, because the empirical data analysis did not reveal any significant or compelling differences in the relationship between families and social actors with regard to social class, this element is not examined further in the research. The interviewed couples jointly created lists of individuals and institutions and then together answered the specific questions outlined below. The respondents often supplemented each other’s statements and added new examples. Therefore, gender was assessed as an important factor for only a very few topics (highlighted in the description of the results below), where differences between the comments of male and female respondents were clearly evident.

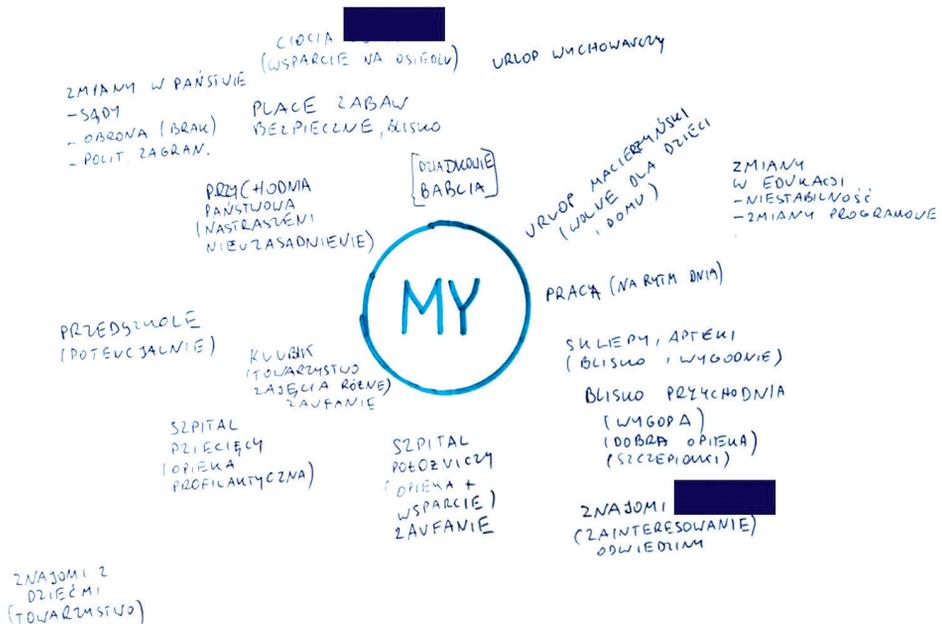
I used the following research tool to gather information on respondents’ relations with social actors around them. The participants were given a large sheet of paper with the word “WE” (in the sense: our family, Pol. “MY”) in the centre and asked to come up with a list of all individuals and institutions that have influence over them. Then, the elements of the list were to be written down on that sheet in the following way: the closer to “WE”, the greater the influence (see: Picture 1 and Picture 2). Implementation of this research tool could be seen as a contribution to the qualitative research of family-institution relationships.

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**Picture 1.** The example of sheets with a lowest number of listed individuals/institutions  
Respondents listed: mommy, brother, sister-in-law.



**Picture 2.** The example of sheets with a larger number of listed individuals/institutions  
Respondents listed: grandparents [grandmother], maternity leave, work, shops, medical centre, maternity hospital and children's hospital, daycare centre, kindergarten, aunt X, friends (who are interested in), changes in the State, changes in the education system. The list has been anonymised, mentioned names are covered.

When the respondents decided their lists were complete, the moderator began asking the following questions:

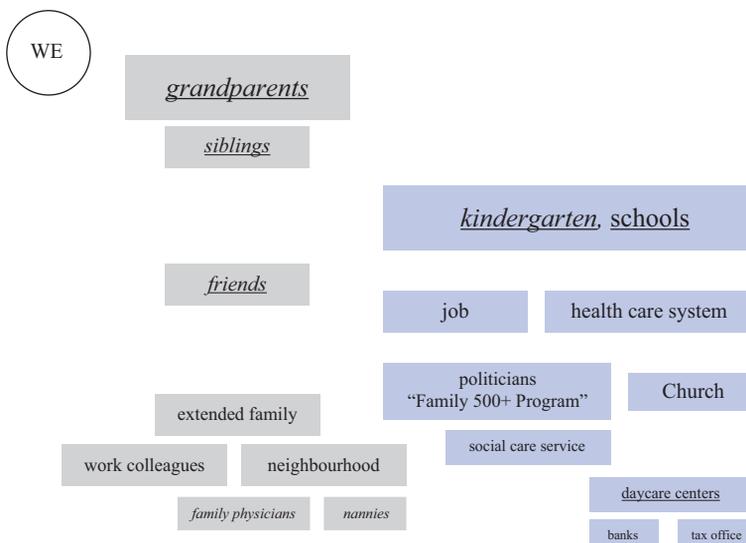
- 1) How does this individual/institution affect your family?
- 2) Do you have any influence on this individual/institution?
- 3) Does this individual/institution support you as parents? If so, what does it help you with?
- 4) Does this individual/institution obstruct your family? If so, how? What do you do then?
- 5) Do you trust this individual/institution? If not, why not?
- 6) How would you describe your relationship with this individual/institution in a few words?

If respondents did not mention kindergarten, school, workplace, health care, the Church, or politicians, the moderator enquired about them one by one.

The study involved an inductive approach (Neuman, 2003). The data was analysed using qualitative tools (Silverman, 2001), specifically the thematic analysis approach (Guest et al., 2012). The data was coded using ATLAS.ti software. The ethical procedure involved the preservation of the interviewees' anonymity (e.g., names of respondents and their children were changed; the name of the medium-sized city was coded). All interviews were transcribed verbatim. For this paper, selected quotes were translated into English by the author. The translation was consulted with a professional interpreter.

## Results

The individuals most frequently mentioned by interviewees are outlined in the first part of this section. Then, the institutions around the families, identified by respondents, are discussed. A summary of the results is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Summary of the results: individuals and institutions in families' social environment

How should the data presented in the figure be interpreted?

- individuals and institutions that inspired trust in the interviewees have been marked in italics;
- individuals and institutions that were perceived to be supportive of families have been underlined;
- individuals and institutions mentioned most frequently by interviewees as having influence over their families have been marked in large font and placed close to “WE”;
- individuals and institutions named the fewest times and perceived as less influential have been highlighted in a smaller font and placed further away from “WE”.

### *Individuals around families*

Almost all respondents spontaneously mentioned their parents, positioning them closest to the “WE” circle. Characteristically, however, they used only the term “grandparents”, not “parents”. Grandmothers (mothers more often than mothers-in-law) were indicated as significantly more influential and important than grandfathers/fathers-in-law. Grandfathers were hardly ever mentioned outside their role of grandmothers’ helpers and as individuals, they were rather “invisible”. The influence of grandparents primarily took three forms of support: organisational, financial, and emotional.

Organisational support increased the amount of time for parent’s absence: grandparents assisted in children’s daily routine (e.g., going to and returning from kindergarten/school), in sickness, or whenever parents wanted to be absent (e.g., over weekends). It also involved helping around the house (e.g., *they provide something to eat* – 18). As Jola and Marcin (25) said, grandparents: *feed, change, and dress their grandchildren just like we do*. Secondly, some respondents admitted that grandparents paid for their grandchildren’s extracurricular activities, co-financed daily shopping, cooked lunches or bought expensive things (e.g., a car). The third type of assistance mentioned by respondents was emotional support, which mostly involved providing a sense of security. Many participants described grandparents as caring, trustworthy individuals who are emotionally close to their families and can always be relied on. Grandparental support was commonly regarded as natural and obvious – Angelika (24) said: *Grandparents ... they are simply present. They are with us, and they help*.

The same respondents who identified their parents as supportive also said that grandparents’ attitudes and behaviours toward grandchildren were irritating. I recognised four major reasons why parents were annoyed with grandparents. First, almost all respondents claimed that grandparents spoiled their grandchildren. The pampering mostly consisted of providing children with a nearly unlimited amount of sweets. Julia’s (21) statements perfectly demonstrate this: *My mom only feeds him with sweets. Grandma says, “It’s better to eat a cookie than nothing”*. Marta and Tadeusz (5), the parents of a seven-year-old boy, defined the grandmother-grandson bond as follows: *Grandma wishes to overwhelm him with her love. She buys him everything he wants*. Second, interviewees were irritated when the grandparents did not obey the rules set by

the parents, which in effect reflected negatively on the parents' authority. Third, numerous respondents stated that their grandparents tolerated such behaviours in their grandchildren that they would not have tolerated, or indeed had not tolerated, in their own children. For the parents, that was a source of annoyance and, sometimes, even bitterness.

In short, parents' attitudes toward grandparents might be seen as a perfect example of ambivalence: on the one hand, grandparents were extremely supportive, but on the other, they were extremely annoying; on the one hand, grandparents were indispensable, but on the other, relations with them often involved a "fight" or even a "war" over different approaches to raising children; on the one hand, parents trusted grandparents and readily accepted their support, but on the other hand, they did not accept many of grandparents' behaviours toward grandchildren.

Siblings were indicated as influential far less frequently than grandparents. While grandparents' support was taken for granted, siblings' assistance had to be requested. Relationships with siblings did not provoke intense or ambivalent emotions. In contrast, relations with friends seem to be much more intriguing. The vast majority of respondents – even those who considered friends to be important – stressed that some topics should not be shared with persons other than family. Interviewees frequently used the statement that "dirty linen should be washed at home". "Money issue" was presented as an example of such a topic. Most frequently, interviewees reported their fears that others could use such knowledge against them. Many interviewees mentioned their *limited trust in people outside their immediate family* (21). In contrast, respondents who said they could discuss anything with friends at the same time saw this openness as breaking the dominant social norm of distrust.

Only very few respondents indicated the extended family members (aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.), neighbours, work colleagues, family doctors (as persons, not as agents of the health care system), and nannies as influential.

### *Institutions around families*

Kindergartens and elementary schools were the most influential and frequently referred to institutions that influenced families. Nurseries came in second, which is clear since nursery care in Poland is much less widespread than kindergarten care and most respondents had no experience with this institution<sup>8</sup>. The respondents' perceptions of kindergartens and schools and their level of trust in them as educational and caring institutions differed significantly. The vast majority of interviewees evaluated kindergartens significantly more favourably than they did schools. Parents viewed kindergartens as places where their children can self-develop, get educated and learn how to be more self-sufficient. Furthermore, the kindergarten staff, according to the interviewees, provided children with tender care and attention. In effect, children were

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<sup>8</sup> In 2021, for every 1,000 children under the age of three, 155 used nursery care (GUS, 2022). Kindergarten care was attended by 92% of children between the ages of three and six (Kazimierczyk, 2022).

protected, *completely taken care of*, and even *simply loved* (25). Almost all parents declared a positive relationship with the kindergarten staff, mutual readiness to discuss children’s behaviours and openness to counselling on parenting issues. Some of the respondents were parents’ representatives in kindergartens and they believed they had a voice in the running of these institutions. The vast majority of parents categorically stated that they trusted the kindergartens. The non-public ones were trusted even more.

Parents’ attitudes toward elementary schools were definitely negative. First, respondents felt that children in schools were less individualised than in kindergartens and that their personal needs or difficulties were less frequently identified and addressed by the staff. The school was described by Angelika and Krzysztof (24), parents of two boys ages three and nine, as an *assembly line in a factory*. Children’s anonymity at school might be linked with the perception that school is an unsafe place, where, as Iwona and Robert (27) stated, a child can be *pushed, slapped*, and generally *school means a struggle for survival*. Second, respondents believed they had less control over schools than over kindergartens. Marta and Tadeusz (5) described a teacher in their son’s class who was extremely strict with the pupils. In the interviewees’ own words:

*‘Tomek [son] is clearly stressed’.*  
*‘He’s very nervous about school’.*  
*‘The kids are crying [...]’.*  
*‘They do not want to enter the classroom’.*

Despite their negative assessment of the teacher’s work, which they mentioned multiple times throughout the interviews, the respondents did not try to change the situation. Nor did other parents in the class. Marta explained: *Everyone keeps their mouth shut because, I suppose, every parent is afraid their reaction may have an adverse effect on how their child gets treated*. Katarzyna and Maciek (18) emphasised that while the choice of school is a point at which they, as parents, can make decisions pertaining to their child’s education, then later on, when they are not *inside the system [in the sense: since the child started education in school]*, well, *we don’t have any impact*.

Nonetheless, for several respondents, having little control over the school did not imply discontent. Some parents stopped communicating with the school, assuming, as Ewa and Piotr (20) did, that they needed no contact if their children were doing well:

*‘How do we stay in contact with the school?’*  
*‘Yes, I am in contact, after all, I attend parent-teacher meetings ... Just kidding, practically I am not in contact at all...’*  
*‘Well, that’s right, Natasza [daughter] is doing well in school [...]. I went to the meeting with the teacher, and then she said to me: “I have nothing to talk to you about because everything is fine”’.*

The workplace can be considered another institution listed by respondents as having an impact on their families. Employment had two effects on families, which respondents tended to describe simultaneously: first, it provided a livelihood for the fam-

ily, and second, it reduced the time *for the family*. Paulina and Konrad's (11) short conversation was an excellent demonstration of the dual impact of work on family: *It provides us with funds. And you are not at home [in the sense: because you are at work].* The other type of employment's influence on family life was the structuring of both daily routine and leisure, e.g., holidays.

Respondents – especially female respondents – if they did recognise the positive aspects of work (apart from earning money), they indicated *a break from day-to-day duties* (21) and *a breath from everyday life. [...] [because] at work I can have a quiet cup of coffee, quite unlike at home* (14). Employment was rarely described as providing satisfaction, professional development or self-realisation. Work was mostly perceived as stressful, mood depressing, and having a generally negative impact on one's *well-being* (17), generating undesirable emotions that one *brings home* (10) and provoking the realisation that it all can *have a negative effect on the children* (18). Moreover, respondents rarely felt that the company, office or public institution where they worked supported them in their parental activities. In contrast, they were more likely to report assistance from coworkers (who, for instance, were ready to stand in when one had to take their child to see the doctor). Work was commonly presented as *in competition* with the family (in terms of time away from the family) or even as a *family enemy* (due to work being seen as a source of frustration that can negatively affect family life). A notable example was a conversation between Wojtek and Beata (26):

*'[Work] limits, restricts our being together, our being ... a family'.  
 'Work consumes a part of our life'.  
 'Half of our life'.*

The healthcare system was yet another social institution discussed. The majority of respondents professed distrust in physicians working primarily in the public health service. An excellent illustration here was Katarzyna and Maciek's (18) response to the question of whether they trust the health service: *'No [laughter]'. 'I mean, I'd rather go private [laughter]'*. Respondents' distrust and aversion to doctors may have derived from the experience of having one's parental concerns subjected to a very harsh judgement. Mothers, who had more regular contact with health care services than fathers, felt disrespected. Two stories provided excellent examples: Joanna (19) described how a doctor ridiculed her concerns about her child's health, which made her feel *totally insignificant [and] treated like a loony*; Julka (21) said a doctor dismissed her demands and labelled her *oversensitive*.

Politicians, political parties, and governing authorities were seen as less influential social institutions than the health system. Their impact was revealed in four contexts. One is the influence on families' financial situations. Interviewees primarily mentioned the public policy called the "Family 500+ Program" (launched in 2016, universal financial benefits for families with children) and the activities of social welfare centres. Respondents were ambivalent about this social programme. Those who had experienced financial improvement were openly enthusiastic: *Honestly, it's wonderful that it's there*, but at the same time: *When it wasn't there, we were also able to cope*, stressed Renata and Darek (12). Families in financial difficulties can apply for additional ben-

efits and then contact the social welfare centres. The interviewers described them as institutions that transmit welfare funds and *ask stupid questions* (24), demand *piles of documentation* (22), and sometimes humiliate the beneficiaries. Joanna (19) said: *Anybody who asks for financial support is profiled as an [instance] of social pathology plotting to extort money.*

Another form of impact of the government on families, as indicated by respondents, was related to the education system. In this context, parents discussed mainly the insufficient availability of nurseries and kindergartens, as well as the education reform introduced in 2016, which resulted in the abolition of middle schools (Pol. *gimnazja*). A third identified element of political influence was the organisation of the healthcare system. Here, the dominated opinions grounded in parents’ experiences with the public health care system prevailed, so assessments were chiefly very negative. Fourth, a small percentage of respondents reported the government’s effect on the organisation of various public-sector concerns such as the legal system, the economy, price rises, the labour market, and so on.

Even when the interviewees cited concrete examples of how their families were influenced by politicians’ activities, the vast majority of them clearly distanced themselves from politics and those in power. Marek (19) stated: *They [politicians] irritate me. They have no impact on my life. It doesn’t matter to me who is in power.* According to Tadeusz (5): *Politics is something we try to keep as far away from the child and family as possible [...] the level [of politicians] is zero, and there’s no one to vote for; it’s scary.* Regarding politics, other respondents declared: *We don’t get involved in such matters* (27); *I do all in my power to ensure that politicians have as little effect on my family as possible* (23); *I don’t watch the news because I don’t want to get involved... I don’t have the stomach for it* (12). Respondents stated unequivocally that they did not trust politicians. The government’s support was seen only in terms of financial benefits, but in general, the interviewees felt their families were harmed rather than helped by politicians. Out of their own initiative, parents hardly ever mentioned politicians, political parties and governing authorities as influential institutions. Such bodies were mentioned in response to specific questions asked by moderators.

The Catholic Church was another institution mentioned by respondents as having an impact on their families. However, just one-third of the parents named it, which is in contrast with the prevalence of declarations of Catholicism in Poland – 87% of Poles describe themselves as “believers” or “strong believers”, according to the CBOS quantitative survey conducted in 2021 (CBOS, 2021). Respondents’ perceptions of the Church as an institution and their perceptions of Catholic religion varied markedly. The institutional church, represented by priests, clergymen, and teachers of religion at schools, was seen as untrustworthy and unsupportive. Additionally, some respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the involvement of the Church in politics in Poland. Furthermore, the Church *repels* them due to the *clergy’s greediness* (21). Another cause for the unfavourable evaluation of the Church was, as Arek and Kasia (7) pointed out, its readiness to meddle:

*Silly pronouncements which, to put it bluntly, make no sense. Neither to us nor to science. Admittedly, one can hardly talk of the Church’s scientific foundations, but the Church*

*itself meddles with scientific matters; let's take for instance the in vitro. A number of our acquaintances have made use of that. Who would consult the Church on IVF?!*

At the same time, some respondents stated that the Catholic religion and faith provide them with emotional and spiritual support. The majority of respondents had an ambivalent attitude toward the Catholic Church. The ambiguity reflected in Julia and Maciek's (21) question: *Theoretically, we are Catholics, aren't we?*, as well as Marek's (23) distinction between *Christian values*, which were significant to him, and *Church values*, which he strongly questioned.

Among other influential institutions around families, yet only occasionally referenced, there were: banks (in the context of receiving and repaying loans), stores (their location relative to where respondents lived influenced the organisation of family life), daycare centres for children (which offered care for a few hours and helped *socialise the child* [28]), and sports clubs for children.

### *Discussion of the results*

The study justifies the identification of three dimensions of families' social isolation. First, **absence of social institutions that families can trust**. Out of all the institutions listed by respondents, only kindergartens inspire trust and are perceived as family-friendly and supportive. Elementary schools are evaluated negatively because parents lack trust in them and receive less assistance from them. Parents' relationships with the other institutions mentioned, especially politicians, the Catholic Church, and the public healthcare system, are not founded on trust. Additionally, the vast majority of respondents do not perceive these institutions as supportive. On the contrary, parents are often irritated by the actions of these institutions (especially politicians), feel "alienated" (especially by the Church), and attempt to avoid them (as is the case with the public health services, which are ignored when the choice of the private ones is deemed feasible). Furthermore, the majority of respondents claim that, as parents, they have no (or very little) control over the listed institutions.

Given that most of the institutions are not trustworthy nor helpful, informal support networks are formed through familial bonds, mostly with grandparents, but also with siblings and, less often, with friends. Even if they are irritating, respondents' closest relatives have the greatest influence on parents and are the most supportive. In other words, the people regarded to be part of the family (typically of only the immediate family) and family ties are the most essential markers on the social environment map, and family ties involve the highest level of trust. This is clearly demonstrated in the conversation between Jola and Marcin (25). The respondents identified their family as only themselves and their children (Marcin) or as them, children plus parents and siblings (Jola), and then concluded: *I don't think we'll add anyone [in sense: important to them]. We are so hermetic*. Hermetic here is a quality capturing the processes by which the immediate family isolates itself from the outside world.

The second dimension of families' social isolation is the **desire presented by parents to separate their families from social institutions, and willingness to cut them-**

**selves off from institutions**, especially politicians and the Catholic Church. The parents discuss specific aspects of politicians’ and the Church’s influence on their family life (mentioning money transfers, influence on education and health systems in the case of politicians, and influence on children’s religious practices such as baptism, communion, going to mass, and attending religious classes in the case of the Church), but simultaneously some of them state strongly that these institutions have no influence on their families. Moreover, they want to separate their families from the influence of politicians and the Church. This seeming contradiction may be caused by parents’ associations of political or religious influence with attempts to interfere in the lives of their families (“meddling”), to which they are decidedly opposed. Parents also claim that they are unconcerned with what politicians and priests or clergymen think of them. At the same time, the majority of interviewees underline the importance of the opinions of people in their immediate network (mainly their grandparents and, less commonly, siblings, friends, and acquaintances). Kindergartens and schools were mentioned as institutions whose opinions were relevant to the respondents, but only in the first case was the assessment discussed in the context of supporting parents.

The third dimension of families’ social isolation is characterised by the **perception of the family (usually narrowly defined by respondents) as a safe space as opposed to a “dangerous area” outside**. Many respondents perceive the world outside the family as threatening and unpredictable. These themes emerged either in response to questions (e.g., about children’s futures) or spontaneously in various interview contexts. Respondents noted a range of threats to which they believed children were exposed, beginning with *leading someone [in sense: the child] astray* (3, 26), *bad influence* (9, 21) emanating from *bad company* (3, 4, 6, 22, 25), *bad people* (26), *dodgy people* (12) or *sects* (16). *Bad company* included those addicted to drugs, alcohol, or gambling, as well as *hot middle school girls* who are *hunting for young boys* (5) or a future *unsuitable wife* who would not take care of the respondent’s son (21). Another significant risk mentioned by parents is addiction to technological devices (see: Sikorska, 2022). One of the implications of considering the outside world as dangerous was an upbringing based on distrust, implying a socialisation in which it was critical to *be warned of dangers* (22). This approach is excellently captured by Beata’s comment (26): *You also need to teach [a child] trust in people, so... that they don’t trust everyone*.

The main limitation of my research is the reduction of the sample to families with children. This might influence the respondents’ selection of individuals and institutions considered influential. Grandparents, the most frequently mentioned individuals, were described by respondents as grandmothers and grandfathers of their grandchildren rather than their own parents. As for institutions, the most frequently mentioned were childcare and educational institutions. Implementing a survey based on a sample of families with teenagers or families without children might change the list of individuals and institutions identified as having influence on families, or at least affect the order in which they would be mentioned. In such cases, one could anticipate that grandparents, as well as childcare and education institutions, would not be listed most often. The absence of extensive literature on civil society or civil involvement issues could be considered as a limitation of my paper, too. However, this was dictated by the intention to focus on family-institutional relationships, for which

the concepts of amoral familism and sociological vacuum, implemented as a theoretical framework, seem to be best suited.

### *Closing remarks*

I argue that families' social isolation can be seen as one of the most significant aspects of family life in contemporary Poland. Three dimensions of social isolation experienced by families with children are identified: the absence of supportive social institutions that families can trust, families' willingness to cut themselves off from institutions, and the perception of the family as a safe space as opposed to a "dangerous area" outside. In my opinion, the concept of family social isolation regarding a liberal-democratic Poland in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century corresponds to three observations made by Banfield (1958) and Nowak (1979), which deal with rural Italian communities in the 1950s in the first case, and Polish society under the communist regime in the 1970s and 1980s, in the second.

First, the notion of trust towards family members (and representatives of other primary groups) was essential for both Banfield's and Nowak's thoughts. Informal networks are centred around family, which is a provider of services, insurance, and the transfer of resources (Alesina & Giuliano, 2011) and which, in effect, can have a compensatory function against institutions (Koralewicz & Wnuk-Lipiński, 1987; Bojar, 1991). The relationships within the family or primary groups are perceived as intensive, authentic, and vivid (Tarkowska & Tarkowski, 1990), supportive and based on emotional connections (Koralewicz & Wnuk-Lipiński, 1987; Bojar, 1991). Family members and other intimates are seen as "insiders" (Nowak, 1979), who are familiar, recognised, and comprehended (Tarkowska & Tarkowski 1990). The results of my study echo these observations, demonstrating the tendency to perceive family as a safe space in opposition to a "dangerous area" outside. In particular, grandparents were described as the most supportive kin relations, even if they sometimes irritated the parents. Parents view grandparental assistance as natural. Furthermore, grandparents, siblings, and friends are all identified as individuals who can be trusted. In reference to institutions, only kindergartens are perceived by parents as supportive and trustworthy.

Secondly, in both concepts of amoral familism and sociological vacuum, the prioritisation of family bonds is accompanied by low levels of trust in institutions. Nowak (1979) identifies a sense of "alienation" from institutions, which are viewed as unfriendly, uncooperative, unreliable, or even threatening. My findings complement Banfield's and Nowak's theses, revealing a lack of supportive social institutions in which families can place their trust, as well as parents' willingness to isolate themselves from institutions. The results of quantitative research cited in the introduction (CBOS, 2020, 2022; Evalue, n.d.; European Social Survey, 2020–2021) confirm the thesis of low level of social trust in Poland. Moreover, parents claim that institutions have no influence on their families or that they do not want institutions to have any influence. At the same time, they argue that they have no control over institutions. A lack of trust in institutions and distancing from them can be regarded as one of the key reasons for the appreciation of both the family as a universal value and family relationships that connect those qualified as family members.

Thirdly, Banfield and, particularly, Nowak highlight the existence of a barrier between the private and public spheres, which may arise from both a high level of trust in family members and a low level of social trust in institutions. Wnuk-Lipiński (1982) introduced the term “dimorphism of values” to illustrate the relevant attitudes toward individuals and institutions. The results of my study confirm these observations. Family members (especially grandparents and siblings, but also friends) are viewed as “insiders” who operate in the private sphere and belong to the “world of individuals” in opposition to institutions (except kindergartens) that operate in the public sphere.

What are the reasons for the similarities between Banfield’s and Nowak’s observations (made more than a half-century ago) and the presented findings? The simplest explanation is that the concepts of amoral familism and sociological vacuum are defined at such a high level of generality that they are universal enough to be applied to various types of societies. In other words, the coexistence of high levels of trust in family members and in members of other primary groups with low levels of trust in institutions is ubiquitous and obtains regardless of the type of economy (socialism or capitalism) or the type of organisation of society (traditional or postmodern society, communist regime or liberal democracy). An alternative response, which solely applies to Nowak’s concept, refers to the course of long-term processes of cultural and structural formation – the process of *longue durée* (Braudel, 1995), which is grounded in social relations, including relationships between families and institutions (see: Sawicka & Sikorska, 2020) regardless of the type of society organisation. Both answers are, in my opinion, reasonable.

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