Social Policy Issues

Problemy Polityki Społecznej

Contents

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Different methods – lasting tensions: exploring familial pragmatism through a methodological lens

The concept of familial pragmatism (Pustułka & Sikorska, 2023) was the main focus of the introductory remarks to the first part of our double-volume Special Issue (SI) on *The privacy and politicisation of parenting in Europe: family as a set of practices and as an object of external influence.* We argued that familial pragmatism works as an orienteering concept that makes it possible to highlight the practicalities of what people – at an individual (micro) level do in the face of the public/political sphere invading their private lives. The second volume not only underscores the suitability of a pragmatic approach with regard to the content of the second batch of four SI papers but also offers some methodological insights about the private/public dilemmas, alongside discussing solutions that have helped the authors/contributors to the SI – illuminate new aspects or sites of private/public tensions in family lives. In essence, we argue that – regardless of the methods used – the tensions between private and public realms persist. Just like individuals, social researchers also pragmatically and reflexively navigate the methodological landscape in their efforts to understand the private/public dilemma.

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To illustrate this, it is important to recall and clarify some salutary lessons stemming from methodological approaches taken to examine the key notions of concurrent politicisation and privacy concerns over researching families in the European sociological space, also accounting for how the "family" evolved as a construct in sociology over time. Conceptually, we follow Platt's (1986) determination in recognising that there has been a strong – if not unwavering – interconnectivity between a dominant theoretical paradigm and the preferred methodology within sociology as the discipline up until the late 20th century. Similarly, we acknowledge that the contemporary, i.e., the 21st century's streamlining of multiple perspectives and paradigms (see: Savage, 2009) goes hand in hand with the plethora of research methods.

Furlong (2015, p. 116), reminding the readers that "contemporary sociology often [is] seen as being internally divided, decentered, with the lack of a coherent core", makes a strong case for this multitude being reflected in sociology's various subfields, especially as researchers are pulled between structuralist and poststructuralist perspectives. This is also evident, on the one hand, in the parallel developments and scope expansions in family definitions and studies (see: Farrell et al., 2012), and methods used to study families, on the other hand. In essence, we argue that distinct definitional framings of family/families have been significantly impacting the types of research carried out in the field of family studies, including what can be seen in the papers included in both SI volumes. These changes are both pragmatic and inevitable since every single cohort since the 1920s onwards is believed to have changed priorities in relation to children's socialisation, their degree of scepticism towards family-life regulating institutions as well as their commitment to individualisation and secularisation (Therborn, 2004, p. 22; cf. Pustułka, 2014).

Researching "the family" as an institution

The structural-functional paradigm dominated the sociology of family from the 1950s to the 1960s (Mann et al., 1997), or even into the 1970s (Gabb, 2011; Chambers, 2012; see also: Sikorska, 2019). Talcott Parsons, one of the primary thinkers representing this paradigm (see: Parsons & Bales, 1955), refers in his theorising of kin to the definition of "nuclear family" provided by American anthropologist George Peter Murdock in the late 1940s. According to Murdock (1949), a nuclear family denotes a union of two people of different genders who jointly raise a child or children (biological or adopted), run a household together (in this sense they are economically connected) and have sexual relations of a socially acceptable form. In the nuclear family, the social roles of man, woman, and children (with gender differentiation), as well as the division of their duties were precisely defined as a result of the strong foregrounding of the "natural", i.e., biological traits.

Parsons, upholding Murdock's concept of gender division of roles and responsibilities, attributed to women (mothers and wives) an expressive function in the family (emotional support, care responsibilities), while allocating to men (fathers, husbands) an instrumental function (first of all a breadwinner role). To ensure an optimally "functioning" society, women were assigned to the domestic, private sphere,

whilst men dominated in the public domain. According to Parsons, the two main functions of the nuclear family were the socialisation of children and the stabilisation of adult personality. The successful execution of the two aforementioned functions was expected to guarantee the reproduction and stability of social order. Family in the structural-functional paradigm was portrayed as a functional "institution", one of the most important subsystems or "basic social unit" of a social system.

This type of – now largely challenged and rejected – dichotomous and gendered definition of family should be seen as being in line with the methodological focal points of sociology during this era. For example, regarding gender, attention was often split between looking at male breadwinning within the public sphere, and women's caring roles and duties (cf. Gatrell, 2005; Cheal, 2002). Quantitative approaches – especially survey methodology – were being intensively developed and used to shed light on whether the family fulfils its social function towards the broader social system (Bredemeier, 1955), and to clarify the family's place in the societal axio-normative value-order (Mann et al., 1997; Chambers, 2012).

This approach permeated the development of quantitative measures that retain relevance for family studies up to the present day. Among them is the steady inclusion of family-related question blocks and probes across key instruments of demographic data collection at national, European and global levels, translating to family scholars having the ability to compare, contrast and contextualise the changes at the macro level (see: Casper & Bianchi, 2001; Keilman, 1988; Iacovou & Skew, 2011). Moreover, quantitatively oriented family sociology, together with demography, has been critically informing family policy from the 1960s to the present day (see: Belsky, 1984; Kaźmierska-Kałużna – in this volume). Studying family composition and quantifiable indicators of the inner processes within the family or more broadly linked to kinship structures – including household division of duties, inheritance, intergenerational solidarity, to name a few – demonstrate the lasting significance and entanglement of family in the social system and social structures over time.

The late 1960s and 1970s witnessed significant transformation in family dynamics, particularly in the North American and West European societies. One seminal study that fed into the end of an era regarding the dominance of the structural-functional paradigm and its favouring of survey/statistical methods was Young and Wilmott's work (1957) on family and kinship in Britain. With its reliance on observation methods, attention to social interactions and meanings of social class, the study undermined many of the "functionalist truths" and became a harbinger of the advent of more paradigmatically diverse perspectives, as well as qualitative methods, in the discipline dedicated to family and family life (Cheal, 1999; 2002).

Furthermore, the second wave of feminist scholarship became vocal about the inequalities that dual/gendered organisation of family causes, with "family" emerging – for many thinkers – as the "lynchpin" of injustice (Okin, 1989; Millett, 1970) during this period. This was largely due to the family's primacy in social reproduction, which signified perpetuating social constructions of gender through socialisation (Cano & Hofmeister, 2023; Pustułka – in this volume). Connecting private and political realms, Millett (1970) poignantly argued that the family's patriarchal social organisation was a prototype or blueprint of social order at all levels,

thus rendering women inferior in both private and public realms. Just like the (male) "head of state", the husband/father was often viewed as an omnipotent "head of the family" who manages wealth, issues orders, and metes out punishment. The multitude of feminist critical voices (see: Chodorow, 1978; Firestone, 1970) towards family as a social institution oppressive to women (and children) went hand in hand with the broader transformation that eroded the nuclear family model's legitimacy. Ultimately, these alternative framings, alongside socio-demographic conditions and lessening social control, fostered new setups of family life that informed a notable paradigmatic shift and expansion of the methods toolbox for studying family life.

Paradigmatic and methodological transformations – towards families as "sets of practices"

The key changes happening "within family" through the late 20th and early 21st centuries have certainly been gradual and non-universal (Slany, 2002), for instance with many wondering whether and how the new ways of leading family life may undermine the persistence of marriage as an institution (Billari & Liefbroer, 2016). On the one hand, modernisation and gender equality agendas continue breaking down the traditional patterns of marrying and conducting family life, while progressively making alternative family forms widespread and accepted (Cheal, 1999; Allan, 1999; Chambers, 2012; Szlendak, 2010; Giddens, 1992). On the other hand, familism has not disappeared from modern kin relations (Slany, 2013). Being in a committed and stable intimate relationship in which one has children, as well as framing one's life aspirations on the pillar of family happiness, continues to matter to individuals and societies in late modernity (Jamieson, 1998; Kajta & Pustułka, 2023). While family values are shifting, Giddens' premonition that traditional family values are being fully replaced or sacrificed for individual goals has not come to fruition completely. Instead, changes in families are simply embedded in the ongoing broad processes of social change and more family-specific shifts, for instance, democratisation of couples (Giddens, 1992). As such, we observe the diminishing primacy of a patriarchally-ordered heteronormative marriage as the "model setting" of family life (Smart, 2007; DiGiulio et al., 2019).

Empirically, this could be observed in the growing diversity in family models (e.g., partnership unions and marriages of same-sex couples; LAT – Living Apart Together; DINK – Double Incomes, No Kids; voluntary childless; voluntary singlehood, etc.) and particularly increased social recognition of these models (e.g. Chambers, 2012; Slany, 2002). Over time, families of choice and the recognition of the LGBTQ+ community in regard to reframing or dismantling some of the previous family life models were noted as shedding new light on families, often emphasising the need for a social constructivist lens that can better reflect new and dynamic realities of personal relationships (May, 2011; Weeks et al., 2001; Mizielińska et al., 2017). In the end, "family situations in contemporary society are so varied and diverse that it simply makes no sociological sense to speak of a single ideal-type model of 'the family' at all" (Bernardes, 1985, p. 209), since "[e]vidently no one 'knows' what a family is: our perspectives vary to such a degree that to claim to know what a family is shows a lack

of knowledge" (cf. Cheal, 1999). The same can be stated about methodologies applied within the field.

In parallel, the increase in the economic independence of women revived attention to gendered dynamics in the family, as the third-way feminist thinking played a significant role in fostering new inclusivity of the private/public junction within family research (Walker, 1991). hooks (2004) drew particular attention to intersectional – class, racial, ethnic, among others – aspects that determine women's pathways in gender/family realms, Ehrenreich explored masculinity as an important feature of imagining alternative futures for families (2011), while Wolf (2001) continued Rich's (1976) legacy through her examination of blurred lines between public discourses/institution of motherhood and the realities of mothering of the everyday.

New inspirations, often grounded in micro-sociological perspectives, echo the dual impact of the idea of individualisation, as discussed by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2013). While individualism serves as an instrumental facet for empowerment within broader family dynamics that have undergone major shifts, it is also connected to challenges and complexities that come with a family's no longer stable nature. In the same vein, Adams (2010, pp. 501–503) interestingly listed demographic transition, technology, and globalism/globalisation as the three most powerful theory-driving forces for family studies since 1970. A technological perspective on family highlights, among others, the devaluation of male physical strength in the labour market, the advancement of birth control as a method of governing one's timing and desire for procreation, the increased number of whom we call "high-tech babies" being the result of medically assisted reproduction (Gerodetti & Mottier, 2009; Katz Rothman, 1989; Kramer, 2010), as well as the consequences that the every-day presence of mobile phones, personal computers and Internet have for intra-family relationships.

The demographic transition, namely, the regressive stages of populations in a growing number of countries, impacts familial trajectories through extended longevity, low birth rates, and lower marriage rates. Longer life and newfound aspirations, especially evident among women, strongly affect the ideas about reproduction and its scope in subsequent generations (see: Mynarska & Rytel, 2014). Regarding globalisation, Giddens points out that it significantly changes everyday life by wholly transforming societies and institutions of social practice (Giddens, 1992; Slany, 2002, p. 45).

Personal experiences and everyday family life were positioned much more in the foreground of the studies in the sociology of families and intimate lives in the 21st century. This is evidenced in the widespread adoption of theorisations that focus on the concepts zooming in on the family as it is "done", practised, and experienced by individuals. These ideas are ensconced in the notions of "doing family" and "family practices" (Morgan, 1996; Chambers, 2012; Slany et al. 2018; Sikorska, 2019), "displaying family" (Finch, 2007; Dermott & Seymour, 2011; Gawrońska & Sikorska, 2022; Radzińska & Pustułka, 2022), and "intimacy" (Jamieson, 1998; Dermott, 2014; Gabb & Fink, 2017).

This triad of conceptual framings shifts the definition of family from "institution" through "set of practices" (Morgan, 1996). Morgan defines family as something that people "do" and "in doing, they create and process the idea of family" (2011, p. 177). The author assumes that family (and, one may add, parenthood, motherhood, fatherhood,

etc.) is constantly constructed and reconstructed in family practices, and is created in the daily process of home-building and home-making. Smart summarises that "families are what families do" (2007, p. 27), while Finch states that families are constituted by "doing family things" and thereby "confirm that these relationships are 'family' relationships" (2007, p. 67). In each of these concepts, the emphasis is on individuals, their family practices, relationships, and emotions. These microsocial aspects take precedence over more "objective" or macro-level factors, such as kinship or the formal act of entering into a union through marriage (see: Sikorska, 2019). The new approach is moving away from the assumption that institutionalised pressure associated with family can be challenged, hence family is not the universal "centre" that determines the individuals, their lives, their choices, etc. Instead, the individuals' agency has a crucial impact on formatting and practising family life (Chambers, 2012).

Family does not occur here in the singular (as "The Family") but in the plural "families" or is replaced by the term "family life" (Smart, 2007). The shift challenges the assumption of the existence of a universal, socially acceptable and functional model of the family – a model that determines what is the "proper" social norm and what is "pathology" in family life. Interlinked fluidity, flexibility, and individuality of family practices have taken centre-stage in family research, paving the way for connecting self and society (see also: Allan, 1999; Morgan, 2011) with other notions.

The idea of intimacy in the family has become prominent with the inclusion of beyond-familial relationships (Jamieson, 1998; Smart, 2007), resulting in the emergence of the sociology of personal life focused on the relational and socially constructed nature of the ways in which people build personal connections in the families and beyond (May, 2011; Pahl & Spencer, 2004). Said developments relate to wider social theorising on post-family life, for instance in Giddens' focus on "pure relationship" (1992, p. 58) which views family-hood and relatedness as built on a "rolling contract" (May, 2011, p. 6). It also takes into account the advancements brought by individualisation, risk, disembeddedness and "the normal chaos of love" at a distance (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2013). Discussions of individual autonomy in the ethical, religious and political sense (linked to emancipatory movements, gender equality claims, stratification theory) have been flourishing, while individualism is being fostered not only by the social but also by physical space (Pustułka, 2014). Families are "tossed upon a sea of change" (Adams, 2010, p. 504), being just like the rest of postmodern reality "commodified, uncertain, outmoded, and insecure" (Weiner, 1997, p. 111; cf. Adams 2010).

The shift in the definition of the family alters researchers' lenses. Instead of dealing with the family as a social institution, i.e., a fairly stable entity located in the social system (Belsky, 1984), family life is largely analysed within a dynamic and process-oriented context that accounts for kinship practices that are polyvocal. Similarly, the attention of the researchers has switched to the analysis of what transpires within families and the interplay between families and their broader social environment. Not discarding family as a unit of analysis crucial for policy and public statistics, the research agendas reflect the multiplicity of familial voices that can only be understood on a more granular level of individuals, in line with a personal turn towards intimacy (May, 2011; Jamieson, 1998).

As such, contemporary social research acknowledges the necessity to gather perspectives from various individuals as members of families in different roles (mothers/fathers, children, spouses, etc.; see: Slany et al., 2018; Rancew-Sikora & Żadkowska, 2017; Reimann and Pustułka – both in this volume). Microsociology of emotions, desires, personal crises, practices, and choices made in regard to partnering and parenting is at the forefront of sociological theorising of the continued tensions of personal as political. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of the papers contained in the SI leverage this approach, as the authors offer explorations of everyday family life, family practices, and the process of "doing" family.

Methodological look at SI contributions

As discussed above, the assumption that family requires constant "doing" designates a methodological lens set firmly on everyday family practices. However, focusing on how the family is "produced" in everyday practices does not simply imply replacing macro-level analysis of families (studying the influence of external factors on family life) with micro-level analysis (studying only what happens between family members). On the contrary, the practice-centred approach advocates combining both levels and analysing the mutual influences between the family practices undertaken by individuals and the cultural, social, economic, or institutional context (see: Morgan, 1996; 2011; Slany et al., 2018).

The articles collected in the two SI volumes are based on several methodological assumptions. Primarily, to discern how modern families navigate the private/public junction, the scholars have predominantly utilised qualitative approaches, focusing on individuals. This means discerning the intricacies observed within their relational sphere and practices, but also recognising how they are shaped by the surrounding political landscape and its invasion of private life. The majority of the papers (see articles by Reimann, Binder, Kajta, Sikorska, Herzberg-Kurasz, and Pustułka) present data positioned this way and obtained from in-depth interviews with different family members. For example, we hear Reimann's children-narrators talking about joint physical custody arrangements as practical reflections of public discourses on post-divorce/post-separation understandings of problematics. Similarly, Binder's interviewees speak about their personal choices of organising family life, yet these are inherently constrained by economic, legal and cultural constructions of gender. Also showing this approach, Pustułka points out the difficulty of attributing intergenerational shifts in family values to just private (family socialisation) or just public (societal values) realms.

As empirical evidence, the data offers deep insights and understandings of the multi-perspective and dynamic nature of contemporary family life at the private/public junction. It enables exploration of the topics dealing with relationships and emotions and, under specific methodological assumptions, facilitates the investigation of everyday practices. Furthermore, despite conducting the interviews in accordance with the specified scenarios, the interview setting lets the interviewees introduce and pursue themes that the researchers might not have explicitly set out to question. The material collected through in-depth interviews serves as documentation of the

language and narrative framings employed by the individuals, allowing researchers to track familial pragmatism in the stories.

To boost the methodological soundness and explanatory value of their data, the Authors of the SI contribution complement the single-person one-time interview approach with additional designs or techniques that enrich it. Firstly, papers by Binder, Herzberg-Kurasz, and Pustułka rely on temporal approaches of qualitative longitudinal research (QLS; see: Neale, 2020) to investigate the changes in individuals' practices and attitudes in response to evolving external circumstances over time. Secondly, articles by Sikorska, Herzberg-Kurasz, and Pustułka use the empirical material from interviews conducted through a multi-perspective approach (Vogl et al., 2019), which recognises that the dynamics of family lives – especially in terms of relational and cultural tensions – may warrant collecting data from multiple family members. Tracking responses in pairs (i.e., intergenerational dyads, intimate/romantic/spousal couples) can shed new light on the relationships and possible points of inconsistency between respondents navigating the political/private junction.

Beyond expanding research designs, it is also crucial to see that the Authors are not only looking at "typical" actors of "doing family" in family research. Specifically, the focus on parenting as it is being "done" by mothers and fathers (which is addressed by Sikorska, Pustułka, Kajta, Herzberg-Kurasz, and Binder), Reimann's paper contributes the viewpoint of children, a group which too often is still overlooked in family studies. Subject-wise, the article by Budginaitė-Mačkinė also focuses on children's issues and positioning, yet adds on another dimension to mapping the family standing in the public sphere. Using discourse analysis as a method, Budginaitė--Mačkinė recognises the influence of media on children's lives and argues that these shape the societal norms regarding "suitable" childhoods, and determine the scope and framings of policy interventions. In contrast, the review article by Kaźmierczak--Kałużna effectively highlights the tensions that occur between personal choices about reproduction and the societal ideas about it established by public policies. Consequently, it serves as a compelling example of how one can integrate both individual and societal perspectives when looking at aspects of "doing family" at micro- and macro-levels.

Going forward, we postulate a need for combining explorations of family practices and family pragmatism with mixed-methods approaches. In order to fully understand the processes of "doing family" (Morgan, 1996) and familial pragmatism (Chang, 1997; Pustułka & Sikorska, 2023), family research should strive to break the existing divides – both between the individual and structural perspectives, and the qualitative and quantitative methods that tend to come with them.

Structure of the second volume of the Special Issue

Four papers forming the second part of this double SI have already been mentioned above, but now they will be discussed in detail, in relation to both familial pragmatism and their methodological contributions to the study of the private/public intersection in family studies.

In the first paper, Irma Budginaitė-Mačkinė uses the concepts of "family troubles" and "troubling families" (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2013) to investigate representations of transnational childhoods and childhoods abroad in Lithuanian media. The Author sets an explicit focus on sources concerning child protection and children's rights as matters of the public and state's interests. The starting point for Budginaitė--Mačkinė's analysis is the assumption of the crucial role of media in defining "good" families and "appropriate" childhoods. Employing public discourse analysis on two Lithuanian internet media portals, the Author focuses on a subsample of news items referring to child(ren)'s rights and the protection of child(ren) to examine how mobile and transnational childhoods have been constructed and understood as "vulnerable" and in need of protection. To this end, Budginaitė-Mačkinė's paper reflects the tensions that inspire moral panics stemming from the disregard of the voices of the actual actors of the family process – in this case migrant children. Moreover, the paper shows a different side of pragmatism, happening in the media sphere. Specifically, in the era of media sensationalism (Uzuegbunam & Udeze, 2013), it is the media outlets that pragmatically reframe the public discourse around private phenomena. In that sense, the children's "right to tell" (their private stories) is overshadowed by media and political (public) interest "to sell" a troubling vision of transnational families.

In her review paper (the only one of this type in both volumes of the special issue), Izabela Kaźmierczak-Kałużna discusses factors responsible for fertility in Poland and refers to the situation in other European countries. Presenting economic and socio-cultural conditions, the Author focuses on institutional solutions, especially the role of public and (pro)family policies, and then poses questions about the causes of Poland's demographic collapse. The analyses also take into ac-count the impact of recent social crises (e.g., the pandemic, legal changes that limit the availability of legal abortion), which on a microscale may contribute to postponing reproductive decisions and, on a macroscale, may result in further depopulation of Poland. The paper demonstrates the tensions between the private sphere (the individual's decisions on procreative behaviour) and the public/political domain (public policy addressing fertility issues). While Kaźmierczak-Kałużna does not offer direct narratives about familial pragmatism, the paper provides the framing for studying this issue among Polish women and couples of reproductive age. Specifically, we hypothesise that the new abortion law (see: Bucholc, 2022) will result in more familial pragmatism, as women (and couples) who ponder having children (or subsequent children) may limit their procreation due to fear of not being able to legally terminate their pregnancies for embryo-pathological reasons.

Magdalena Herzberg-Kurasz investigates an often overlooked – in Polish scholarly family literature – social and sociological dichotomy between the role of a mother in the early stages of parenting and the role of a mother of an adult child. The research is based on data from a longitudinal and multi-perspective qualitative study of individuals and couples whose adult children have left the family home. Considering life-cycle or life course as determinants of mothering as an everyday practice and motherhood as a social institution, the Author explores tensions between the two conflicting spheres. On the one hand, we see the private situation of women who face a new reality of "doing family", grappling with emotions and reframing their mother-role as the result of their children

leaving the nest. On the other hand, the Author elucidates that women's identity constructions are related to the public policies and social norms regarding motherhood. The article shows how women may pragmatically work on reconciling (successfully or with more challenges) the tensions within motherhood at different stages of their life--course/biographies, as well as sheds broader light on how couples organise their lives in the new phase of the family life-cycle.

Last but not least, Paula Pustułka's article explores the process of intergenerational transmission via the lens of parenting as a value. The paper contributes to a better understanding of long-term socialisational effects in the changing intergenerational context of parenting and families in Poland. Pustułka draws on data from two qualitative, intergenerational, multi-perspective, and longitudinal investigations (interviews with intergenerational dyads of young adults and their parents) and observes the main reasons for failures and successes in the transmission of parenting from one generation to the next. The tensions between the visions of young adults and those of their parents lie in the combination of societal values that are promoted or simply dominate the public sphere, and everyday family lives as transmission channels. From a generational perspective, we can distinguish a much greater familial pragmatism in how young people talk about parenting and reproduction, being especially attuned to the constraints that the political sphere imposes on individuals' private decisions in contemporary Poland. Hence, the issue of intergenerational transmission is a prime example of the "clash" between what is private (individual family transmission in this context) and what is public (social change in values, norms, and parenting patterns).

As the Guest Editors of this double-volume SI, we would like to close this *Introduction* by once again thanking all Authors for their contributions. We are strongly convinced that the papers can inspire further research and discussions pertinent to the topic of the privatisation and politicisation of parenting in Europe.

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Representations of transnational childhoods and childhoods abroad in Lithuanian media discourse

Abstract

The Lithuanian population has been highly mobile since joining the EU. Consequently, life across borders has become a common experience for many children and young people from Lithuania. This article first examines the extent to which Lithuanian media (2006–2021) captures the experiences of Lithuanian children living abroad and of those who remain in Lithuania when their parents emigrate. It then focuses on a subsample of news items which portray mobile and transnational childhoods as "vulnerable" and in need of protection, building on the concepts of "family troubles" and "troubling families" (McCarthy et al., 2013). The findings reveal that the constructions of childhoods in the migration context are grounded in two powerful imaginaries – one linked with migration and the other tied to the notion of family. The increasing diversity of family forms challenges the strong imaginary of the national-bound single household family unit as the norm and reveals the media's power in defining "good families" and "appropriate" childhoods.

Keywords: media discourse, transnational childhoods, childhoods abroad, family troubles, troubling families

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Introduction

Lithuania's accession to the European Union in 2004 made it easier for Lithuanian citizens to move abroad and, consequently, life across borders has gradually become an increasingly common experience among children and young people. According to Statistics Lithuania (2023), between 2005 and 2021, more than 100,000 Lithuanian residents under 18 years of age left the country. In parallel, nearly 27,000 Lithuanian nationals under 18 years of age moved (back) to Lithuania between 2005 and 2021. For a country with a population below 3 million, such figures are quite significant. They indicate that children and young people represent an important group of the mobile Lithuanian population.

A significant share of children and young people in Lithuania are leading a transnational family life due to parental emigration. The data from the State Child Rights Protection and Adoption Agency for the years 2010–2016, shows that more than 15,000 minors were placed under temporary guardianship at the request of their parent(s) who had moved abroad (EMN, 2017). It is estimated that this number is actually significantly higher if we consider that children who remain in the care of one of their parents do not require a change of guardianship.

Taking into account the significant share of children and young people living abroad and the considerable number of minors remaining in Lithuania following the departure of their parents, it is important to know to what extent their experiences are covered in the public discourse. Acknowledging the role media plays in framing migration (Eberl et al., 2018) and defining "good" families and "appropriate" childhoods (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2013), this paper examines how Lithuanian online media (2006–2021) depicts transnational childhoods and childhoods abroad. First, it aims to uncover the overarching themes in the media coverage of the migration of the Lithuanian population and to determine the extent to which the experiences of children and young people are captured in the media, whose voices are presented and in what contexts. Second, the article focuses on the subsample of news items referring to children's rights and child protection. Using the framework of "family troubles" and "troubling families" (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2013; 2019), the article reveals how transnational childhoods and childhoods abroad can be constructed as "vulnerable" and in need of protection.

Researching "family troubles" in the context of migration

Ribbens McCarthy, Gillies, and Hooper (2019, pp. 2207–2208) offer a conceptual framework to breach the binary between the research focused on so-called "ordinary" family lives and research concentrated on "the problematic" observed in family studies. They define the concept of "family troubles" as "unexpected disruptions and/or […] disruptive changes, and/or […] a chronic failure of life to live up to expectations" (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2013, p. 14). At the same time, they recognise that these expectations themselves might be troubling (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2019, p. 2211).

Childhood, in particular, becomes a period of life which has increasingly high expectations, and, consequently, anything that may be seen as disrupting an (idealised) image of childhood can be perceived as a source of "trouble" (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2019, p. 2211). The concept "family troubles" was initially used to acknowledge the "'normality' and 'ordinariness' of changes and challenges in the family lives of children and young people", which may not necessarily be experienced as "family troubles" (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2019, p. 2210).

Migration of one or several family members is prone to come to the attention of the media, as it does not comply with the expectation that a child will be raised by their parents at their home, which is considered to be the suitable site of a "proper childhood" (Ribbens McCarthy & Edwards, 2011). Furthermore, some families living abroad do not comply with the expectation that children will be raised in their country of origin. Therefore, "family troubles", which would be deemed undeserving of attention in "regular" circumstances, may start to be seen as "troubling" enough to "require some sort of action or 'intervention'" (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2019, p. 2212) in the context of migration.

Migration was not one of the themes researched by the group of scholars focusing on "family troubles". However, the usefulness of this theoretical framework for researching families in the migration context and across diverse cultures has already been acknowledged elsewhere (Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018; Juozeliūnienė et al., 2020a; Ribbens McCarthy & Gillies, 2018) and it serves as a basis for this paper. Transnational parenting is at the core of debates about the moral imperative of being responsible parents (especially mothers) and fulfilling family responsibilities (see: Duque-Paramo, 2013; Gu et al., 2022; Phoenix, 2019). The review of Lithuanian academic publications between 2004 and 2017 (Juozeliūnienė et al., 2020a; 2020b), shows that when negative framing is used in the media, scripts such as disrupting family relations, abandoning children, misinterpreting parental responsibilities, putting one's own needs first instead of prioritising the needs of the child are employed.

The research to date on raising children abroad focuses on the efforts of Lithuanian parents to be a "good" parent: ensure the child's well-being and maintain the child's ties with their country of origin (see: Rupšienė & Rožnova, 2011; Batuchina, 2014; cf. Juozeliūnienė et al., 2020a). It acknowledges that these efforts may both succeed and fall short and frames the examples of weakening the Lithuanian identity in the second generation as failing the moral imperative to preserve the national identity abroad (see: Šutinienė, 2009). Meanwhile, recent research situating the experiences of Lithuanian families abroad in the institutional context and public discourse in the host countries point to ineffective state interventions or insufficiently implemented assistance (see: Šilėnienė & Koblova, 2017) and the fear of host country institutions by Lithuanian families abroad (see: Daukšas, 2020).

Following the line of inquiry suggested by Ribbens McCarthy and colleagues, this paper aims to reveal how certain kinds of childhoods are inherently constructed as less "appropriate", where mobility of parents is perceived as a problem. Furthermore, it aims to demonstrate when changes and challenges related to parents' migration (together with and without children) become considered "troubling", "harmful" and requiring intervention. What responses are portrayed to be appropriate, by whom, to which families, and in which contexts?

Portraying migration and family life in the media discourse

The research on media coverage of migration highlights a prevailing tendency to focus on negative issues (see: Lubbers et al., 1998). The host countries' media often depict migrants from what is called Eastern European countries as an economic threat and a potential burden on the welfare system (see: Eberl et al., 2018; Tereškinas, 2011). Security concerns and criminal activities also receive attention in some cases (see: Loftsdóttir, 2017; Radziwinowiczówna & Galasińska, 2021), albeit less compared to migration from non-EU countries (see: Poole & Richardson, 2010). The research predominantly examines the host countries' perspectives, with a few notable exceptions that consider both the host and sending countries' viewpoints (see: Balabanova & Balch, 2010; Cheregi, 2018).

The international research demonstrating that media plays an important role in defining "good" families and "appropriate" childhoods (see: Ennis, 2014) is also relevant for developing arguments made in this article. Notwithstanding the general underrepresentation of children in the media, it has been established that vulnerable children tend to receive significant coverage in the news due to their potential attractiveness to the reader (Popović & Kampić, 2017). Research on transnational families demonstrates that public concerns over the welfare of children remaining in the country of origin after the departure of their parent(s) abroad prevail across time and across various contexts (see: Gu, 2022; Shostak, 2006). The recent research evidence shows that, even if children later join their parents abroad, a two-fold disruption of primary attachments may be noticed in such a context: first, when their parents (particularly mothers) migrate; and second, when children leave their "beloved caregivers" in the country of origin to join their parent(s) abroad (Phoenix, 2019, p. 2321).

Furthermore, families who move abroad with their children or who start a family while already living abroad are not exempt from potentially falling under the scrutiny of institutions of the host country or the host country's media. It is acknowledged that mobility continues to shape the "contours of particular childhoods" in the second generation (see: Orellana et al., 2001; Wolf, 2002). This can be illustrated by the accounts of "feeling peculiar" shared by youth with migratory backgrounds and a wide range of identities constructed by the migrant children (Pustułka et al., 2015, p. 207). Both children and their parents face various challenges: they have to navigate the (new) settings, which are "determined by a superimposed group culture of the majority" (Adams & Kirova, 2006) and engage with or cope with (symbolic) "everyday bordering" practices in these settings (Tervonen et al., 2018; Walsh et al., 2021). They can be identified (and differentiated) as not belonging to the majority population. Consequently, there is a possibility that the difficulties some migrant children face can be "attributed to their ethnic/national origin or the (wrong) doing of their parents" (Ślusarczyk & Pustułka, 2016, p. 62), which can lead to labelling a particular family as "troubling".

The broader research on childhoods in the migration context also points to the mobilisation of children's rights for governing and controlling transnational childhoods and childhoods abroad by various welfare regimes (see: Lind, 2019). Enforcement of protective rights may particularly concern children, as they are likely to be

"the least controversial subjects of a policy guided by harm protection" (Anderson, 2012, p. 1242). Furthermore, "vulnerability" may be distributed differentially and become a negative and stigmatising feature for some specific groups (Casalini, 2016).

Data and methods

The article draws on the empirical data from two Lithuanian Internet media portals (Delfi.lt, 15min.lt) over a period of 16 years (2006–2021). Internet media was chosen for two main reasons: first, the selected news portals have historically had the widest readership in Lithuania, surpassing traditional printed media for quite some time[2]; second, the online format ensures accessibility to both Lithuanian residents and Lithuanians abroad, influencing their perception of migration processes and their effects across borders.

The empirical data was gathered while implementing the postdoctoral research project "Migrants from Lithuania: representations in Lithuanian public discourse and everyday contexts" (no. 09.3.3-LMT-K-712-23-0155), which has received funding from the European Social Fund under a grant agreement with the Research Council of Lithuania (LMTLT). As emigration rates increased in the official statistics, the Lithuanian media's interest in migration topics grew (Budginaitė, 2012). This led to the creation of sections dedicated to covering news on the migration of the Lithuanian population. Delfi.lt (established in 1999) was the first to introduce a special section "Lithuanians abroad" in 2006. Meanwhile 15min.lt (established in 2008) created the special section "Emigrants" around 2012. By then it already had a very high readership (Gemius, 2015), rivalling Delfi.lt. The decision to focus on the specific sections also made it possible to avoid limitations posed by the data collection with the keywords search[3].

The data was collected using the Web Collector function embedded in the data analysis software MAXQDA 2022. The copy of each article was saved in the MAXQDA programme in two formats (.pdf and .docx). The latter format was used for textual analysis; while the former was kept to retain the visual appearance of each article on the website. All articles published under these two sections were included in the analysis (N=6899) and grouped into separate sets according to the source and the year of publication (see Figure 1 in the following section).

As the first step, the articles' content was analysed using an automated approach to thematic analysis. The research on media framing of migration distinguishes issue-specific frames and generic news frames (Brüggemann & D'Angelo, 2018; Eberl et al., 2018). The issue-specific frames represent the themes (e.g., economy, social

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[2]   The top three printed media sources (*Savaitė*, *Žmonės* or *Lietuvos rytas*) had a readership of between 173,200 and 321,700 in 2019 (Kantar, n.d.). For comparison, in 2019 Delfi.lt and 15min.lt had a readership of over 1280,00 and 1248,00 readers respectively (Gemius, 2019).

[3]   The search engines integrated into the selected Internet media portals provide only a limited number of (most recent) results when running keyword searches, making it impossible to capture the changes over time. Furthermore, there is a wide variety of terms used to refer to the mobile Lithuanian population (e.g., "emigrants", "Lithuanians abroad", "diaspora"), making it difficult to capture the same media corpus.

welfare, security, or culture) with which migration tends to be inherently associated; while generic frames (e.g., conflict, victimisation) rise above thematic boundaries and "are closely related to routines of journalism" (Eberl et al., 2018, p. 211). Issue-specific thematic dictionaries were developed on the basis of a literature review and integrated into the MAXQDA project using MAXDictio package. The distribution of themes in time is presented in Figure 2 (see the following section).

As the second step, the articles attributed to the theme of "family" during the first stage of the analysis were reviewed further. Those articles, which mentioned children (N=2214 articles with over 14,600 mentions), were reviewed to make sure they referred to underaged children[4]. After screening, the remaining articles were grouped into three sub-groups: articles focusing on childhoods abroad (Lithuanian citizens under 18 years of age living abroad), transnational childhoods (living in Lithuania, while one or both of their parents live abroad), and childhoods upon return to the country of origin (moving back to Lithuania with their parents).

These two initial steps of analysis allowed the general trends in media coverage over an extended period of time to be unveiled and to determine the extent to which families affected by migration (in particular transnational childhoods and childhoods abroad) were depicted in the Lithuanian media discourse. The exploratory thematic analysis carried out at this stage also revealed that one of the (initial) themes present in the news articles on childhoods abroad and the news articles on transnational childhoods were related to the protection of child(ren)'s rights and protection of child(ren) against (potential) harm. Therefore, as the third analytical step, an in-depth qualitative analysis was performed on a subsample of the articles, which mentioned child(ren)'s rights or protection of the child(ren) (N=85 articles). The analysis was carried out following the thematic analysis approach using MAXQDA 2022 software for coding.

General thematic trends

Attention to the mobility of the Lithuanian population post-EU accession increased, peaking shortly after the introduction of dedicated sections in the researched news portals (see: Figure 1). The "Lithuanians abroad" section on Delfi.lt included over 350 articles annually for several years and a similar trend was observed in the section "Emigrants" (15min.lt) from 2013 to 2016. However, both portals witnessed a gradual decline in the number of articles over the recent years. This may indicate both a decreasing interest in news focusing specifically on mobile Lithuanians and, at the same time, a better integration of such news in the general media flow.

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[4]   Articles, which used the word in the sense of "adult children" or as part of a specific expression (e.g., "feeling like a child"), referred to not having or planning children in the future were excluded.
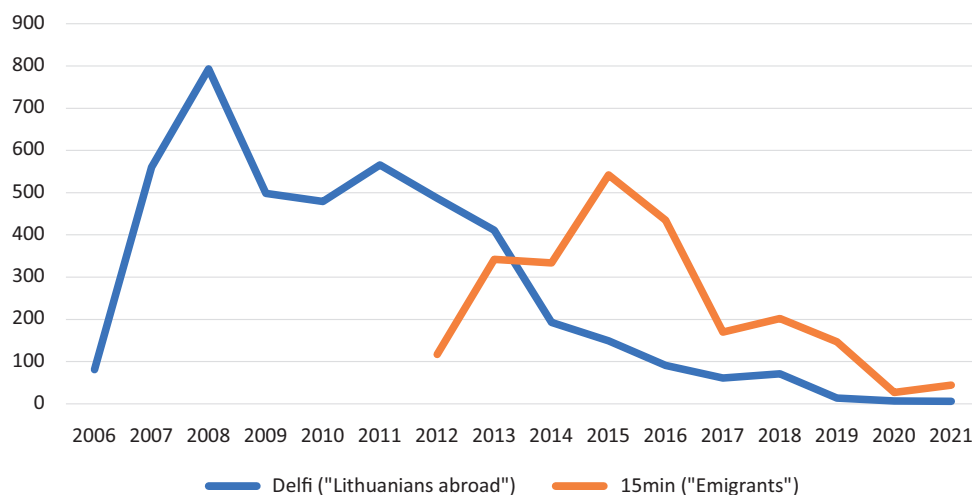
Figure 1. Number of articles in the sections "Lithuanians abroad" (Delfi.lt) and "Emigrants" (15min.lt) by the year of publication (2006–2021)

The thematic focus evolved over time, yet the top three themes remained consistent (see: Figure 2). First, the international mobility of the Lithuanian population was primarily framed as a political matter, with journalists actively covering political debates around emigration, return migration policies, double citizenship, and the political engagement of Lithuanian communities abroad, etc. Second, there was substantial media coverage of various crimes involving Lithuanian nationals abroad and offences against them. This aligns with a broader trend of crime-centric coverage in migration news observed elsewhere (cf. Eberl et al., 2018). Figure 2 illustrates a sustained high share of articles on this theme and increased attention in recent years. On the one hand, this could be attributed to the growing criminalisation of migration in the host countries' media (see: Radziwinowiczówna & Galasińska, 2021): a significant share of articles on criminal activities published on both Delfi.lt and 15min.lt were either directly based on news items published in the host countries or collected from several international sources, often in English. On the other hand, the increasing share of crime-centred articles may be due to a decline in news items on other themes, while the reporting on criminal activities abroad continued as before.

Compared to the prominent themes of "politics" and "crime", "family" received less media attention (see: Figure 2) although it consistently ranked in the top three themes over the whole period of analysis. A closer look at the articles attributed to this theme reveals that despite the frequent use of the keyword "child(ren)", children were seldom the central focus of the article. They were typically mentioned in passing when reporting about Lithuanian nationals abroad (e.g., "they brought[5] their children

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[5]   In Lithuanian, a specific verb was selected (*atsigabeno*), which is commonly used to refer to cargo or goods/things.
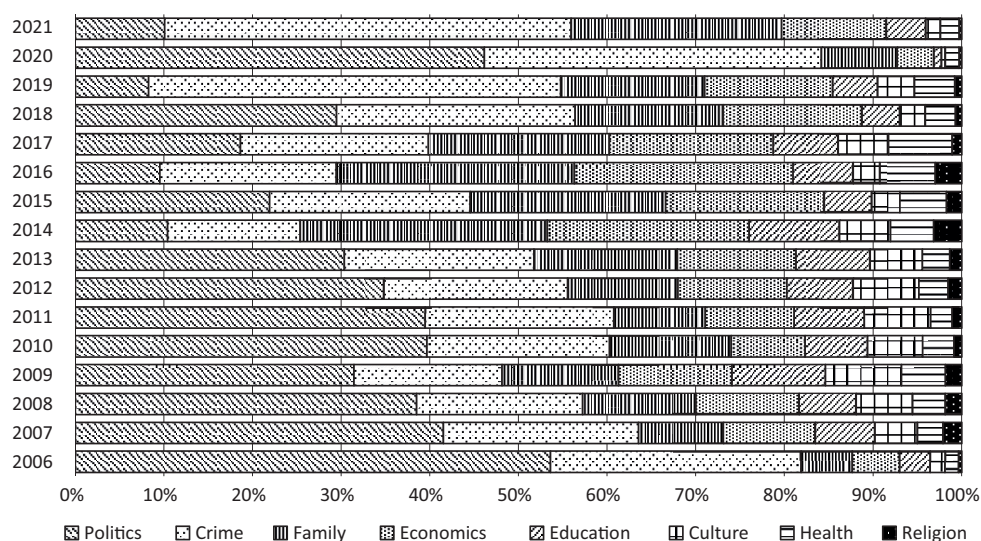
Figure 2. Share of references to specific themes by year (2006–2021)

to England"). This echoes the tendency to overlook children and their position in the migration processes (see: Orellana, 2001; Sime & Fox, 2015) and treat children as "luggage" in both academic discourse (Orellana et al., 2001; cf. Pustułka et al., 2015), and media discourse (Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018).

Articles delving deeper into children's lives within migration context (rather than mentioning "child(ren)" in passing) predominantly viewed the children's situation from the perspective of their parents, educators, psychologists, social workers, child rights protection services staff, government officials, experts, and others. This approach reflects the involvement of "personnel with recognised authority" (cf. Archard & Skivenes, 2009), who are consulted when defining the child's best interests across various contexts. It is agreed, however, that the use of the notion of "best interests" has some inherent difficulties related to hidden cultural and moral assumptions (Thomas & O'Kane, 1998, p. 138; cf. Woodhead, 2015).

Despite the recognised importance of including children's perspectives in legal and policy decisions related to their lives (cf. Thomas & O'Kane, 1998), the media seldomly gave a voice to the children or young people themselves and in those few cases when they did, the reflection on childhood experiences was made from the point of view of (young) adults. Such lack of (young) children's voices in the media (before adulthood) relates to ethical dilemmas, age-appropriateness and particular approaches required for interviewing, as well as difficult access and time constraints (Bird, 2013). It reflects the inherent contradiction between having their voices heard and preventing (possible) harm, as well as a careful balance between a child's best interests and their views (Archard & Skivenes, 2009). At the same time, however, it also leads to the lack of understanding and visibility of children's perspectives on matters that directly affect their lives in childhood and well beyond.

Most of the articles focused on Lithuanian nationals living abroad. However, a significant number of features concerned cases where children and their parent(s) lived across borders, particularly around 2008–2010. The experiences of children upon return started to be captured at a similar time as transnational childhoods but children's experiences upon return remain the least talked about subject so far. It is important to acknowledge that a number of articles captured changing family life arrangements in the same family over time. Despite the conventional linear perception of the migration process, recent academic research shows that migration trajectories are not necessarily "marked by a beginning and an end but rather involve ongoing, multiple and provisional journeys across locales and over time and the life course" (Amrith, 2021, p. 127). Similarly, a significant number of news articles in the Lithuanian media recognised the complexities and fluidity of family life in the context of migration by referencing multi-local family arrangements. In some of the migration stories depicted by the media, it was also acknowledged that these arrangements may change over time and in various directions, e.g., children join their parent(s) abroad for a while, are then later sent back to the country of origin to be cared for by relatives, and then re-join their parent(s) in the host country once the living circumstances abroad improve. While the subsequent sections of this article focus specifically on representing transnational childhoods and childhoods abroad, the non-linearity of migration trajectories is also taken into account.

Representations of transnational childhoods

Previous research shows that the negative framing of transnational families (and transnational childhoods) dominated the news coverage for over a decade (Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018). The departure of parents (particularly mothers) was often framed as creating an unfavourable and unsafe environment for the children both in the psychological and physical sense, as the following quote illustrates: "parents' departure creates a lot of anxiety, sadness for children. Furthermore, [children] have to adjust to living with others, sometimes even almost complete strangers" (Smalskienė, 2010). In numerous articles, the experience of migration in the family was associated with difficulties related to the separation of child(ren) and parent(s): children were considered "lonely", "unloved", "in want of closeness", "searching for close people". This section details how the depictions of the "troubling" nature of transnational families differ depending on the family circumstances and how representatives from institutions working with the protection of children's rights emerge as (potential) protectors against harm.

"It is not always necessarily bad, but it is never good": gradation of "troubles" in transnational families

The parental decision to move abroad was usually depicted as a disruptive change and as a source of (potential) "trouble". However, how troubling it actually became in journalists' eyes was at least partially linked to the family's circumstances. For exam-

ple, the article "Emigrants risk losing their children" quoted a psychologist who argued that there might be different kinds of families: in most cases, parent(s)' emigration creates "great suffering for children" and "leaves deep scars", but "it is likely that there are families, where such problems are not so severe" (Smalskienė, 2010). All parent(s) moving abroad risk losing their children (as the article's title suggests), but the odds of actual loss happening might be worse for some rather than for others. The same subtle distinction is drawn when the author concludes that it is never good for children to live apart from their parents, but whether it is bad, may depend on a specific family history or situation.

The gradation of "troubles" depending on family circumstances observed in numerous news items is particularly evident in the article "New orphans: emigrants' children" (Navickaitė, 2012). This article also happens to represent one of those very rare cases when the media considers the point of view of the children themselves. Claiming to set out to present *two stories of children left in Lithuania* in their own words, the article depicts both protagonists as independent and successful young adult women. Nevertheless, the way these two stories are framed points to a subtle grouping of transnational childhoods into more and less "troubling".

The stories are narrated in juxtaposition to explain why the *emigration of the parent(s) became a big challenge* in one case, but not the other. It starts with the story of a girl who, after her single mother's departure, began living with her grandmother:

She was raised without her father and she remained with her grandmother […]. After two years the mother returned, but not for long – not even a year passed before she moved abroad again. This time not only for the money – her mother wanted to recover from alcohol abuse.

After these initial introductions, the reader soon learns that the story's protagonist moved in with her mother's sister and later ended up living independently before reaching adulthood. Wrapping up the story, the author of the article concludes that "her childhood was not easy" and now her mother is "only a friend".

The introduction to the second story, similarly, focused on a girl who began living with her grandparents after her parents' departure:

[She] remained in Lithuania when she reached 15. Her parents had very good jobs abroad, but she did not want to move abroad with them, because she attended a good school. Living without her parents, she found she didn't miss them. On the contrary, she even wished that they would not call her every day.

Despite the similarities of the starting points of the stories (i.e., moving in with grandparent(s)' after parent(s)' departure), the reader immediately learns that the second protagonist attempted to join her parents abroad after some time, but she did not like it and returned to Lithuania to live alone "in a big house" under the supervision of her uncle until she reached the age of 18. The article states that the heroine of the second story "decided to stay [in Lithuania] herself", never had any psychological problems and her classmates greatly respected her for being so independent.

The framing of family circumstances (single parenthood vs. nuclear family; lower vs. higher socioeconomic status; regular vs. prestigious schooling; different reasons for the parents' migration) as the main factor leading to different experiences of life apart represents inherent hierarchisation of transnational childhoods as more or less "troubling" depending on the families economic, social, and cultural capitals.

Protecting children from harm

Even if we do encounter some cases when the media gives a voice to children to share their experience of transnational childhood, the stories about the dangers for children living apart from their parents were usually told from the point of view of other actors (social workers, representatives of institutions of child rights, psychologists, experts), representing recognised authority (cf. Archard & Skiveness, 2009). In such instances, Lithuanian institutions and services were usually depicted as the (last line of) protectors of children against (potential) harm.

Some articles recount attempts to talk parents out of leaving in an effort to prevent the creation of (potentially) "troubling" transnational childhoods. One notable example of such efforts with a successful outcome was shared in the article "Emigrants risk losing their children" (Smalskienė, 2010): *'Believe me, if you leave, you will take away from your child and yourself much more than you will ever earn over your whole life' – these were the words I used to finally convince an 18-year-old [city] resident woman not to leave her month-old baby to go abroad to work.* As journalists explain, such efforts are not always successful. When "long conversations" do not make a difference, child rights services do everything they can to take care of the legal guardianship even when *at the very last week* a child's parents attempt to take care of the required documents (Nagrockienė, 2007).

Another instance where Lithuanian institutions and various specialists come into the picture as providers of support is the (attempted) reunifications of family members in Lithuania. Journalists explain that even after the return of the parent(s), some children continue living with their guardians (most often grandmothers). Reuniting with the child is not always enough to solve family "troubles" and, even with the help of professionals, the (accumulated) harm to the child(ren) cannot be fully addressed. When reporting on unsuccessful attempts to reunite with the child, journalists argue that parent(s) should have known better than to leave their child(ren) in Lithuania. *Didn't the specialists tell [her before leaving], that separating the child from the mother would have consequences? Or she did not want to hear it?*, asks the author of one of the articles (Smalskienė, 2010). Even if such a rhetorical question was not answered, the story is told solely from the point of view of the child rights services and can be read as a gendered moral tale, where the main responsibility for the child rests on the shoulders of the mother (cf. Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000).

Representations of childhoods abroad

While transnational families are prone to fall under media scrutiny for not complying with the expectation that children will be raised by their parents, raising children abroad may also be depicted as troubling for other reasons. First, the media demonstrates that parents (including "good parents") may find it hard to protect their children from the (potential) harm they face as "migrant children" living outside of their country of origin. Second, journalists argue that being a "good parent" and having a "proper childhood" is culturally specific. This section first focuses on instances presenting the inappropriateness of living abroad for "proper childhoods", and later turns to discussing the role parents and various institutions may play in creating the (un)safe environment abroad or preventing the children from (potential) harm there.

Inappropriate sites for "proper childhoods" abroad

One of the settings attracting significant media attention as a source of potential "troubles" were schools abroad. Articles shed some light on the Lithuanian pupils' experience of bullying at schools in various countries. The instances mentioned in the media range from various forms of verbal to physical harm, directed at both boys and girls (Jackevičius, 2007a). Some of these instances are defined as "experiences of terror" (Jackevičius, 2007b), claiming that they do not always receive sufficient attention from the host country institutions. As the following quote illustrates, the (small) injury can be perceived as a small matter (not deserving attention or concern) and the (interviewed) mother's worry for her child's safety at school can be disregarded on this basis: *One day my son came home from school with one of his eyebrows split open. When I went to the school to find out what happened, the school staff told me: 'Never mind this – they [children] are just toughening up'* (Jokubauskienė, 2018). In such and similar cases, reactions from host country institutions to problems reported by the parents of Lithuanian children were depicted as ranging from disregard and insufficient attention to active discrimination of the children based on their migration status.

Dangers may lie both within and beyond the school walls if the children fall in with the wrong crowd abroad (15min.lt, 2018). In addition to shedding light on various crimes abroad, some of the articles raised broader questions about the safety and security of life abroad for children and young people and reflected on ways the crimes in question could have been prevented. The host country institutions are not the only ones to which the calls to take (more) responsibility and ensure a safe(r) environment for the Lithuanian children abroad are directed. For example, the article detailing the negative experiences of Lithuanian children in Ireland hints that "it might be even worse in Spain" later to remind that "it was the parents' decision: they took their children to Spain, to Ireland" (Jackevičius, 2007a).

The media also shows that children often come to harm in their own private space (family home), which should be the safest possible space for a "proper childhood". Over the years, journalists reported a number of cases when children were not taken care of, they witnessed continuous violence in the family (directed against

other family members) or were beaten by their parents (both mothers and fathers alike) and, in few instances, even killed by them. According to the media, at some point, various forms of neglect and violence started to be reported "almost daily" in various host countries (ELTA, 2010). The parents in most articles are depicted as incapable of understanding what it means to raise children and lacking the skills to take proper care of them: *If they had no background in raising children back in Lithuania, nothing will change abroad. Earning money does not teach one how to raise a child* (Bereišis, 2012).

Such and similar quotes in other articles depict child neglect as a widespread phenomenon and a concern to both institutions in the host countries and institutions in Lithuania. The child protection services abroad in such instances are presented as very well informed and, if the need arises, cooperate across country borders. Both the active presence and speed of the services abroad were well noted, as were the efforts of Lithuanian services to find suitable guardians (usually grandparents) for the children back in Lithuania to make sure they do not end up in care institutions abroad.

Another (possible) form of harm in the close (home) environment is described in the articles detailing divorces in families with underage children living abroad. The families going through a divorce are described as "undergoing legal battles" (Bačėnienė, 2012), "legal dramas" (Limontaitė, 2013). Although such metaphors are commonly used when reporting on the divorces of both couples of single and different nationalities, the media coverage of the latter group includes some additional layers and depicts them as much more troubling. Not only can divorce be depicted as harming the child, but the decision to create a family with a foreign national in the first place can be questioned, as a quote from the article "Different nationalities – not an obstacle for a family?" illustrates:

> *The family is the foundation of a strong state. Lithuania cannot be proud on this front – the number of registered marriages dropped by 3,600 last year compared to the previous years. Instead, every year there are more and more Lithuanians who start families with foreigners and with representatives of other faiths. Emigration is the reason why the number of mixed families is increasing* (Griškonytė, 2010a).

Both journalists and the interviewees (usually Lithuanian women) warn the readers about the danger of losing custody of the child (if the former spouse who is national of the country where the couple lived gets full custody of the child) or practically (when the former spouse takes the child to another country without the mother's consent). Lithuanian women, who "feel lonely, fragile" abroad and seek companionship in the arms of foreigners are warned by the media "not to forget that feelings and nice experiences should be accompanied by responsibility" (Griškonytė, 2010a). The media places the responsibility to defend oneself and protect child(ren) born from unions with foreign nationals on the shoulders of Lithuanian women abroad, at the same time, implying that unions formed by two Lithuanian nationals would correspond better with the imaginary embedded in the Lithuanian public discourse of what a "normal" family should be.

Inappropriate parenting vs. overreacting institutions abroad

The threat of children being taken away from (one of) the parents is mentioned not only in media coverage of families abroad undergoing a divorce. "Emigrant families more and more often lose their right to raise their children" informs the title of an earlier article (published in 2009) reporting on cases where children were taken by social services abroad. The articles published in subsequent years not only detail how widespread such a phenomenon is, but also try to determine how grounded such actions are, and whether they are always necessary. Reporting can be grouped into "justifiable" cases where children are taken due to inappropriate parenting and "insufficiently grounded" cases presented as a (possible) overreaction on the part of the host country institutions.

Parents are held responsible for creating the unsafe environment directly (actions towards the child(ren) ranging from neglect to abuse) or indirectly (decision to take their child abroad). In the former case, the intensive coverage of various cases of child neglect and abuse abroad is used to justify the need for such interventions. The actions of the social services are seen the only way to stop the suffering of Lithuanian children abroad, as the following quote illustrates:

> *The number of such 'sores' recently increased, because there are more and more asocial families who leave to earn money abroad and they take their children with them. Life abroad does not change the habits of these parents – they continue to drink, while their neglected children have to fight for their survival abroad themselves. Truth be told, this usually does not last long – they are soon taken by the local social services from their 'damaged parents'* (ELTA, 2010).

At the same time, the media acknowledges that parents bringing up children abroad may have difficulties reading the cultural scripts and (with or without sufficient reason) fail to be seen as "good parents" in the eyes of the host country's institutions and the circumstances the children grow up in may be considered differently depending on the context. On the one hand, instances of misreading the cultural scripts concern the attitudes towards the use of corporal punishment to discipline children in different countries. As illustrated by the following quote, the media usually sides with the institutions of the host country rather than parents in such instances: *while Lithuanians are used to pulling the ear of their children as a disciplinary measure, this might be looked on with real "horror" by Norwegian, British and Irish child protection services* (Želnienė, 2013).

On the other hand, the media also reports cases of children being taken away based on what is considered "not entirely sufficient grounds". The actions mentioned in the media include: "putting down a child's hamster" (15min.lt, 2015a), coming "a bit late to kindergarten" (15min.lt, 2015b), a child walking "just a few hundred metres alone from school to home and spend[ing] an afternoon alone at home" (Griškonytė, 2010b), skipping a few days of school before Christmas to visit Lithuania and similar instances. Journalists and the experts they interview warn that such instances may seem quite insignificant to some, but they can be interpreted as disregard for the child's interests

and custody of the child might be restricted, which can become a source of "cultural shock" and result in "troubles" with the social services in the host country.

Finally, some argue that "neighbours keep a closer eye on migrant families and can call the services for just minor reasons" (Čepaitė, 2010) and consider it to be "the business" model of the institutions abroad targeting migrant families (Jokubauskienė, 2018). Instances, when children are taken from parents by the services of the host country, are seen as particularly problematic when the guardianship of the child is given to a single-sex family. The article titled "[The child] is surrounded by the hot love of the Norwegian lesbians" (Stanišauskas, 2010) shares that:

> *For over a month now the two-year-old [boy] has had to listen to stories about two princesses in love. Norwegian society treats the citizens of less economically developed countries worse than the population of the banana republics. Norwegian child protection services took [the child] away by force and gave him into the temporary care of a lesbian family.*

While a number of stories from countries (Ireland, Sweden, the UK) tended to frame the interventions by social services as justified, most of the cases, considered insufficiently grounded, were reported from Norway. This led the media to ask "Can they take away your child from you in Norway?" (Delfi.lt, 2013), detailing the efforts of the Lithuanian diaspora to make sure that newly arrived parents were fully informed about the rules, and their rights and obligations when bringing up children in Norway. The effects of such extensive and detailed media coverage are reported in other research on the experiences of a "climate of fear" in Norway (see: Daukšas, 2020; Hollekim et al., 2016; Vassenden & Vedoy, 2019) and elsewhere (see: Walsh et al., 2022).

Conclusions

Following the line of inquiry suggested by Ribbens McCarthy, Gillies, and Hooper (2013; 2018; 2019), this article sought to examine representations of transnational childhoods and childhoods abroad in the Lithuanian media, with a particular focus on articles discussing child protection and child's rights. It is acknowledged that the media may affect children's lives by shaping societal expectations towards "appropriate" childhoods and the way that policy interventions are framed (cf. Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2017). Even if the findings reveal "family" as one of the dominant themes, children rarely emerge as the main informers and their stories, when told, are shared when they have already reached adulthood. Despite the active involvement of children and young people in the migration processes, the public imaginaries surrounding their experiences remain shaped by others. This underscores the inherent contradiction between advocating for the expression of children's voices while also avoiding ethical dilemmas related to interviewing children and preventing them from media attention, which can cause harm (cf. Archard & Skiveness, 2009). At the same time, it engenders the acknowledgement of children's viewpoints about matters directly impacting their lives during childhood and extending into adulthood.

The analysis also revealed that media discourse on transnational childhoods and childhoods abroad relates to two types of powerful imaginaries: one associated with migration and one associated with family. These imaginaries are shaped by institutionalised understandings of the troubling nature of migrant families (with locally situated families considered as the norm) and varying expectations on "how a family should be" (cf. Juozeliūnienė et al., 2020b) depending on the country contexts. It has been acknowledged that transnational families are often subject to scrutiny in Lithuanian public discourse (see: Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018) and elsewhere (see: Duque-Paramo, 2013; Gu et al., 2022; Phoenix, 2019). Similar to Duque-Paramo (2013), this article alludes to broader societal attitudes that media discourse reflects, highlighting the mismatch between the idealised image of a (privileged) childhood in a nuclear family household and the diversification of family forms due to migration and other significant demographic changes. While discourses on transnational childhoods in Lithuanian media are far from the "pathological migrant family" observed elsewhere (see: Gu et al., 2022 on depictions of Chinese transnational families), the analysis of the representations of childhoods in the context of migration reveals how both transnational life and life abroad may be framed as "troubling". In both cases, family life does not correspond to a single household in a single country ideal. Seeing the lack of co-residence (transnational childhoods) and life in a different cultural environment (childhoods abroad) as being problematic points to the importance of situating the research in the wider theoretical debates addressing issues of household changes and increasing diversity of contemporary family life (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000).

This article extends prior research by demonstrating how some transnational childhoods are deemed to be more troubling than others in the public "imaginary" (cf. Juozeliūnienė et al., 2020b; Smart, 2007). The findings reveal that depictions of transnational childhoods are influenced by social class, with families having fewer resources more likely to attract media attention. While challenges experienced by children from families in more advantageous socioeconomic circumstances are acknowledged, they are less often depicted as troubling, compared to children from less privileged backgrounds (e.g., single-parent households, lower socioeconomic status, etc.). In the latter case, the media tends to magnify the changes and challenges, framing them as deserving of public scrutiny (cf. Morgan, 2019). Lithuanian institutions in such cases are depicted in the Lithuanian media discourse as protectors against harm holding the higher moral ground and the Lithuanian state emerges as "valued and well-meaning" (cf. Anderson, 2012; Hollekim et al., 2016). Such construct of a state rushing to children's defence relates to the work of Hollekim and colleagues (2016), who examined contemporary discourses on children and parenting in Norway. They show how the emphasis on the "proper" parenting skills compels processes toward standardisation and homogenisation of parenting, labelling certain groups of parents as deficient and arguing in favour of state institutions exploring alternative approaches.

Representations of children living abroad can be subjected to a process of "vulnerabilisation" in the Lithuanian media discourse in multiple ways similar to other groups deemed vulnerable in other contexts (cf. Casalini, 2016; Karin et al., 2012; Lind, 2019). Findings reveal that parental choices are scrutinised for moving abroad, reinforcing the depiction of locally rooted families (remaining in the country of origin) as the

norm, transnational parenthood as "irresponsible" and transnational childhoods as "troubling" (cf. Juozeliūnienė et al., 2020b; Juozeliūnienė & Budginaitė, 2018). Moreover, being raised in a bi-national or multi-national family is inherently constructed as less "appropriate", categorising the childhoods in bi- or multi-national households as inherently problematic. Similarly, the media portrays the placements of Lithuanian children under temporary guardianship, especially involving same-sex couples, as a cause for heightened concern. Such and similar instances illustrate how families involving people of different nationalities and those not aligning with heteronormative "imaginary" may be presented in the media as a source for (national) concern. Such discourses tap into the anxieties about ethnic (and racial) preservation, which are exacerbated by the parents and/or carers not conforming to the ideal of single nationality heterosexual coupling as the safest environment for a "proper childhood". This can be seen as an expression of heteronationalistic discourse, explored in other EU countries with a long emigration tradition and traditionally strong family values (see: Mulhall, 2011 on the case of Ireland).

The wider academic literature highlights the diverse challenges faced by children growing up in competing national and ethnic contexts. They must navigate growing up in complex (intersecting) environments (family, peer groups, educational institutions, etc.) (Adams & Kirova, 2006). Each of these environments may contain (some) dangers to "proper childhoods" that children living abroad are exposed to. Lithuanian media acknowledges the insufficient attention from the host country institutions, especially regarding the challenges Lithuanian children face in schools, and the inappropriate parenting practices, ranging from neglect to serious harm. These contribute to an "imaginary" of the social pathologies believed to be inherent in families finding themselves in less privileged circumstances. Even if the way in which institutions and services of the host countries' actions are interpreted in the media may vary (from well-grounded actions to overreactions), the portrayal of parents as ultimately responsible for the situation remains a recurring theme: the parents took the risk to move abroad and they have to bear the ultimate responsibility if something goes wrong.

The findings of this article should be understood in a context related to the inherent limitations of the study. The choice to focus on two specific sections "Lithuanians abroad" (Delfi.lt) and "Emigrants" (15min.lt) does not cover the broader media corpus, which may also refer to transnational childhoods and childhoods abroad using a different framing (less linked with imaginaries surrounding the migration topic). It should be also noted that the analysis primarily focused on a subset of news items related to child's rights and child protection, attention to which decreased in recent years. The broader thematic range of the entire corpus was only briefly touched upon but largely remains beyond the scope of this publication, and warrants separate exploration due to the increasing diversity of themes. The article also only analysed internet media, excluding newspapers and alternative genres of media (e.g., social media), which may contain different perspectives. Although this choice ensured capturing messages accessible to both Lithuanians abroad and Lithuanians residing in the country, it also missed out on exploring alternative perspectives and voices of children and young people. These voices may be more prominent in social media and warrant separate investigations.

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Fertility as an object of influence of public policies of the state

Abstract

The fertility rate in Poland has remained below the level of simple generation replacement. Recent attempts to change the demographic situation and modify (pro)family policy have turned out to be ineffective. The pro-natalist "Family 500+" programme, also turned out to be unsuccessful in this area. Polish families decide to have children less and less often, and this trend continues, placing Poland among the fastest ageing countries in Europe.

The paper is a review article. It is based on selected data from Eurostat and Statistics Poland (GUS). The main goal is to present the factors responsible for fertility, taking into account the relationship between what is private and what is public/political. The author focuses on institutional solutions, especially on the role of family policies. She also poses questions about the causes of Poland's demographic collapse, trying to explain why the attempts to affect fertility do not bring the expected results.

Poland's problems are presented against the background of other European countries that are experiencing similar population problems. The analyses also take into account the impact of social crises, which may contribute to postponing reproductive decisions, and result in further depopulation of Poland (e.g., the pandemic, legal changes limiting the availability of abortion).

Keywords: fertility, fertility rate, demographic crisis, social policy, pro-family policy

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Introduction

Nowadays, the EU is trying to cope with imminent economic and political threats, as well as declining fertility rates and rapidly ageing European population (see: Grant et al., 2005). The dynamics of deep demographic and social changes was additionally intensified by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting reproductive intentions and fertility rates, and increasing the rate of ageing of the Europeans (see: Aassve et al., 2020; Kuropka et al., 2021). Although (pro)family policy is the exclusive domain of each Member State, which when designing activities in this area, takes into account their specific historical, economic, and socio-cultural conditions, some demographic trends are common to most EU countries, such as an increasing average age of first childbirth and marriage, a decrease in the number of marriages, and an increasing number of divorces (see: Slany, 2002; Szlendak, 2012). The extremely low birth rate in some countries, which is correlated with these processes is, therefore, a problem for the whole EU. Thus, more and more initiatives are focused on population policy and the social policy models implemented in individual countries (especially pro-natal activities) are viewed from the perspective of their effectiveness and the potential possibility of their implementation elsewhere.

According to Eurostat data, 4.07 million children were born in the EU in 2020, with the total fertility rate (TFR)[2] of 1.50, which is lower than the last peak in 2016 (1.57), but still above the all-time lowest rate in 2001 (1.43)[3]. Among the EU states, the highest fertility rate was recorded in France (1.83). Romania (1.80), Czechia (1.71), and Denmark (1.68) were also significantly above the EU average. On the other side of this continuum were: Malta (1.13), Spain (1.19), and Italy (1.24) (Eurostat, 2022).

Poland is among the countries with the lowest fertility rate in Europe. In 2020, it reached the value of 1.38, a year later it decreased even more (1.32). A constant downward trend in the fertility rate in Poland has been observed for over half a century. The first wave of the decline in births took place in the 1960s, the next one began in the mid-1980s and lasted continuously until 2003, gaining momentum in the 1990s. Within 20 years, the fertility rate in Poland decreased from 2.42 in 1983 to 1.22 in 2003. For over 30 years, the fertility rate has been below the level of simple generation replacement[4], and for over 20 years it has been defined as extremely low (below 1.5) (GUS,

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[2]   Total fertility rate (TFR) means "the average number of children that a woman would give birth to during the entire reproductive period (15–49 years), assuming that in particular phases of this period, she would give birth with the intensity observed among women in the surveyed year" (GUS, 2022, p. 30).

[3]   It should be emphasised that during these two decades, the EU expanded significantly. In 2001, the Union included only 15 countries and the following states were outside the EU: Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Hungary (accession in 2004), Bulgaria, Romania (accession in 2007), and Croatia (2013). In 2020, the UK left the EU.

[4]   Simple replacement of generations means a situation in which "typical parents give birth to a number of children which, under given mortality conditions, is sufficient to fully replace parents in reproduction. In modern societies, where virtually all newborns live

2022b; GUS, 2022a). Long-term demographic forecasts do not promise a rapid improvement in this area, and rather chaotic attempts made by successive governments to modify (pro)family policy have not been very effective.

However, the desire to have children is almost universal in Polish society (see: CBOS, 2013, 2019a). In 2019, only two out of 100 people did not want to have children at all, 6% declared a desire to have only one, nearly half (47%) – two (which has hardly changed for a quarter of a century), and over a quarter (28%) claimed they wanted to have three children. Moreover, for the last dozen years, there has been a clear decrease in the percentage of people who consider the 2+1 family model optimal for them (from 13% in 2000 to 6% in 2019) and, at the same time, the number of those who would like to have three children has increased (from 19% in 2006 to 28% in 2019). Despite these declarations, however, Polish women and men decide to have a child less and less often. In 2022, only 305,000 children were born in Poland, which is the lowest number in the post-war history of the country and it is 26 thousand births fewer than in 2021 and 50 thousand fewer than in the pandemic year – 2020 (GUS, 2023). The data illustrate the gap between the achieved and preferred fertility. The essence of the phenomenon is the discrepancy between intentions, which at a young age are co-shaped by, e.g., the structure and model of the family of origin and social norms of fertility, and in the peak reproductive years they are verified by the already changed needs and institutional context, e.g., the current economic situation, the implemented model of social policy, or the possibility of combining family and professional roles (Beaujouan & Berghammer, 2019). The "fertility gap" is not a problem specific only to Poland, but the difference is particularly big there (see: Sikorska, 2021).

The factors that affect the final fertility rate include: (1) economic aspects (such as the country's macroeconomic situation, GDP, wages, inflation, unemployment rate, as well as an individualised sense of financial security), (2) broadly understood institutional conditions (especially the implemented model of family policy), and (3) the socio-cultural context (cf. Sikorska, 2021; Slany, 2002). Today, financial security and a consolidated sense of stability are absolutely necessary for starting a family. Although a bad economic situation in the contemporary history of Poland has not always resulted in a low birth rate (cf. demographic booms in post-war years – 1949–1955 or the record-breaking baby boom of the late 1970s and early 1980s at the time of economic crisis), nowadays "conscious parenthood" is based on the permanent provision of secure living conditions to the (future) family.

A coherent policy that allows individuals to combine professional work with family responsibilities facilitates the accomplishment of pro-natalist goals. Flexible solutions in this area and an extensive system of amenities addressed to parents, especially those with young children, are essential. Finally, the climate around fertility and the cultural context are also important. In other words, the relations between what is private (individual reproduction plans and preferences) and what is public (political) are impor-

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to adulthood, the average number of children needed to replace their parents is slightly less than 2.1. Children are needed to replace the mother and father, and the fact that a small part of newborns will die before they are able to start their own reproduction needs to be taken into account" (Szukalski, 2009, p. 59).

tant. Considering the above, it can be assumed that the contemporary demographic problems of Poland (and perhaps of most European countries) are largely caused by macro factors – including socio-cultural changes that are natural aftermath of the modernisation processes, the state's economic policy and the lack of systemic solutions, such as a long-term, coherent, and effective social policy. This is, in a sense, the result of many years of lack of interest of decision-makers in the successively decreasing fertility rate. The deepening demographic crisis was identified as a significant social problem too late. Moreover, realising its validity was delayed and it became a problem going beyond the private sphere, arousing mobilisation to action too slowly (cf. Blumer, 1993).

Today, fertility is a matter of concern for some public policies of the state. The issue is also present in the journalistic and scientific discourse, in which, however, there are still more questions than answers. What are the sources of Poland's population problems? Why have the pro-natal tools introduced in recent years (including the "Family 500+ programme") not brought the expected effects? Are the current measures well-suited to the situation? Are they designed for the decades that are needed to rebuild the country's population? Is the politicisation of the fertility issue – its deprivatisation – an expression of care for creating conditions conducive to parenthood and genuine improvement of the demographic situation?

The paper attempts to answer these questions. It is a review article. Based on the extensive literature and selected statistical data (Eurostat, GUS), the sections below discuss the institutional and socio-cultural determinants of fertility, trying to compare the situation of Poland to other European countries and indicate the causes of the demographic crisis, taking into account current tensions between the private and public spheres.

Institutional determinants of fertility
– the role of social (and family) policy

Each European state shapes its own social policies, also in terms of pro--demographic activities, taking into account its specific economic and socio-cultural conditions. The literature provides various typologies of social policies (see: Saraceno, 2007; Szczudlińska-Kanoś, 2019), however, the classic division into three main models: liberal, conservative, and social democratic proposed by Esping-Andersen (1990), is most often used (cf. Balcerzak-Paradowska, 2009; 2014; Durasiewicz, 2017; Golinowska, 2018; Zgliczyński, 2017). This classification is based on the concept of the welfare state, and each of the models, created in a slightly different historical and cultural context, is constituted by one of the guiding principles – freedom, equality or solidarity.

In the **liberal model** (implemented, e.g., in Ireland), freedom is the dominant value in social policy, and market mechanisms are the main regulators of socio-economic processes, thus the state interferes in the affairs of the individual and family in incidental situations, and to a minimum extent. This also applies to social interventions, which is why the model assumes the smallest redistribution of funds for social purposes. The range of social rights of citizens is very limited, and social benefits are selective,

directed to individuals most in need and, additionally, subject to the income criterion. Relatively low social benefits are to prevent individuals from becoming dependent on the received support and to foster the creation of conditions for self-empowerment and self-help activities, including finding a job. In this individually oriented model, it is assumed that having children is a private matter of parents, so pro-natal stimuli are not particularly extensive, nevertheless, family benefits are universal.

The **conservative model** (e.g., in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany) is based on the principle of solidarity. Here, regulatory functions are performed by the state, which is also the guarantor of the social rights of citizens and organises the redistribution of funds, e.g., in the form of the social security system. Social benefits depend on the status of an individual on the labour market and are based on the solidarity between employers and employees. This model strongly emphasises the primary role of the family in meeting the needs of individuals, and in its classic version favours the petrifaction of the traditional (patriarchal) model of family life (with a man whose paid work allows him to support his family and a woman who usually functions outside the labour market and provides unpaid housework). Highly developed benefits for families are to support them in performing reproductive and care functions, therefore, social services provided by external entities are poorly developed in this model.

In the **social democratic model** (e.g., in Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland) social policy is grounded on egalitarianism, which guarantees social cohesion and solidarity. In this model, the welfare functions of the state are the most extensive, which is connected with high taxes but, at the same time, common access to satisfactory social benefits and an extensive system of services is guaranteed. All citizens are entitled to benefits (including family benefits), but their amount is directly related to employment. Because of the high level of social security, the system is attractive not only to representatives of the lowest classes, who are under multidimensional social risks (which is typical, e.g., of the liberal model), but also to representatives of the middle classes. A characteristic feature of the Scandinavian model, co-determining its attractiveness also for well-educated and well-off people, is a clear emphasis on gender equality and the promotion of universal participation of women in the labour market, e.g., through a developed system of institutional facilities that allow mothers to combine family and professional roles. The variety of available family policy instruments used within this model (from solutions supporting families in childcare, through universally available public services addressed to various categories of recipients, to tax reliefs) is based on the assumption that children are a necessary condition for ensuring the continuity of society as a whole, therefore, participation in the costs of their maintenance is the responsibility of this society.

The solutions implemented within family policy (as part of social policy) in each of the models reflect the position and role of women in society, and indirectly they implicit the correlation between individual reproduction preferences, decisions, and their macro systemic background. Thus, it is possible to describe specific ideas in a particular cultural context. They can be presented on a continuum – from (quasi)patriarchal solutions based on the traditionally understood division of gender and family roles (conservative model, breadwinner model), through egalitarian solutions and mutual responsibility of partners in the performance of household duties (liberal mod-

el, dual breadwinner model) to a clear emphasis on issues related to women's emancipation processes (social democratic model).

The classification presented in 1990 by Esping-Andersen, was completed in later years with two more models – **Southern European** (Ferrera, 1996) and **Central--Eastern European** (Fenger, 2007). The former one (typical for Italy, Spain, Greece, Portugal) was initially identified as a variant of the conservative model, due to strong familialism, promotion of the traditional model of the family, emphasis on its fundamental functions in supporting the weakest members of society, and the limited role of the state in this area. In this model, more than in any other, attention is paid to maintaining family cohesion and care for strong family ties, which in turn is supposed to limit the responsibility of the state for the development of initiatives supporting families. A characteristic feature of the social policy implemented under this model is the inconsistency of the support offered to citizens, which results in numerous contradictions – social benefits are highly selective, the system favours some groups at the expense of others (e.g., pension benefits are relatively high, family benefits – low), and the offer of available social services is not very extensive. This model is sometimes referred to as fragmented or clientelist, as it balances between actions for the social security of citizens and the particular political interests of decision-makers.

The **Central-Eastern European model** (e.g., Poland, Czechia, Hungary) developed last as a result of the socio-economic changes at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. The problems of the post-socialist states, initiated (or revealed) by the systemic transformation (structural unemployment, poverty, social stratification, etc.) collided in the first period of changes with the withdrawal of state institutions from their care functions or the provision of social services. The transformation crisis, the low level of state spending on social purposes, and the selective nature of benefits (often considered unfair or even harmful to the losers of the transformation, see: Kaźmierczak-Kałużna, 2010) did not help solve social problems but even led to their petrification[5]. It could

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[5]   Czechia is unique among post-Soviet countries. The model of social policy that developed there is a kind of hybrid of the three models distinguished by Esping-Andersen (1990). The Czechs did not experience as many transformation problems as other countries in the region and they were able to develop labour market policies and institutions and introduce solutions that appeared much later in other countries or are still only a subject of discussion (e.g., the act on supporting children, act on social services, the "income" act, which guarantees the level of wages and salaries is motivating compared to social benefits, cf. Golinowska, 2018). Perhaps it is meeting socio-economic problems that have become the key to today's demographic success of Czechia. At the end of the 20th century, this country had the lowest fertility rate in the world, and in 2020 it achieved one of the highest rates in the EU (1.71), second only to France and Romania. The reasons for the success of the Czech Republic are seen in macroeconomic conditions (low unemployment rate and low level of poverty), flexible labour market solutions (part-time work, teleworking, paternity leave, etc.), an extensive system of cash benefits for children (including maternity, paternity, parental, compensatory benefits), as well as legal regulations regarding, e.g., in vitro fertilisation (the Czech Republic is a leader in Europe in this respect) (cf. ESHRE, 2017), or tax reliefs for children. The example of the Czech Republic shows that it is possible

have been assumed that the principle of combining paid work of both partners with family roles, preserved for decades in the socialist realities, would remain in the new socio-economic order. However, in the initial period of transformations in Central and Eastern Europe, the emancipatory assumptions of the social-democratic model were abandoned in favour of (quasi)liberal solutions, and a decisive return to traditional forms of family with a man as the sole breadwinner and a professionally inactive woman was observed.

However, these trends are constantly evolving. In some countries of the region (e.g., Czechia, Slovakia), thanks to ongoing cultural changes (the role of active women's movements is important here) and increased financial opportunities (EU funds), attempts are being made to implement solutions similar to the Scandinavian model (especially in terms of services that help to combine family roles with paid work). In other countries, such as Poland, there is also a greater concern for the family, but the main instrument of support is direct money transfers, which are typical of the conservative model (see: ESHRE, 2017; Aspalter et al., 2009; Balcerzak-Paradowska, 2014; Golinowska, 2018).

The models of welfare states and welfare regimes created years ago are subject to modifications due to the socio-political, economic, and technological changes taking place in individual countries. The objective conditions and visions of development change, value systems, social role patterns, fertility preferences evolve, as a result of which these models are constantly "updated". New proposals appear, and they include additional criteria as well as components, such as education or health care (cf. Aspalter, 2017). Classic models are also subject to the processes of hybridisation (cf. Hacker, 2009) and convergence (Balcerzak-Paradowska, 2014; Golinowska, 2018). The discussion on the models of the welfare state and changes taking place within them is, among others, a result of new social risks that have been increasing since the beginning of the 21st century (e.g., the 2008 crisis), and the growing inefficiency of the instruments used so far. Hemerijck (2013) describes these processes as recalibration. In his opinion, individual systems are aimed at making social protection significantly related to the employment of individuals and they shift from excessive support directed at those not participating in the labour market to motivating and supporting those who remain in the labour market or return to it. Employment (of both men and women) is to be strengthened by flexible educational or rehabilitation solutions. In terms of fertility, institutional support, in the form of facilities that enable combining family and work responsibilities, is also essential.

Despite dynamic changes in social and family policy models and differences in specific patterns of pro-family activities applied in individual EU states, nearly all EU countries share one goal. It is the creation of conditions that are conducive to the formation of families, their development and the comprehensive satisfaction of their needs, including living needs and those related to raising children (Durasiewicz, 2017). The most effective instruments seem to be those that are holistic in nature, in which the family is placed in a broad institutional context, and they harmonise with activities

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to influence the fertility rate effectively, and, thanks to a long-term strategy, to get out of the demographic impasse (Ditrich, 2022).

in other areas of social policy. Solutions designed in this way, together with the system of social benefits (including direct cash transfers) addressed to families, can be effective and quite universal tools of population policy.

The similarity of the implemented initiatives proves that today's population challenges and their socio-economic consequences are common to all European states. However, the degree of the convergence of the applied projects does not radically change the social policy models implemented in specific countries and embedded in the historical and cultural context, but it allows one to distinguish European solutions from those existing in other regions of the world. Thus, it facilitates the formation of a relatively universal European model of social policy, based on shared values and principles, such as equal opportunities, partnership, social inclusion, participation, and activation (Balcerzak-Paradowska, 2014; Golinowska, 2018)[6].

Family policy instruments in Poland – pro-demographic context

Despite differences in the implemented models of social and family policy, as well as variations in defining gender roles, family practices, and patterns of family solidarity, in most countries of the European community it is still the family (especially the woman in the family) that is the main source of support for dependent people who need care, including children (Igel et al., 2009; Szelewa & Polakowski, 2008). In Southern and Central Eastern Europe, as well as Poland, patterns of intergenerational support are deeply rooted, which is emphasised by both models of social policy and which causes a relatively greater sense of duty towards the family and its members. Therefore, family policy together with money transfers and social services provided within it serve often only as a supplement to family solidarity, based on informal rules and emotional bonds (Szyszka, 2017). However, in view of currently observed changes in attitudes towards fertility and family, a large part of society may find this way of understanding and implementing policy, including pro-natal activities, increasingly difficult to accept. It can also generate or exacerbate the tension between individual needs and preferences in this area, and – to a large extent – externally defined possibilities of action.

For a long time, this way of thinking about family support was dominant (or even binding) in transforming Poland, where the foundations of modern social policy were created in specific, even for Central Eastern European countries, economic and socio--cultural conditions (Golinowska, 2018). As late as in the first decade of the 21st century, in the face of accumulating demographic problems, solutions aimed at both improving the material living conditions of families and increasing the fertility rate began

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[6] Some researchers point out that despite these "foundations", the convergence of social solutions, even in Europe, is not a smooth and fast process. It is much easier to develop common European standards in the economic areas than in the social ones. Due to the influence of traditional values, shaped by history, deeply rooted in culture and established in institutions, good practices developed in one state are often difficult to adopt in another. In this context, culture may be a barrier to integration (see: Barbier, 2013).

to be introduced. Initially, these were just direct cash transfers, e.g., a single family allowance with supplements introduced in 2004 or a one-time childbirth bonus introduced in 2006. It was only with time that family policy instruments appeared in the form of tax reliefs and service benefits.

Solutions implemented over the last few years, such as extension of paid parental leaves; paternity leaves; annual benefits for mothers who did not work before childbirth or were insured in Agricultural Social Insurance Fund; Large Family Card; development of childcare institutions; a system of tax credits for children; the use of the "one zloty for one zloty" mechanism in family benefits (Magda et al., 2019; Ruzik-Sierdzińska, 2018; Witkowska, 2017), were mostly initiated in times of relatively good economic conditions. They brought an improvement in the financial situation of some families with children, but not an increase in the number of births. The lack of natalist effects results from the lack of consistency of the implemented ideas and the contradictions inherent in them. Some of the solutions (e.g., increased access to institutions providing child care) are aimed at equalising the situation of parents in the labour market and increasing the possibility of combining paid work with family life, while others are conducive to perpetuating the traditional division of roles – with a man oriented on his career and only "helping" at home and a mother staying outside the labour market for a long time, focused on caring functions (e.g., longer parental leaves, but without an obligatory part for fathers) (Sikorska, 2021).

In 2016, under the "Family 500+" programme, the first universal childcare benefits were introduced in Poland. A breakthrough in its form, the new instrument of family policy was to constitute an investment in human capital and support the implementation of pro-natal and social goals defined as equivalent (The Act of February 11…, 2016). Initially, the benefits were available only for the second and subsequent children (the first and only children were entitled to the benefit after meeting the income criterion by the family). In 2019, the programme was extended to all children regardless of the economic status of the family.

Previously, the Polish system of financial support for families with children was based solely on family allowances (significantly lower than child benefits, and connected with the income criterion) and tax reliefs. New transfers not integrated with the already existing forms of aid led to their marginalisation (Magda et al., 2019). The programme itself, however, fitted into social expectations and was recognised as a qualitative turn in the state's family policy, causing a radical change in its perception (CBOS, 2016; 2018; 2019b). Apart from the doubts raised by some researchers concerning the high cost of the programme and its impact on the labour market (decrease in women's employment) (Magda et al., 2019), it can be assumed that there is now a relative consensus in the journalistic and scientific discourse as to its social effects (Kaźmierczak-Kałużna, 2019; Prokopowicz, 2017; Rymsza, 2017)[7].

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[7]   Polish Statistics data show a decrease in the extent of poverty in Poland in recent years. The reasons for the observed changes include a good economic situation and new social transfers addressed to families with children. Small fluctuations in this area in the years 2017–2021 (e.g., stopping the downward trend in 2018) are considered to be the effect of growing inflation, lack of indexation of child benefits, and the pandemic (GUS,

Nevertheless, in terms of pro-demographic activities, the programme did not bring the intended results (Kaźmierczak-Kałużna, 2020). Heralded by its creators as an antidote to the demographic collapse of Poland, it turned out to be completely ineffective in this area (Chart 1).
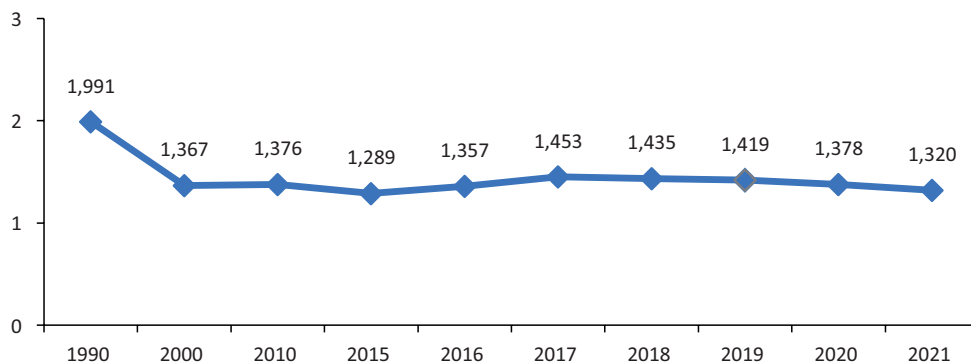
Chart 1. Fertility rate in Poland between 1990 and 2021

Source: Based on GUS (2022a, 2002b)

The increase in the fertility rate in Poland to the highest level in 20 years, observed in 2016–2017, was only a short-term effect of the impact of the new tool. Demographic analyses show that although women aged 25–34 still give birth most often, the fertility rate in older age categories has increased significantly, which may mean last-chance births, and this may not be a direct effect of the programme. A relatively substantial increase, especially in 2017, in the number of births (402,000) referred mainly to second, third and subsequent children, and not first births (GUS, 2018). This is a worrying trend because it is the reservoir of first births that is the largest and first births are mainly responsible for population growth (Bartnicki & Alimowski, 2022).The decreasing participation of first-born children in the total number of births may be an indicator of the growing number of individuals/couples who intentionally do not want to have children or signal a problem related to postponing the decision to have a child. Both childlessness and delayed child-bearing, which, due to women's biological fertility decreasing with age, is a risk factor in this context, are problematic for demographic development, as they perpetuate the unfavourable situation (Magda et al., 2019).

After two years of relative increase, 2018 saw a significant drop in the number of births again. This trend is constantly deepening, which seems to confirm the conclusion that attempts to influence demographic development on an ad hoc basis are not

2022d). Positive trends are also visible in Eurostat data, which show the systematically decreasing scope of severe material deprivation in Poland (GUS, 2017). However, the current situation – the war in Ukraine, galloping inflation, energy crisis, and the risk of a serious economic slowdown and an increase in unemployment – makes the forecasts in this respect less optimistic.

enough. Even a significant increase in spending on family policy and high financial transfers directly to families do not bring quick effects and do not translate directly (certainly not immediately) into the rate of population growth (cf. Rękas, 2013).

In the early 2020s, Poland is at a stage of demographic development that even an increase in the fertility rate to a level that guarantees simple replacement of generations will not reverse the negative trends and will not stop the country's population from further shrinking in a short time. This is also due to biological determinants. A natural factor influencing the fertility rate is fertility and the population size of women of reproductive age (15–49 years), and in particular women at the age with the highest birth rate (25–34 years). However, the three-decade-deep birth depression in Poland has caused structural changes in the population, as a result of which the number of women of childbearing age is gradually decreasing (Magda et al., 2019). The cohorts entering adulthood today are (and will be) much less numerous than those from the baby boom period at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s. Therefore, it will be difficult to improve fertility rates significantly in a short period of time. The process of demographic reconstruction takes at least one generation. Thus, it requires long-term visions and consistent, often unpopular, actions that go beyond election cycles (Grant et al., 2005). Systemic solutions designed for decades are needed, as part of an inclusive family policy and other social policies.

Political and social consensus in pro-demographic activities is necessary because the decline in fertility, together with the ongoing ageing of the population and rapidly growing dependency ratios bring long-term, severe consequences for the entire economy and society. They cause problems in the functioning of the labour market, disturb the balance of the pension system, burden the healthcare system, etc. The process of nuclearisation of the family, which accompanies the population and socio-economic changes, directly affects the ability of the family to care for dependent persons, and this significantly increases the need for institutional forms of care and radically increases its costs. In the long term, it is important for the efficiency of the social assistance system. Therefore, it is important to place demographic and family policy activities in a broad institutional context.

In the EU member states, relatively high fertility rates are typical of those countries where a coherent policy (in the sense presented above) is implemented and consistently pursued on the basis of two foundations – striving to equalise parental duties performed by mothers and fathers and making it easier for both parents to combine paid work and parenthood (Sikorska, 2021). In Poland, the need to develop such forms of family support is most often noticed by the inhabitants of the largest cities as well as the well-educated and wealthy people (CBOS, 2018). However, the family policy model in Poland, which is an example of a (quasi)conservative system, is vague in this area, and the actions taken are often provisional, unrelated and subject to change. In view of the considerable unpredictability of the family and fertility support system, even high cash transfers offered to Polish families today do not have a decisive impact on the sense of stability and financial security. It is wages and salaries, including those earned by women, that are of primary importance for the sense of security and stability. Women's employment in Poland is relatively low compared to other European countries (61% of women were in paid employment in 2019, compared to the EU av-

erage of 68%), and the reasons for this are seen in women's excessive burden of household duties and insufficient access to institutional care for the youngest children. Infrastructural deficiencies and an uneven division of household duties, placing women in the role of "everyday managers" and the only "specialists" in this field, and men only in the role of "helpers" offering support, are serious barriers to demographic development (Sikorska, 2021)[8].

Socio-cultural determinants of fertility – Polish specificity

The causes of the deepening population crisis in Poland should also be sought in socio-cultural conditions. The modern family is changing rapidly in its structures and functions, and some researchers pessimistically announce the crisis or death of the family and herald its permanent decomposition, and disintegration (Popenoe, 1993).

One of the indicators of the ongoing changes is the progressing process of family nuclearisation, which is (co)responsible for the dramatic decrease in fertility, and influences the effectiveness of care functions. The ongoing deinstitutionalisation of marriage and family is also significant (Cherlin, 2004; Żurek, 2020). Getting married, starting a family, and having a child today is a fully autonomous choice of an individual or a couple; it is just one of many alternatives, a possibility, not a biological or socially imposed necessity. The foundations of building a modern family are agency, reflexivity and choice, thus it is becoming more and more accepted to have a "bricolage" ("do it yourself") family, the shape and functioning of which correspond to the individualised needs and preferences of individuals, often going beyond socially propagated standards (Duncan, 2011).

The socio-economic changes taking place in Poland after 1989 were reflected in the changing structure as well as a hierarchy of values and life goals of individuals. In addition to the traditionally perceived family values typical of collectivist-oriented social orders, other values such as subjectivity, freedom and self-actualisation are becoming more rooted in Polish society. As a result of the parallel changes in social bonds, a sense of community gives way to autonomy and individualism. Slightly against, or parallel, to the still firmly established traditional patterns, a slow but thorough redefinition of stereotypes and gender roles, including family roles, is taking place. Thanks to the ongoing emancipation processes and the development of feminist movements, women expect their partners to be more and more involved in family life and their relationships more and more egalitarian (CBOS, 2020). Moreover, a satisfying and time-consuming job competes or even wins in the competition for primacy with the family or (another) child. A career and functioning in other than family areas become a value equally important for both men and women (Marody, 2012). Thus, the traditional love-marriage-mother-

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[8]   It is interesting whether another government programme Family Care Capital, launched in 2022, will bring any demographic effects. A new benefit of a maximum 12,000 Polish zlotys (paid for 12 or 24 months) for the second and subsequent child is offered to parents of children aged 12 to 35 months and maybe a step in the right direction, as it is intended to finance the costs of childcare (The Act of November 17…, 2021).

hood scenario for women (Titkow et al., 2004) loses its attractiveness, which allows them to violate the patriarchal foundations of relationships.

The socio-demographic effects of the processes outlined above are additionally reinforced by institutional shortcomings. From this perspective, parenting is still almost exclusively "private". The state is outside it, and its authorities seem to react insufficiently to the ongoing changes or do not keep up with their pace. In the absence of infrastructural facilities offered to families such as universal access to childcare institutions, women often postpone the decision about motherhood or resign from child-bearing plans out of fear of losing their jobs or leaving the fast career path. According to modern parenting standards, having children requires almost 100% commitment, thus it is a serious emotional, financial, and logistical challenge. It affects the quality and rhythm of the daily life of the individual or couple. For some, it is an unacceptable scenario, hence the increasingly common, conscious decisions to postpone child-bearing, to be childless or to have only one child.

Socio-cultural changes taking place in the contemporary family and its environment are so significant that they must be unconditionally included in the planned pro-natal activities. It seems necessary to radically reorient the dominant way of thinking about the family in Poland and to promote diversity, especially models of life based on egalitarian principles of partnership. A broad, inclusive definition of the family is needed to be used as part of the family policy so that comprehensive support can also be provided to people who function outside the traditional nuclear family (Sikorska, 2021). Without noticing and accepting the changes taking place in the modern world, or without genuine care for an institutional environment that is friendly to families with children, an effective impact on the fertility rate is unlikely.

Conclusions

The multiplicity of factors having a direct or indirect impact on the fertility rate makes attempts to interfere in this intimate sphere of individuals' lives and create population policy at the macro level not easy by definition. It is certain, however, that ad hoc measures do not improve fertility rates and are often counter-effective.

The current situation of Poland (and other European countries) shows the dangerously perpetuating demographic implosion. However, studies and examples of some countries indicate that it is possible to slow down fertility decline and stop negative trends (or even reverse them – see the example of the Czech Republic). However, it is important to be aware that random, isolated interventions do not bring long-term results, and solutions that work in one country may not always be accepted and effective in another (cf. Barbier, 2013). The process of demographic reconstruction is time--consuming and requires actions that are planned for decades, and that are embedded in the economic, socio-cultural, and political context (Grant et al., 2005). It is also important to prevent or eliminate disharmony between individual (private) and external (public) determinants of childbearing decisions.

One of the most important conditions for an increase in fertility is socio-economic balance and a sense of stability. The last two years – the pandemic, the war in Ukraine,

the energy crisis, the economic slowdown, etc. – have unbalanced a large part of the modern world, including Europe and Poland, destabilising the existing rules of functioning, introducing uncertainty about the future, and significantly straining the sense of security that was built and consolidated in the 2010s.

The above-mentioned crisis phenomena have an impact on the reproductive plans and decisions of Polish women and men, as evidenced by the constantly deteriorating demographic indicators. The pandemic certainly did not help to increase fertility (cf. Aassve et al., 2020; Kuropka et al., 2021). The lockdown baby boom did not occur, and – as the data analysed above show – in the years 2020–2021 the fertility rate decreased. It was an effect of the sense of uncertainty and worry generated by the extraordinary situation. On the one hand, people experienced fear about their own and child's health when access to doctors and health care (including hospital care) was significantly hindered, worrying about getting pregnant (e.g., in the context of long-term stress related to the pandemic), and childbirth (e.g., suspension of the procedure of family deliveries); on the other hand, they felt uncertainty about the future, the functioning of the labour market during the pandemic and return to work after childbirth (e.g., the risk of losing a job, worrying about providing childcare when the activities of childcare and educational institutions, i.e., nurseries, kindergartens, and schools, were limited during the pandemic).

Sanitary restrictions and limitations on the activity of public offices and the organisation of weddings were also significant in this context. The number of births is strongly correlated with the number of solemnised marriages. Despite the changes taking place in this area, almost 75% of children in Poland are born in marriages and more than half of them in the first three years of the marriage. During the pandemic the number of solemnised marriages decreased significantly – in 2020 just over 145,000 marriages were solemnised, that is over 38,000 fewer than a year earlier. This also had an impact on fertility (GUS, 2021).

Recent legal changes concerning infertility treatment and limiting access to legal abortion do not help to improve fertility rates. In 2016, the National Programme for Infertility Treatment with In Vitro Fertilisation, which provided couples with financial support for three IVF procedures, was closed. The problems of infertility are becoming more and more common in Polish society, and the high costs of IVF procedures are an insurmountable barrier for a significant number of couples trying to have a child. Therefore, the abandonment of the programme raises doubts.

According to experts, the decision to have a child may also be significantly influenced by the restriction on access to legal abortion introduced by the Constitutional Tribunal in 2020, even in the case of foetal lethal defects. It is worth emphasising that in 2013, when abortion in such cases was legally permissible, every fourth respondent included in what is called demographic reserve, pointed to the probability of genetic defects in the child as an important reason for abandoning reproduction plans (Kotowska, 2014). In view of the successively increasing age of women giving birth to children (which involves serious medical risks), it can be presumed that the restrictive abortion law will be an additional factor hampering the birth rate. It is emphasised by the members of the Demographic Sciences Committee of the Polish Academy of Sciences, who claim that the change in abortion law does not only violate what is called the abortion compromise reached in the 1990s by rekindling and exacerbating

the ideological conflict in Polish society, or undermine public trust in the authorities, but it also brings a risk of multidimensional and long-term socio-demographic consequences. The new regulations disrupt the family planning process, increase the fears of women and their partners related to becoming pregnant (which may lead to further delays in the decision to have a child or abandonment of child-bearing plans), and significantly increase the risk of a higher number of abortions in inappropriate conditions, which threatens health and life of women, and may result in difficulties in conceiving in the future. Thus, the new law may significantly contribute to the further deterioration of the demographic situation in Poland, where the fertility rate is already extremely low (Komitet Nauk Demograficznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2020).

These legal regulations, which restrict individual freedom, and their expected demographic effects show how undesirable excessive interference of politicians in the family and the individual is. The excessive privatisation of fertility issues and depriving families with children of systemic support and facilities conducive to fertility (which has been practised in Poland for many years and which indirectly led to the demographic collapse), as well as the extreme politicisation of this delicate sphere of life (e.g., by introducing a strict law) are harmful from the perspective of pro-natalist goals. Caring for fertility is caring for each individual and society as a whole. In terms of state institutions, they should build a lasting sense of security for citizens (also in relation to women's reproductive rights), but above all, they must create a coherent and inclusive (pro)family policy, which will also include people functioning outside the traditional models of family life. It should accept in its assumptions changes occurring in contemporary families and their environment. Finally, it must be closely related to other public policies.

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Motherhood in the empty nest –
a lack of social recognition?

Abstract

This article explores a socially and sociologically unrecognised stage of motherhood when adult children leave the family home. Regarding family policies, social context, and individual attitudes towards this stage and reconfiguration of a mother's social role of a mother – there is still a notable gap in the research on family issues. Becoming a mother in an empty nest is an individual process following considerable life changes. Despite its importance, it appears to be treated with less validity than the experiences of mothers who are navigating through the early stages of motherhood. Therefore, this paper shows what happens in the lives of women whose role as mothers is being transformed. It complements research on the family life course by focusing on the reconfiguration of the maternal role and the experience of motherhood at the stage of an empty nest. The article is based on empirical material collected between 2019 and 2021 within a 36-month longitudinal qualitative study of individuals and couples in Poland whose adult children had left the family home.

Keywords: motherhood, post-motherhood, mother's role, empty nest, empty nest syndrome

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Introduction

It is often assumed that women find it more difficult (than men) to process the moment when their adult children leave the family home (Spence & Lonner, 1971; Dennerstein et al., 2002; Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009; Wojciechowska, 2009; Bouchard, 2014). This is mainly due to the social role of women, in which they are seen as full-time parents and caregivers. In Poland, women are credited with constructing their identity based on the mother's role. In traditional discourse, a woman moves smoothly from the role of a mother to the role of a grandmother (Pustułka & Ślusarczyk, 2016; Radziwinowiczówna et al., 2018; Gajewska et al., 2023a). Linking the female role exclusively with offspring and home may be the reason why the empty family nest is a source of severe stress and identity crisis for women (Wojciechowska, 2008 after Oleś, 2000). Meanwhile, research (including the study that is the subject of this article) does not confirm the emergence of the crisis at all but also does not always point out the possibility of reorganisation within the life priorities of mothers of adult children (see liminality in the maternal role in Gajewska et al. (2023a) and the latent role of the mother in Herzberg-Kurasz et al. (2023b)). Thus, it seems that the social roles played by women affect the experience of the empty nest. Consequently, positive approaches to ending active parenthood seem to create more dilemmas for mothers than for fathers (Sheriff & Weatherall, 2009).

Women in the "third age" (Bonvalet et al., 2021; Gullette, 1995) who have accomplished the "rush hours" (Coelho et al., 2021) stage of life, might be of interest not only to social policy planners in all European Union countries but also the entire health system including family therapists. The "late working life stage" (50–65 years) is when women still spend more hours on unpaid work than men (around 5–6 hours a week in the case of Polish women) (Coelho et al., 2021) and the different ages of retirement entitlements create various risks for men and women regarding their unequal positions in older age. Women's workloads are most often considered in the context of balancing maternal and professional roles, while also serving as caregivers for ageing parents (the sandwich generation) or grandchildren (recently named the panini sandwich generation) (Kotowska et al., 2016; Slany, 2019)[2]. Between its components, there is no space or freedom to act, no freedom to choose – in many cases one's own meaningful life goals. Fulfilment of the norms of the caregiving role has a deeply rooted power of duty in Polish culture, manifested as a paramount family value (Slany, 2023). Existing research on the subject is limited, although there is significant social demand to address the dilemmas experienced by mothers during the post-maternal period of their life course[3]. The group of mothers of adult children included in the study have little visibility in research on family issues.

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[2]   Performing tasks and having obligations towards family members from different generations was referred to as the sandwich generation. Over time, with the overloading of the generation with the aforementioned responsibilities and the density of duties a new term emerged – the panini sandwich generation (Slany, 2023).

[3]   Post-maternal in the sense that adult children have moved out of the family nest.

The paper aims to identify the changes in the meaning of the mother's role during their life course. It will also show how the mothers in an empty nest perceive their maternity and how the scripts of their behaviours change. Women participating in the study referred to their memories of relationships with their children growing up in full nests. Then, they matched those memories with their more recent experiences of adult children leaving their family homes. The article attempts to note the existence and name the period after which adult children leave the nest, in which women continue to be active participants in their social life. The period that so far has not received a name (that would be commonly used in sociology) and is largely defined by the reconstruction of the mother's role.

The article explores the self-identification experiences of mothers, by looking at both transformational processes – being a mother in a full nest towards the perspective of letting the role of the mother become latent. It seems like there is no script of behaviours in the empty nest as well as adequate post-maternity rituals (as a maternal roadmap), corresponding with those existing within the culture of women who are becoming mothers (manifested in, e.g., the organisation of baby showers or arranging group support for other young moms) (Nelson, 2006). If "motherhood is work that must be learned" (Hays, 1996 in Titkow, et al. 2004, p. 207) it seems reasonable that it should also be present in the context of post-maternity, or the "post-child" stage of women's lives.

Motherhood is seen as something that is continuously created by each society member. How motherhood is perceived and experienced in society results from the processes of social construction (Badinter, 1998; Wall, 2001). Its perceptions are, e.g., produced through everyday social interactions, discourses, and practices (Glenn, 1994). Therefore, e.g., ideas about a "good mother" have been changing throughout history. Studies on the social construction of motherhood attempt to make it more visible how dominant meanings or common connotations of motherhood have emerged, changed, and are continually (re)produced by members of society (Badinter, 1998; 2013; O'Reilly, 2010). At the same time, there are as many definitions of motherhood as there are mothers. Each mother approaches the performance of this role in a unique way and carries it out in her own distinctive manner (Badinter, 2013; Kasten, 2013).

The paper has been divided into five sections. I start with a section dedicated to mothers in the post-maternal midlife phase. The next section is a description of the changing meanings of motherhood and research on motherhood in the Polish context, where a cultural perspective on the subject has been presented. These two parts provide a theoretical framework for the article. The article then describes the methodological issues of the study. Ultimately, I present the results of the analysis carried out by presenting examples concerning different valuations of motherhood, the lack of post-maternal rituals and the strong cultural influence of the Polish cultural concept on post-maternal period experiences of women. What should be emphasised at the beginning, and what will also be illustrated in the empirical material, is that the departure of an adult child from the family home does not automatically lead to a release from the mother's role. It can sometimes affect its intensification, by changing its nature. It feels more appropriate to speak about the role which has

become irregular, no longer on a day-to-day basis. Even if there is no co-presence, the role of a caregiver does not appear to have an end.

Mothers in the post-maternal midlife phase

The phrase "empty nest" is used most commonly and repeatedly to name the period of family life when adult children have left the family home. It might carry a pejorative connotation when it is treated synonymously with the concept of empty nest syndrome. These two terms should be approached independently because while the empty nest is used to name an objective event of the family life course, empty nest syndrome refers to the subjective experience (most often negative) of experiencing the departure of adult children. More often than not, it is used to refer to women's experiences. Many researchers support the idea that empty nest syndrome is accompanied by a period of emotional anxiety, identity conflict, depression, guilt, fear, stress, and loneliness (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009; Bouchard, 2014; Grover & Dang, 2013). Focusing solely on the empty nest syndrome, one can miss the whole range of experiences mothers have when their adult children leave the family home. In addition, it is not entirely true that a nest becomes empty while a married couple or a single parent (sometimes also with a new partner) continues to live in it (Bouchard, 2014). Some researchers accuse the phrase "empty nest" of being too colloquial (Spence & Lonner, 1971). On the other hand, the widespread use of the statement allows immediate association with a specific moment of the family life course. What also remains to be discussed is the terminology and whether the use of the term "**post**-maternity" (post-maternity and post-motherhood which are used interchangeably in the manuscript) is appropriate and adequate in the context of emptying the nests, mainly due to the fact that it may be mistakenly associated with the end of motherhood. The study being conducted indicates a reduction in the burden of household chores related to offspring, but it also shows their transformation into tasks performed remotely.

The stage of the empty nest, although it does not start nor end abruptly (it happens that children sometimes return to their family homes – boomeranging) (see: Gaviria, 2016, Żadkowska & Herzberg-Kurasz, 2022b) occupies only a small part of an extremely extensive period (midlife stage) of the life course that is enriched with various experiences that can last more than 30 years (Mitchell, 2006). In the manuscript, the post-maternal phase refers to the time when motherhood changes from everyday, intense motherhood, engaged in thorough physical co-presence, to occasional motherhood, realised remotely. The use of the "post" prefix does not mean that the role of the mother ceases to exist. Motherhood in relation to adult children changes its nature, and the lack of co-presence does not always mean less intense relationships with their children.

Combining the traditional approach associating the female role exclusively with tasks directly related to children and the home, excluding one's interests or professional life, may be the reason for the widely held assumption that the empty nest is a source of severe stress and an identity crisis for women (Badinter, 2013; Wojciechowska, 2008; Hryciuk & Korolczuk, 2012). The responsibility for the home and the adult

children leaving it is mainly taken by the woman-mother. There is no empirical evidence directly confirming the emergence of a crisis. They indicate, however, the possibility of a reorganisation within the life priorities of mothers of adult children. Wojciechowska (2008) draws attention to the possibility of the emergence of a feeling of emptiness in the nest, which for many years was buzzing with family life. She speaks about "ineffective coping with the new situation" Wojciechowska (2008) which is about adapting to a new formula of family life. At the same time, she points out that the research projects carried out so far, do not allow to determine whether the stage of adult children's departure from the family home is linked to a partial loss of identity for the woman or, on the contrary, is combined with a sense of relief, full acceptance of it and a smooth shift towards the formation of a new self (Wojciechowska, 2008). The role of women as mothers of adult children remains undiscovered in sociological and social discourse. The emptying nest and lack of rituals that would answer the ambivalence about how to go through this stage of family life shed light on the lack of post-maternity culture. Empty nest syndrome seems to affect those women for whom the fact of being a mother has remained paramount throughout their lives (before their adult children moved out). When a woman defines herself solely by the role of mother the presence of children makes fullness, and their absence makes emptiness (De Singly, 2023). Several researchers validate the concept that parents with limited social relationships as well as those who became parents at a young age, exhibit a greater intensity of empty nest syndrome (Bouchard, 2014; Grover & Dang, 2013; Harkins, 1978; Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009). Therefore, for some mothers, the departure of an adult child will mean an empty nest, while for others, the child's departure will mean a redefinition of roles such as that of mother, parent, and partner – without including the empty nest syndrome aspect (De Singly, 2023). Other studies suggest that post-maternity issues are not at all relevant to modern women because they are not as connected to the home domain as previous generations of women were (Sheriff & Weatherall, 2009).

The starting point of the post-maternal phase can only be subjectively determined by the individual woman, who defines it in relation to her own experiences. The reference point can be both the first and the last offspring. There can be a variety of indicators – the child's first job, a certain age, going to college, leaving home, marriage, or more subtle signs of maturation, it will not always be the attainment of legal adulthood (in the view of the law). Others suggest that the empty nest is associated with gradual changes involving self-reliance rather than a specific event (Randhawa & Kaur, 2021).

According to Spence and Lonner, a mother will not truly enter the post-maternal phase when she is not sure whether her child is successfully realising an adult life. Moreover, this adult child may also make it difficult to step out of the mother's role by constantly involving her in the challenges of adult life (Spence & Lonner, 1971). The lack of precise guidance on how to act as a mother of adult children can create uncertainty, which will generate a sense of role strain (Wojciechowska, 2008); transition into liminality (after Gajewska et al., 2023a) or reconfiguration of a mother's role into a latent role (Herzberg-Kurasz et al., 2023b), activated remotely, e.g., when children come to visit (Rancew-Sikora & Skowrońska, 2022).

Post-maternity is a term, proposed by Margaret Gullette (2002), describing a woman's living situation after her adult children have become independent and self-sufficient. Historically, the term refers to the social changes that began in the late 19th century in the United States, starting with the decline in fertility. As part of the family's life course, it inaugurates new relationships with adult children. As Gullette claims:

> *To resist the endless condescension of our culture towards women who raise children at the time of their lives when their children become adults; to enable these women to become new autobiographical subjects, themselves defining the differences made by the coming-of-age of their offspring; to dislodge the term "postmenopausal" and other forms of sexist middle ageism; and, in general, to enable more women to look forward to their future life course, I propose a category, "post maternal women"* (Gullette, 2002, p. 553),

which also seems to create room for a new relationship with "herself" – post-maternal woman (see: Gajewska et al., 2023a). It brings to mind the permanent end of a certain phase of family life (which, as shown, does not end but changes and reformulates) but also focuses attention on women's lives (after the adult children have moved out). The experience of adult children moving out of the family home creates space for re-shaping the mother's role and her other roles. This is a new stage in life, especially for women who were heavily involved in the role of mother before their children moved out (even if it was not a role that fulfilled them). As part of my analysis, I emphasise gender in the empty nest and show that a woman (as well as a man) has a distinct life course in the family because of the roles performed.

Motherhood in the Polish context: changing meanings of motherhood

Scholars propose different patterns of motherhood, which are based on the combination of clear separation of femininity and the fulfilment of the mother's role. Among them affirming mothers and ambivalent mothers (Budrowska, 2000), the I-ideal and I-real mother (Olcoń-Kubicka, 2009a), a mother who understands her role in modern and traditional ways (Wojciechowska, 2002a; 2002b), a mother who is good and bad (Waldman, 2014), a mother who follows adaptive and emancipatory strategies of functioning. The models indicated above represent two oppositional approaches with the fulfilment of the mother's role – in a traditional or a modern approach (Maciąg--Budkowska & Rzepa, 2017). Although they relate to the beginnings of motherhood, they can be successfully incorporated into an analysis of the experiences of mothers of adult children whose role as mothers undergoes recomposition, entering the phase of an empty nest (Herzberg-Kurasz et al., 2023b). Wojciechowska, in her work on the well-being of mothers of adult children, attempted to distinguish different patterns of separating from adult children, referring to women's personalities, social conditions (placement of the parental role), and demographic factors such as age, the mother's education, age, and gender of the children. Wojciechowska has also considered the time factor as an important element in differentiating the forms of separation.

The time factor is understood as the period that has elapsed since the adult children moved out of the family home (2008, p. 12).

In Poland, motherhood forms the essence of ideals of femininity and national identity. The discourses and practices of motherhood are strongly influenced by symbolic figures important in the country's society and culture (the Polish Mother, Poland as Mother, and the Madonna) (Korolczuk, 2010; Titkow, 1995; Imbierowicz, 2012). The figure of the Polish mother is rooted in Polish traditionalism, the values of the Catholic Church and conservatism (Imbierowicz, 2012). Motherhood represents a period in life leading to changes in women's identity. The whole process can begin as early as becoming pregnant or even at the stage of planning a pregnancy (Budrowska, 2000; Kasten, 2013; Afflerback et al., 2014; Badinter, 2013). The uniqueness of this transition comes from the fact that although the identity and experiences of every mother are very complex – if you "do" motherhood, you automatically become a member of the culture of motherhood (Nelson, 2006). Nelson's research supports the argument that motherhood is a social construction and ritualised interactions among mothers recreate the existing culture. It is also underlined that motherhood requires preparation and it creates a shared identity among mothers. Lesińska-Sawicka (2008) defines motherhood as "the process of becoming and being a mother". The model of intensive motherhood described by Hays (in the context of the American upper class) set the model for the proper upbringing of offspring in Western societies, putting the child at the centre of attention, and remaining highly absorbing for mothers (Hays, 1996). Both concepts described seem to contain elements of the current model of motherhood in Poland, where expectations of mothers are constantly raised. Children, in turn, are treated as an indicator of "mothers' parenting efficiency" (Bieńko, 2015, p. 95). At the same time, alongside the stereotype of the Polish Mother, we have the model of the perfect woman, living under the pressure of being accomplished, and submitting to endless social expectations (Titkow, 1995; Boguszewski, 2013). The role of the mother is reduced to an aspect of duty (Lewicka, 2021), both by mothers themselves and those around them. Like the "managerial matriarchy" described by Titkow or "macho mothering" (after Lewicka, 2021) in the context of Polish culture (Titkow, 1995).

The quality of motherhood implies what kind of person the child will become (among other things, while becoming an adult) (Maciarz, 2004). Motherhood as a means of female fulfilment, the ideal maternal love construct, and responsibility for the child's complex development are strongly connected with the crises within the mother's role (Włodarczyk, 2017). A woman stepping into the role of a mother becomes a member of the culture of motherhood. Within it, women are united by the experience of motherhood, which they can share: "The kind of commonsensical idea of motherhood as a natural and inevitable aspect of womanhood is a type of social mandate" (Sheriff & Weatherall, 2009, p. 90).

Ideas about motherhood and the symbolic role of the mother are still deeply ingrained within Polish culture, where the imperative of self-sacrifice functions. In traditional discourse, being a mother is still perceived as a woman's primary role (Budrowska, 2000). The role of the mother and her caregiving domain has its extension in the role of the grandmother as well as the caregiver of sick, ageing parents (sandwich

generation) (Slany, 2019; Pustułka & Ślusarczyk, 2016; Gajewska et al., 2023a). The public debates taking place in the first decades of the 21st century regarding abortion, infertility and in-vitro procedures reveal the patriarchal construction of motherhood in Poland. At the same time, it shows the potential for social shift and changing women's empowerment (O'Reilly, 2010).

Women's abandonment of the above-mentioned, traditional model, the blurring of markers for entering adulthood including delaying the decision of marriage and giving birth may enable the emergence of other maternal patterns, and the realisation of culturally assigned norms for women in a different, individualised manner (beyond caregiving roles) (Arnett, 2000; Galland, 2003; Kudlińska-Chróścicka, 2019; Winogrodzka & Sarnowska, 2019). The Polish mother figure seems to be mentioned in scientific discussions and public debates on too many occasions to explain the complicated, ambiguous role and position of a mother(s) in modern Poland (Hryciuk, 2012; Kotlarska-Michalska, 2021). The straightforwardness of women's choices related to the role of a mother (taking it up and the ways to carry it out) is no longer as obvious as it was a few decades ago (Włodarczyk, 2017). As Sikorska points out, writing about the new mother, who has many motherhood patterns to choose from, modern motherhood is not equated with a woman's mission and her destiny. Motherhood is more "the result of factual choices" (Sikorska, 2009, p. 176).

Historically, women have been socialised to be dependent and subservient, usually to fathers, husbands, and male representatives. However, in a modern model which occurred, women were allowed to be autonomous and self-reliant, making their own choices in combining motherhood with employment (Kotlarska-Michalska, 2021; Ennis, 1997). The essential question is whether there is a problem in balancing motherhood with employment or ambiguity and guilt with contrasting models that mothers are struggling to successfully incorporate (Maher, 2004). Professional roles have only sustained the existing pattern of how Polish women function, which assumes heroism and sacrifice. Eastern Europe's characteristic apparent managerial matriarchy (shaped by the interaction of tradition and history) gave women a sense of being irreplaceable managers of family life, performing tasks that could successfully be a burden for more than one person (Titkow, 1995). At the same time, it led to a situation in which this apparent gratification in the form of power at home was paid for by extreme exhaustion, overwork, and chronic lack of sleep (Titkow, 1995). Titkow emphasises: "thanks to the interaction of history, culture, and economic changes, women have formed their identity, framed around the model of the Polish Mother" (1995, p. 35). The model of the Polish Mother, while shaping the minds of society, at the same time strengthened the view of the most important task of a woman, which is to be a wife and a mother. This shaped not only the social status of women but also, most significantly, their image of themselves (Packalén-Parkman, 2017). Articulating the more difficult sides of motherhood does not come across in the media, but it is an integral part of the maternal experience (Włodarczyk, 2017). Hryciuk points out that one element of exceptional resilience is imperative for mothers to be self-reliant and self-sufficient, and the belief that a willingness to make sacrifices and provide for children is integral to the construct of good motherhood (2017, p. 284). For several years now, in response to idealised messages (including images) about motherhood,

the voice of mothers has been heard in Poland pointing out the gaps in the dominant, idyllic discourse on motherhood (Hryciuk & Korolczuk, 2012).

Data and method

The article is based on empirical material collected within the scientific project Sonata Bis 8 funded by The Polish National Science Center: *Till death do us part… Everyday life practices of 50–64 year old couples with at least 20 years of common life experience*, UMO-2018/30/E/HS6/00159. It is a 36-month longitudinal qualitative study of individuals and couples whose adult children have left the family home (both in-depth-dyadic-interviews with couples and in-depth-individual interviews with women and men). The study was conducted between 2019 and 2021. The project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Gdańsk. Standard ethical requirements (Mizielińska et al., 2018) used in sociology were introduced into the research process. Participants either signed a consent form or gave verbal consent to participate in the study. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymised.

Qualitative research is an effective tool for capturing the multifaceted dynamics associated with children leaving the family nest (Bouchard, 2014). In this study there were 73 Polish women (aged 44–68, who reside in both large cities and smaller towns (non-agglomeration areas)) whose children had left home: 58 were in relationships with at least 20 years of common life experience with fathers of their children; and 15 were in a new relationship or lived on their own (divorced, widowed). In the study group some of the mothers had already experienced the transition to an empty nest while others were either at the beginning or in the middle of it. The group of mothers (of adult children) included in the study has little visibility in research on the family. At the same time, the situation of women in the empty nest may have a considerable impact on family studies and potential social policies. The women who were included in the study pursued their motherhood outside of policies that support the idea of shared parenthood. They represented the upper and lower middle class and had tertiary or secondary education (in comparable proportion). Some of them were not professionally active when their children were young (ca. 30%).

The general aim of the whole project was to present a picture of the daily lives and practices of couples (pre-retirement) whose children had left (or were just leaving) the family home and to answer questions about changes within their relationships and practices caused by the shift towards an empty nest. In the context of the pandemic COVID-19, the research team faced the need to conduct individual in-depth interviews online (to find out more about reflecting on a new quality in the researcher-participant relationship, see: Żadkowska et al., 2022a). Despite the challenge we were left with, we managed to complete fully qualitative in-depth individual interviews with Zoom.us software using microphones and cameras. Online interviews consisted of "virtual walks" in the households, which was possible thanks to an additional tool used by the research team – emotional maps (Żadkowska et al., 2022a).

The analysis of the gathered material was a multi-step process. At first, I extracted and analysed parts related to maternity experiences where children were small. Then,

I distinguished several categories in the maternal context related to their work activity, the burden of maternal duties, household chores, relationships with children, and time spent together. It was also important to grasp the attitudes of mothers towards the listed categories and to follow their personal reflections (from the perspective of time that had passed). At the same time, I read the remaining parts of the interviews to maintain the context and to find other mentions closely related to motherhood in the empty nest.

Results

Motherhood is experienced very differently by mothers and is influenced by a whole range of factors. Experiencing motherhood is a very individual and often intimate experience. While analysing the collected material, it was determined that the experiences of mothers in the empty nest, similarly, have many common points of contact but are also very diverse. A woman in an empty nest "happens" to be a mother in selected situations – when she realises the role of a mother remotely when the children come to visit and at other moments arranged by herself or her adult children. Daily practices without children make the mother's role go into a latent state. The situation stands in contrast to the time of the full nest when being herself occurred incidentally (or was in a latent state). As an example of herstories of mothers of adult children, I created categories that helped me organise mothers' narratives on motherhood in the empty nest. The issues related to this phase of family life revolved in two thematic areas: (1) the different valuation of motherhood through the prism of the subjective experience of mothers, and (2) the lack of post-maternity recognition through the prism of the environment and social norms (which mothers internalise).

Post-maternity: different valuations of the same social role?

Analysis of the empirical material indicates the existence of different valuations of the same social roles. Elżbieta, who is 68 years old, has two sons (aged 41 and 34), who moved out 10 and 12 years ago. Elżbieta is a teacher by profession, and she has worked at home a lot. She had a heavy workload, which is why her husband took over many of the household chores. She is currently still working, despite having retired:

Elżbieta: *About changing the apartment to a smaller one, after our sons moved out: […] and here my husband showed great skills of persuasion – it was he who led us to the fact that this apartment we have is wonderful… And it makes us incredibly happy. **And the happiest thing that has happened is that our children live close by […]*** (7-IDI-ZOOM).

What can be observed here in the case of Elżbieta is a sense of joy in raising children, independent, and self-reliant on the one hand and, on the other, a lack of readiness (despite the long time that has passed since their departures) for them to move too far away. She represents an attitude where the greatest happiness for

the mother of adult children is the fact they live in a nearby neighbourhood after their departure.

Felicja, the mother of three children, very accurately defines the emerging kind of ambivalence that she became aware of at a certain stage of her empty nest experiences. The youngest child, a daughter, lives outside of Europe. Remembering this experience, Felicja recalls:

> Felicja: *[…] that I felt something so amazing, that this is such a paradox of this [maternal] love; that when you love someone very, very much and well, you want this person to be happy. And here, out of that love, you are supposed to say "Go". And it's so against what the heart feels* (DDI_P_29_F_M).

On the other side of the wide range of experiences, we have a situation where for Agata (52 years old), the empty nest is the end of maternal "service":

> Agata: *[…] This is one thought – another – a stage in which **a sense of service will end**. Really – that's how I often perceived it. Now it's kind of less, but it's kind of like **such a service, worked-off motherhood**. My most popular saying is that **motherhood is highly overrated**. And I think you shouldn't, as I said earlier, make such an artificial family for children [she refers to the crisis in the couple and the artificial maintenance of marriage for children]. This is 100% what I thought – and while being married I thought quite the opposite, that it should be done for the children* (IDI-34-ZOOM).

Agata is divorced and after separation from her husband, she stayed at home with her two sons. The older son moved out right after high school graduation (when he was about 18), he was away a lot (an athlete); the younger son is in the process of moving out for college, but he was "stopped" by the COVID-19 pandemic. She considers herself a hard-working person, after her divorce she took additional jobs to provide "the same level" for her children. In the example above, Agata also points to a change in her approach, which was very different during her early stages of motherhood, when the children were younger. Moreover, she concludes with the socially and culturally overrated nature of motherhood. Perhaps the burden of parental responsibilities as a single mother influenced her experience. She made it very clear that she had to take every job and she felt the pressure that her children had to have the same standard of living maintained (as before the divorce). Likewise, Teresa sees having a child as a sacrifice which disappears with the emergence of adulthood:

> Teresa: *Now, I can't imagine going back to the stage of the sandbox, walking with a stroller… I mean, this independence, this freedom that I have now. I can really, I have so much free time. And actually, very few responsibilities related to raising a child who is already an adult and who is already starting a life on her own. **I know how much time and dedication it requires. I, at all times, perceive it as a sacrifice. Because I have never derived any great joy from such contact with young children**. It's only as this child gets older I think, it's more fun and this miracle happens* (IDI-26-ZOOM).

Teresa (46 years old), did not give up her job while raising her daughter, however, she was strongly supported by her parents (especially after her divorce when extra care help was very much needed).

Even if in the spatial dimension mothers feel and notice an emptiness, in their personal experience the emptiness is a promise for a proper, eagerly awaited, change. It was not possible during the presence of children in the family home. Bogna (50 years old) started working when her children were 11 and 13 years old. She has two daughters (Nela, 25 years old, and Kasia, 23 years old), who moved out when they started college, about four years ago:

> Bogna: *[…] And when the girls moved out, it was the first time I felt such peace and could breathe, that this is a time only for me. I just didn't have that suddenly… yes, I wrote that there was emptiness because the rooms were empty and there was peace and quiet. But these were not for me… we laugh that now I'm a bad mother and it shouldn't be like that, **but for me, it is a time of such peace and quiet and now my time has come** […]* (8–IDI-ZOOM).

Similarly for Barbara (mother of two daughters), the empty nest means **an expansion of her privacy, her "asylum"**:

> Barbara: *[…] And this private space – now mine – has expanded all over this floor, as the children left home two years ago, my private space has expanded, and grown, in a positive way. Also, this desk I'm sitting at, I got it from my daughter – she left it, I set myself up at it, organised it myself, I even have my mess on this desk, I have found myself. Also, for me, **the empty nest means an expansion of my privacy, my asylum – that's the way to put it*** (IDI-29-ZOOM).

For some mothers, the empty nest is a time when overwhelming concentration on children gets uncomfortable, and its absence is associated with pleasant tranquillity, like in the case of Wioletta, the mother of Przemek and Bogna (her children moved out quickly because they lived in dormitories while they were at high school):

> Wioletta: *You know what, it may sound selfish, but there is peace of mind. Well, in the sense that we are calm about them and we live peacefully here. We don't worry, thank God precisely, that they will be healthy, that they will do well. And that's how it is! And we have the so-called peace of mind! If we want to, we go out, if we want to, we cook, if we want to, we go out for dinner. Such things! […]* (DDI_P_33_F_M).

Post-motherhood is also a kind of inauguration of new relationships with adult children. As Tamara (57 years old) explains how she perceives it now:

> Tamara: *So sort of referring to the slogan "empty nest", then yes, the empty nest stage changes the relationship undoubtedly. What I said was that it changes the relationship, it should change and that was my assumption, to a more friendship-based relation-ship. It gives me a lot more free time for me, but at the same time, it also gives me*

the opportunity to establish these partnership relationships. And partnerships, also with that kind of special sensitivity to each other, right? That's it. Well, we sense each other's moods, but we also know a lot about each other – in the sense of facts, right? […] well, I enjoy my children's fresh perspective on my relationships with my friends, that they can tell me what it looks like from their side. I would say that in a way we are also like psychotherapists for each other really (IDI-31-ZOOM).

Although the presented examples have points of convergence, at the same time, each herstory is truly unique and there are very diverse experiences behind them. While some, when thinking about motherhood, remember it as a time of sacrifices and a lot of burdens, a time they did not quite enjoy, others remember the joy of being able to be at home with their children. Consequently, the latter will feel an emptiness when the children are gone too far away. They give different meanings to the same period of their lives, while, at the same time, processing the separation of their now-adult children in other ways as well. Interestingly, when talking about the joy they derive from life after the departure of their children, they sometimes describe themselves as "selfish". Nevertheless, they appreciate the time they have gained for themselves and recognise the benefits of this stage of family life. Both for themselves and their new relationship with their now-adult children.

Lack of social recognition?

The lack of a post-motherhood culture might be confirmed in the lack of social recognition for mothers for whom the role of the mother is going through a period of reconfiguration (Herzberg-Kurasz et al., 2023b). Mothers seem to experience a similar situation at the beginning of the maternal journey when the first child is born and the woman becomes a mother for the first time. The analogy between releasing the first child into adulthood and the birth of the first child seems appropriate while pointing to the transformative nature of both experiences. Both stages – becoming a mother and becoming a post-mother – bring a tremendous change in the life of any woman and it also takes time to process it individually. For Basia, the first departure was perceived as a very difficult experience, even if later on it worked out totally differently with the other children:

Basia: *I have to say that after some time it passed – that first time was terrible and it was hard, there was no one to talk to. I even tried to talk to my friends and various acquaintances about it, but people just shrugged their shoulders,* **I could find understanding with hardly anyone. Everyone said that it was normal and it would work out somehow, etc., and I was experiencing it hard and lacked someone who understood.** *Even my female colleagues who had experienced it also took a swipe at it. I even have colleagues at work who said they envy me because I have peace of mind now […] and I actually thought to myself that my situation had good aspects, and* **it took me about two years to come to accept it.** *During the first year, it was a harsh struggle, I suffered because of it, but in the second year it started to calm down, and in the third year my*

husband and I came to the conclusion that actually it was already okay because we had raised the children, we now had time for ourselves […] (DDI_P_4_K_M).

The least helpful were the comments of those closest to her, which highlighted her atypical approach to experiencing the empty nest. Basia emphasises the frustrating lack of someone she could talk to which would help to move through this stage of family life as a mother more smoothly.

Despite the maturity of the mother's role (midlife stage of life), social influences and a typical Polish evaluation (most of the time being judgmental) remain strong. The value of the collective patterns regarding the role of the mother (importance of what others think about their maternity, how they judge them as mothers of adult children, what they say about them as mothers) seems very strong:

Basia: *I told Bartek when he was going back to Wroclaw **that everyone probably had a tray of cake from their mom, and he didn't**. But when Bartek leaves, I always try to prepare something for him. I make him such fruit mixes, some pomegranate… whenever he leaves, he has some picked fruit, mandarin oranges peeled, pomegranate peeled, so that he knows that his mom is thinking of him* (DDI_P_4_K_M).

A strong sociocultural influence of the Polish mother concept operates from two sides. In the study, mothers presented it as a downside but, at the same time, it was seen as something to be proud of. Following the general assumption: if one replicates it, it means she is a good mother. If one performs a different motherhood, one's own way, she might not be considered a good mother anymore. As a result, one might feel like they do not fit into the pattern of social expectations.

Maria, recounting the difficult relationship with her younger daughter, refers to the ideal of the Polish mother, which she recognises she is not. Participating in the study brings to her a reflection on the nature of her marriage, which prevented her from following this social model of the ideal mother, as she treated her relationship with her daughters differently than it would have been expected from a "good" mother.

Maria: *In our family, the arrangement was that **Dobromił** [husband] **and I are very important to each other, probably the most important, and they, as our daughters, are a consequence of our relationship** – our relationship and love. And it seems to me that this arrangement has always been there, that is, **they have never felt equal**… **this may also be my Polish Mother complex** – I don't notice that Dobry [husband] and I have gained emotional space through the fact that we have reared children and now have more of each other – there is no such thing. It seems to me that we have been similarly close to each other all the time, but perhaps that's because we didn't let the kids get too close to us. This is also the bedroom, which for them was always closed symbolically. There hasn't been a time in our family's life when they have been able to barrack with us in such a way that they are simply the centre of our world. They always had this message that Dobromił and I are the centre for each other* (9-IDI-ZOOM).

Mothers of adult children no longer have to reconcile professional activity with the ambitions and preferences of a woman who wants to fit into the ideal mother model (Kotlarska-Michalska, 2020) yet Ewelina speaks directly about the fact that her joy and relief about the empty nest is rather culturally unpopular and she would be cautious about openly communicating her experience, even in the presence of her friends and acquaintances:

> Ewelina: *I will also say something like this – this will be unpopular… it's hard for me to admit it, but I'll tell you this, I'm waiting for my second daughter to move out as well, I mean, not forever, but in this sense, because I have a need for such an independent life. [First], both with my husband, and [second], professionally for myself, because a new perspective is opening up for me there, too […] some kind of longing, a dream to do something more for myself has been there in me all the time, and I'm already gradually realising it somehow, but I'm aware that if my younger daughter was also already somehow living on her own and that I wouldn't be worried about her, and she's a completely different personality, so I don't know, I would be relieved. Really. **I don't know if I could say that to any friend. I don't know if I would admit to myself that I'm waiting for that empty nest moment […]** (IDI-19-ZOOM).

It seems that both talking about the challenges of motherhood (in terms of feeling a loss of one's own time, life, and self) and showing relief and joy of having adult children move out of the family home – are a social taboo.

Interestingly, despite their reluctance to replicate the same maternal patterns they were exposed to during their childhood, it turns out that they themselves were trapped in those patterns. They use similar socialisation models which are a continuation of previous generations, as with Hanna, who is divorced. Her daughter has recently come back, and her son moved out a long time ago:

> Hanna: *You know what, for sure, it was worthwhile doing many things differently, but it seemed to me at the time that this was the right thing to do. It also comes from what kind of home you came from. My mother, e.g., did not work professionally at any time of her life, never, and literally, everything was done by my mother. **This is also probably related to the fact that I was brought up with such a pattern, that a mother, a woman does everything**. But I also worked professionally, and it was too much for me sometimes, but I was used to a woman doing everything – that was the pattern I had. Now I think it would be worthwhile doing things differently, to get other relatives more involved in responsibilities, e.g., […] I have such a pattern from home, which has affected me a lot, because I come from such a family, where my dad worked and earned good money and took care of the material side, while my dad also did nothing at home, at all – he didn't even make his own tea, everything was done by my mother, everything was done around him. To me it seems that I had imbibed that a woman has to do everything, today, I see it from a completely different perspective, but then, 30 years ago [when the children were little], that's how I saw it* (IDI-16-ZOOM).

Guilt burden caused by "sacrificing" time with her daughters for work. This was the case for Honorata, mother of Inga and Kaja, 41 years of marriage, working in a school for 40 years and now retired. She has a granddaughter:

Honorata: *I felt so guilty, thinking about this conversation… I thought about it so much, because I, first of all, was working a lot – with my nose in those notebooks. When I came back home, after all, there was so little time when I was at home, after I came back from school […] a lot of this work I brought on myself, because that's what a Polish teacher has, unfortunately.* **And I always had such a guilty conscience about not having time for my girls** (IDI-12-ZOOM).

There were also those who chose to stay home with their children until they were school-age, like, e.g., Ewelina (52 years old), who decided when it was time to take care of herself:

Ewelina: *For the first 12 years I did not work and was with the girls. I was at home all the time and took care of the girls, their education and their activities. And it wasn't until after those 19 years that I decided that this was my time – what I could give them was the best, I've already given them, and now I'm on the sidelines all the time, as it happens, as they grow those wings, as they land a little on the ground there I help them. But I don't interfere, I watch from the side, I monitor how life is going for them, if necessary, I react […]* (IDI-19-ZOOM).

Interestingly, having a job has been identified as an important factor, helping to adequately deal with the empty nest, as evidence that there is a need for proper care support (institutional) to provide conditions for professional development, which would not be occupied by greater inequalities (because there remain domestic responsibilities, children, and then sick, elderly parents):

Magdalena: *No, somehow – if you work it's also different because I'm terribly busy. I work at the university, I work at [name of private university], I do courses, additional classes – simply something there all day. And sometimes I don't have time to think that my child is gone and I miss him.* **I think it will be much more difficult for me when I retire** (DDI_P_3_K_M).

Discussion

The analysis of the collected material showed a wide variety of experiences regarding the stage of motherhood when adult children leave the family home. It showed that just like entering everyday motherhood, leaving active motherhood is a subjective experience that needs support and sharing of experiences. Some mothers remained in a parent-child relationship with their adult children (without any signs of a collaborative, equal relationship, without increasing the autonomy of the child).

This may be due to the blurring of markers indicating young adults' entry into adulthood where moving out is not always a definitive event and young adults sometimes return to their family homes. It may also result from a different form of transition through the empty nest stage and a need for longer adaptation. Mothers participating in the study clearly emphasised their need and willingness to share their experiences, as well as their personal reflections. They viewed talking to the researchers as a kind of closure of some unfinished processes. This might indicate the need for systemic support. Additionally, there was also a strong need to compare and discuss their post-maternity experiences. It indicates a lack of post-maternity culture within which group support and the exchange of individual experiences could take place, functioning in the same way as with the beginning of the maternal journey.

The analysis of herstories showed that social expectations of how to fulfil the maternal role still accompanies mothers of adult children. Indeed, it turns out that showing joy when adult children leave the family home can raise ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, there is pride and relief, on the other there is either sadness or guilt that they should not feel joy at such a moment of the life course.

Professional work was an important element of women's stories in the context of full nests. Female respondents very often referred to the entanglement with family responsibilities, and the need to perform domestic duties in parallel with work activity. They also mentioned the mental burden of responsibilities as an additional aspect. It was not only about performing them but also about planning, allocating, and checking them (including remembering). It is thus something indisputable that combining work with motherhood affects the shape of both. Most mothers from the study were economically active and benefitted a great deal from their parents' help when their children were small. Some mothers also had the experience of remaining on maternity and parental leaves. In these cases, the mothers either started working or returned to work only at the stage when the children went to kindergarten or elementary school. The help that some mothers get with their young children in order not to stop their professional development later needs to be reciprocated in the form of care for ageing, ailing parents and providing home assistance for them (sandwich generation).

One of the limitations of the analysis in making comparisons is the very large time span that had elapsed since the departure of the children. Some of the herstories presented very fresh experiences, while some related to the past because the departure had taken place 10 years earlier. Consequently, there was a necessity to reach back not only to the time when the nest was full but also to the moment when the adult children had left the family home.

Closing remarks

Motherhood as a social practice is entangled in stereotypes, conflicting expectations, and evaluations. The ever persistent assumption in Polish society that successful motherhood is the essence of women's identity leaves no room for diversity. Departure of an adult child from the family nest does not necessarily lead to a release from the mother's role. What is more, it can affect its intensification, by changing its nature

to a remote role that can become much more challenging and burdensome to manage (Herzberg-Kurasz et al., 2023b). Handling it can be even more ambiguous. The situation of women in the empty nest and the analysis of various accounts of post-maternity can help create possible social policies. The women in the study are not a group that often appears in sociological research. Such a study brings us closer to gaining more knowledge on an unexplored topic. The divergent experiences of mothers are the result of social differentiation and their life choices, *the role of the mother […] is a role that, much more often than other family roles, is subjected to social assessment and evaluation by publicists, as well as researchers involved in moral evaluations of social phenomena* (Kotlarska-Michalska, 2020, p. 238)

Despite a greater freedom in how mothers of adult children arrange their personal life scenarios, they are not uninfluenced by social judgment, so they always try to perform at their best. Although the role of the mother continues to be the subject of political discourse, a new perspective on the role of the mother should not be overlooked As there is now a clearer tolerance for women's individual choices (Kotlarska-Michalska, 2020). Subject to sociocultural changes, patterns of motherhood are also affected by the way mothers of adult children perceive their own role. Perhaps the younger generation of mothers passes on their knowledge to their elders.

In the context of women's participation in the labour force, there is also a discussion about women's unpaid work. It is seen as a cultural norm, valid within the social script of the role (Racław, 2020). In implicit familialism which is the case in Poland, there is a lack of any instruments of support, thus the family needs to provide care because of the lack of alternatives (Furmańska-Maruszak & Suwada, 2021). Poland does not have a well-functioning, developed long-term care system for the elderly and benefits for both caregivers and the elderly are often considered inadequate. Homecare assistance is not well developed either (Furmańska-Maruszak & Suwada, 2021). As stated in the introduction, the post-parental phase might be of interest not only to social policy planners in European Union countries but also to the entire health system including family therapists. As the empty nest is a phase that most families with children go through, it is an issue of awareness in terms of family functioning and coping mechanisms. The issues presented create a space to look for adequate solutions from the field of care or, more broadly, social policies and perhaps individual support as well. Measures to reduce and redistribute unpaid care work are also advisable.

As the decisions young adults make to have families (and children) has shifted, not all of the respondent mothers are making a smooth transition into the role of grandmothers. Besides, their increased work activity in the "Third Age" does not allow them to give their grandchildren too much attention.

With the departure of children, time is released for mothers to pursue their individual and professional needs. While the mother's role shifts from everyday mode to a latent or out-of-everyday mode – the caregiver role (which is part of the mother's role) does not seem to have an end. Mothers of adult children remain trapped in the panini sandwich generation, which forces them to care for their parents, in-laws, and sometimes, even their partners themselves. It is not easy to predict the duration and intensity of the necessary assistance. A natural consequence of the physiological ageing

process affects the continuation of entanglement in responsibilities. There are not just remote maternal duties (towards adult children), but also extra duties as daughters of ageing parents.

Not only is it challenging to define the period of the empty nest because it is subjective and dependent on external factors, but at the same time, there are also many doubts about the term for motherhood in relation to adult children. This only demonstrates the fact that while entering the role of mother can be defined as a specific moment, leaving behind the role of mother at the empty nest stage is no longer clear-cut or obvious. It feels more appropriate to write about the role of the mother which is present occasionally, but no longer on a daily basis.

Funding

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Intergenerational transmission of parenting as a value

Abstract

While intergenerational similarities and differences are of key importance for tracking social change, relatively little is known about the transmission of values regarding parenting in Poland. Therefore, this paper explores the process of intergenerational transfer, focusing specifically on the transmission of parenting as a value. From a methodological perspective, the article is based on a combined dataset from two projects completed with a multi-perspective approach. The ensuing qualitative thematic analysis offers intergenerational comparisons of dyadic interviews with pairs consisting of 51 young adults and one parent of each (n=102). As a result, three patterns – straightforward transmission, lagging transfer, and broken intergenerational value-normative connectivity in regard to parenting as a value – are discussed. Ultimately, the paper contributes a better understanding of the public and private aspects within long-term socialisation effects, explored here as residing at the intersection of changing values and intergenerational contexts of family life in Poland.

Keywords: parenting, transmission, values, socialisation, generations

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Introduction

The process of intergenerational transmission refers to the extent to which similarities in attitudes, beliefs and behavioural patterns observed between members of the same family persist across generations (Bertaux & Thompson, 1993; Kajta & Pustułka, 2023; Maccoby, 2007; Min et al., 2012; Schönpflug, 2001; Walęcka-Matyja, 2022). In essence, scholars are interested in how the norms and values of parents and children (and their children) compare over time, mainly, because questions about whether fundamentals remain intergenerationally congruent or begin to diverge are significant for sociological understandings of social change, and useful for effective formulation of family policy (see: Belsky, 1984; Chen & Kaplan, 2001).

This paper deals with parenting as a particular component of the intergenerational transmission process, acknowledging that both parenting as a value, and its transmission, reflect the dynamic relationship between parents operating as individual actors in a private sphere, and these very parents being rendered producers of "citizens" from a more public, state-driven perspective of socialisation and policy (Cano & Hofmeister, 2023; Sikorska, 2016). Recognising the inherent tensions between societal (public) and individually preferred (private) values (Rohan & Zanna, 1996; Perales et al., 2021), parenting is here framed as a particular value, with attention paid to whether parents and their adult children share beliefs about the general importance of family, as well as observing congruence/divergence in their views on the specificity of experienced and aspired to parent-role (Schönpflug, 2001).

The research gap addressed by the analysis pertains to the Polish context of family transmission of values (see: Jasińska-Kania, 2012; Slany, 2002; Kajta & Pustułka, 2023). It posits that personal views and choices observed among young adult individuals typically need to be seen as a reconciliation between the influences of intergenerational family transmission in the private sphere and broader discourses about values – including parenting – present in the public sphere (Sikorska, 2016). Moreover, the paper accounts for the temporal dimension of socialisation processes, recognising that transmission of parenting can only be studied when children become adults and are either old enough to reflexively ponder reproduction, or even become parents themselves (see: Manlove, 1997). Resultantly, intergenerational models of parenting are temporally inscribed in the investigations of the family lifecycle (Pustułka, 2020) and life course (Elder & Caspi, 1988). To account for the passage of time, the concept of transmission lag (Cunningham, 2001; Min et al., 2012; Monk, 2011) is leveraged in this study.

The aim of this paper is to highlight the intergenerational dimension – including the transmission's potential lag effects – within parenting as a value situated at the junction of private and public influences. To fulfil the paper's objective, a combined dataset from two qualitative, intergenerationally multi-perspective studies has been created. Then, a two-stage, focused thematic data analysis was applied to interview data collected from 51 intergenerational dyads consisting of young adults and their parents. Sixteen interviewee pairs were interviewed across two waves of the

GEMTRA study (S1)[2] and 35 dyads participated in the QLS component of the UL-TRAGEN project (S2)[3].

In the following sections, the theoretical framework, which is primarily rooted in the studies on intergenerational transmission and parenting, is presented first. This is followed by a section on the study and methods. The findings are divided into three sections to illustrate (1) evident intergenerational transmission of parenting, (2) ambivalence across the axio-normative transmission, and (3) the apparent absence of intergenerational transfer of this value in the studied families. Concluding remarks complete and summarise the contribution.

Key concepts and studies of intergenerational transmission of parenting

The theoretical model adopted for the analysis is embedded in the study of family and parenting as values in Poland, as well as the body of work on socialisation and intergenerational transmission. Linking the two, the final subsection sheds light on researching transmission of parenting as a value, and the framing of transmission lag dictated by the multi-perspective approach.

Family and parenting as values in Poland

Values ensconce ideals, beliefs and principles that determine what is held correct, desirable, significant or morally proper by a given collectively, for instance, a society or a social group (Jasińska-Kania, 2012; Rohan & Zanna, 1996; Szafraniec et al., 2017). In capitalist societies, the dynamic of values is framed by the societal transition from values that Inglehart (2010) refers to as traditionalist and materialist, to those deemed rational-laicised and postmaterialist. Poland serves as an interesting research setting, as hybrids of value orientations characterise its citizens (cf. Szafraniec et al., 2017; Jasińska-Kania, 2012; Pustułka & Sarnowska, 2021). In that sense, traditional "family values" carry the heritage of being rooted in patriarchal, pastoral, and hierarchical infallibilism of family as an institution legitimised by church and state (cf. Slany, 2002; Sikorska, 2016). However, these coexist with a more open-ended framing of families and intimacies through a more equal relational setup in the parent-child bonds (Sikorska, 2019), which echoes postmaterialist desirability of affinity, closeness, and high-quality bonds (see: Perales et al., 2021).

It is important to clarify that studies centred on values refer generally to "family" rather than specifically conceptualising "parenting", as the latter is seen more as an aspiration linked to procreative plans (CBOS, 2019b). In this realm, data consistently show that "family" tops the ranks of what Poles consider to be the most important

(CBOS, 2017). Moreover, when Polish people are asked about the meaning of life, different generations converge in their selection of "family" as the most important value (Kajta & Pustułka, 2023; Frąckowiak, 2007). Longitudinal data shows that vast majority of respondents chose it, both in 1997 and in 2017 (CBOS, 2017).

In a representative study of values important for everyday life, "family happiness" was the answer indicated by 80% of the respondents (CBOS, 2019a). Only about one in 10 Poles (11%) posited that one can be equally happy without a family, while the average valuation of a family has slightly increased between 2008 and 2019. Given the aspirational dispositions, having a family and being a parent can be considered as values that mothers and fathers may wish to instil in their children as important and desirable (cf. Farnicka, 2016).

Connected to familism, meaning the cultural value of positive feelings towards one's family (Campos et al., 2014; Walęcka-Matyja, 2022), parenting shares with familism its prioritisation of collectivist kinship roles over one's own individualistic value orientations. Particularly in the female, matrilinear line, familism strongly overlaps with family-centric value-orientations. For instance, Repetti et al. (2011) found that mothers commonly wished their daughters to be family-oriented, while fathers were rather forging individualism and self-development for sons. Mothers are also the main conductors of values related to gender orders (Perales et al., 2021), as also shown by Farnicka in the Polish context (2016). In this study, women – across three generations – were more inclined to foster family values, as well as more rigid when it came to their offspring having children of their own. This observation requires a nuanced understanding of cross-generational transfers.

Socialisation and intergenerational transmission

Socialisation, seen as parental responsibility over individuals' preparedness for living in the surrounding society (Guhin et al., 2021; Maccoby, 2007) conceptually lies at the crossroads between personal and public. While it is shaped by values and orientations that are important – from the perspective of the state – for an individual to become a good citizen (Guhin et al., 2021), it also strongly hinges upon values that the parents – as individuals – hold dear and manifest in their private life (Cano & Hofmeister, 2023; Min et al., 2012).

These "private" and "public" realms are intertwined, with significant interdependencies between socially desirable values promoted by institutions and those passed down from generation to generation (Roest et al., 2010; Vedder et al., 2009). Denoting the scope of continued similarity within attitudes, beliefs, and behavioural patterns observed between members of the same family across generations (Bertaux & Thompson, 1993; Min et al., 2012; Walęcka-Matyja, 2022), intergenerational transmission in families reflects – to different degrees – the axiomatic value-system (Rohan & Zanna, 1996) and *Zeitgeist* (Vedder et al., 2009) of the society in which the families operate. Moreover, value transfers rarely happen through explicit measures, instead occurring through parents' everyday actions, during shared meals, when telling ancestral stories, as well as through disciplining and rewards (Bertaux & Thompson, 1993;

Schönpflug, 2001). It is quite clear that these private acts might not register as value transmission, thus explaining the blurry boundaries between the mutually influential public and private value realms.

Yi and colleagues (2004, p. 526) argue that there is a widespread belief that transmission between parents and their children takes place, but researchers still fail to analyse this process in a detailed manner. Simply put, research consistently shows strong value-coherence between parents and their children (see: Copen & Silverstein, 2008; Min et al., 2012; Vollebergh et al., 2001; Maccoby, 2007; Kajta & Pustułka, 2023). However, other variables and public values may determine the extent of intergenerational similarity and difference. For instance, close relationships in the family increase solidarity and improve the process of intergenerational transmission (Bengtson et al., 2002), while conflicts and structural reshuffling (e.g., social mobility) might be associated with divergent attitudes and values of parents and children (Lawler, 2002).

The Polish context is vital here, as values commonly accepted by a given society (in the times the individuals live in) are the easiest to transfer (Schönpflug, 2001). On the contrary, transferring values that are considered "new" may encounter greater inter-actor resistance (Roest et al., 2010). According to this premise, it would be more challenging to intergenerationally foster reproductive ambivalence than to communicate the validity of a traditional transitional path towards marriage and having children (cf. Perales et al., 2021; Schönpflug, 2001; Walęcka-Matyja, 2022).

Transmission of parenting and lag effects

As with the broader transfer of values, studies generally confirm intergenerational continuity within parenting, which effectively means that present-day parents repeat parenting practices they were "parented with" as children (Min et al., 2012; van Ijzendoorn, 1992). Three main characteristics of the body of literature on the issue of intergenerational transmission of parenting should be featured. First, data mostly stems from quantitative approaches, with the operationalisation of "parenting styles" rather than values. Second, research on problematic contexts (e.g., cycles of abusive parenting; cf. Cox et al., 1985) is more prolific than studies on "typical" families. Third, insights into intergenerational transmission of parenting originate primarily from the Western contexts (Chen & Kaplan, 2001).

To provide some examples, when new parents are observed and probed for explaining their behaviours, they recall (good and bad) parenting strategies that have seemingly been transmitted (van Ijzendoorn, 1992). On the positive side, female participants of longitudinal and retrospective studies who reported having supportive and constructive parents were more likely to present positive adaptations in their own mothering later (Cox et al., 1985). In a more problem-oriented approach, classic work by Belsky (1984) provided insights into the dysfunctional transfer of child abuse, with a person's memories or experiences of neglect and violence identified as a strong and consistent predictor of the same patterns of behaviours towards one's offspring, trumping variables like SES (see also: Capaldi et al., 2003; Elder & Caspi, 1988).

In the public realm, evidence indicates that policy programmes and constructive relationships outside of the family (i.e., between children and non-parent socialisation agents like teachers or counsellors), may act as mediating mechanisms for the cessation of problems across generations (Capaldi et al., 2003; Egeland et al., 1988). Still, variable implications of constructive and destructive parenting translate into intergenerational outcomes in other areas, e.g., educational achievement/failures and aspirations, health prospects, social capital, and sociability (Chen & Kaplan, 2001). Therefore, the process of intergenerational transmission of parenting is political in the context of family welfare cultures, or in regard to breaking the cycle of abusive parenting, both of which represent politically significant agendas of family policy (Belsky, 1984; Dahl et al., 2014).

From an intergenerational standpoint, it should be noted that 84% of the surveyed Poles would like their family of procreation to be similar to their family of origin. Moreover a family with children (nuclear or multigenerational) is a desired form of family life for as many as 87% of the respondents (CBOS, 2019b). As such, Polish parents retain their importance as axio-normative anchors and socialisation agents for individuals, also during adulthood (Pustułka & Sarnowska, 2021), yet some practices, traits or tasks may still be considered (un)desirable, even if they differ in execution from what has been known or learnt from previous family generations (Farnicka, 2016).

In essence, subsequent years of parenting mean that socialised and transferred values can change (Guhin et al., 2021; Maccoby, 2007). This is addressed by the concept of "transmission lag", which acknowledges that not all results of intergenerational transmission can be immediately tracked and determined, instead reflecting the delayed nature of socialisational transfers (Cunningham, 2001). In other words, for some values, there is a temporal pause between children's socialisation and the significance of certain fundamental beliefs or ideas. The effects of being parented in a given way may remain dormant (Min et al., 2012, p. 116), for instance, during adolescence.

The consequences of the passage of time are vivid when research focuses on the durability of intergenerational transmission at the "empty-nest" stage of families of origin after the children have grown up (cf. Schönpflug, 2001). Particularly for parenting and reproduction, only when the children reach adulthood, it is possible to track what has been transmitted in a "delayed" manner, i.e., the possible value-related messages obscured and suffering from a transmission lag (cf. Cunningham, 2001; Min et al., 2012). This concept explains the reawakening of values present in parental socialisation, which can be triggered by achieving transitional milestones. Specifically, transmission lags broadly occur when intergenerational transmission becomes traceable because new events in later life trigger values and norms instilled by parents during childhood (Cunningham, 2001).

These may include getting married and having a child, but also more practical realms like choosing educational paths or actions at work (cf. Pustułka & Sarnowska, 2021). Becoming a parent is particularly known to "activate" reflections and evaluations of one's mother or father, even if these topics have remained latent for longer periods of time prior to a new role. Transmission lag may also come to the fore when, later in life, adult children lose a loved one and recall how their parents have handled such events, also from a value-orientation stance (cf. Cunningham, 2001; Min et al.,

2012). In all these contexts, the acquisition of new roles or experiences revitalises the validity of questioning whether and how young adults' values continue to align – or diverge – from those of their parents (see: Copen & Silverstein, 2008; Min et al., 2012).

Identifying the gaps in research on transmission lag, Min et al. (2012, p. 116) argue that "almost all studies of intergenerational transmission of values have examined this issue in cross-sectional data, where it is not possible to examine whether transmitted values persist or even emerge in children as they grow up and assume adult role status". By taking a qualitative look at the intergenerational transmission among young adults and their parents, this study attempts to contribute to research on transfers of parenting as a value by providing multi-perspective accounts from Polish families.

Study and methods

The data has been drawn from two research projects on intergenerational family relations (see: Pustułka, 2023; Kajta & Pustułka, 2023), both conducted with the use of longitudinal and multi-perspective designs (Vogl et al., 2019). Crucial for the included analyses is the multi-perspectivity feature of the data collection, which means that more than one person from a given unit – in this case, a family – has been interviewed for each study. Both projects include interviews with young people who undergo transitions, with the GEMTRA study (S1, 2018–2022) focusing on women who become mothers for the first time, and the ULTRAGEN study (S2, 2020–present) exploring transitions-to-adulthood.

Sixteen mother-daughter pairs (32 interviewees) were subsampled from the first study, titled GEMTRA: *Transitions-to-motherhood across three generations of Polish women.* As the study focused on transitions-to-motherhood, all interviewees from the younger generation had children during the second wave of interviews in 2021. For S2, called ULTRAGEN: *Becoming an adult in times of ultra-uncertainty: intergenerational theory of "shaky" transitions*, 35 young adults and one parent of each were interviewed, resulting in a dataset of 70 IDIs. Although the subsamples were drawn from the larger studies, the analysis was conducted on a combined dataset of 51 intergenerational family dyads. Thus, it renders the delineation of the socio-demographic characteristics of the interviewees in two family generations important.

Given the project's thematic foci, the young adult interviewees for S1 are all cis--gender women. The average age for this subsample stands at 30.5 (age range 26–40). S2 participants are comparatively younger, with an average of 24.2 (range 18–36) and this sample boasts gender variability (16 men, 18 women, and one non-binary person). Similarly, in the generation of parents, S1 again includes only women, and they are 49 to 69 (average of 56.9) and S2 offers the perspectives from both women (21 mothers) and men (14 fathers). In the latter, the interviewees were between 41 to 69, with an age average expectedly lower than in S1 (50.7 years). While SES and residential conditions of the interviewees were not found important analytically, it should be noted that younger generation respondents from S1 and S2 were generally better educated and resided in larger cities. About one-third of all parents did not have a university education. Finally, it is important that 20 of 51 young adults already had children,

while the remaining 31 (all from S2) talked about parenting as an aspiration, recognising or rejecting its value prospectively. This was seen as an asset, as comparative analyses of transitional settings could be conducted across and within generations.

For the analysis, the selection of transcripts from the projects was topically justified and rooted in the category of family generation (Bengtson et al., 2002), thus allowing for a purposeful and comparative angle for looking at intergenerational transmission. A thematic analysis was carried out. In the first-cycle coding (Saldaña, 2013), data from both projects was thematised on the meanings of parenting, with excerpts pertinent primarily to the direct questions on the value-transmission from parents to their (now-adult) children, which were posed in both projects. While some data was scattered across different probes, the most crucial questions spanned: "What values did you wish to pass on to your children?" / "What values did your parents try to pass on to you?", and "Has this process succeeded?", alongside a more general: "What is important in life?" probe. In the second-cycle coding, axial methods were used to focus on intergenerational multi-perspectivity (Vogl et al., 2019), with special attention paid to the presence of convergence and divergence in parenting, value-orientations, and framings. An explicit focus was then set on the processes of intergenerational transfer and indicators of the lag. Differently situated pairs (i.e., young adults who were parents vs. those who were not) were used to validate the final outcomes.

Findings

The findings are organised on the continuum of the traceable evidence of intergenerational transfer of parenting as a value in dyads, starting with examples of congruence of values between young adults and their parents. The second type addresses ambivalence and illustrates the transmission lag, while the third type showcases intergenerational dyads in which parenting has evidently not been transmitted as an intergenerationally shared value.

Parenting as an intergenerationally transferred family value

The first type found in the data focuses on family dyads where having children is not only consistently present in the narratives of adult children and their parents, but it is also similarly narrated, usually as a non-negotiable value. The analysis of the collected material generally revealed that parenting – as a component of a broader idea of "family" – is one of the key values that parents wished to instil in their now-adult children.

As such, this qualitative finding is in line with outcomes of the quantitative studies on parenting/family values and the persisting significance of intergenerational transfer (cf. Min et al., 2012; van Ijzendoorn, 1992; Maccoby, 2007; Roest et al., 2010; Rohan & Zanna, 1996; Repetti et al., 2011). In many intergenerational dyads studied, the transfer can be observed and clearly succeeded in aligning the attitudes to parenting and family across generations. The conviction about the importance of family is mirrored closely, as can be seen in the excerpts from interviews conducted for S2.

S2, Jacek, 51, father
Family is clearly a key value. For me, it is important. It is the most important. [It is crucial] to be in touch, to have good relationships.

S2, Eryk, 23, son
I'd say that family is the most important thing for me. I've always been pro-family and I would have done anything for my family. This is the most important thing, to have this relationship based on love and trust. This is about how I see my girlfriend, but it applies to my whole family.

S2, Witold, 46, father
[For a good life,] it is important to have this internal conviction that, as a man, one has an order in family [life], that there are no major troubles there.

S2, Magda, 20, daughter
Good life [hinges] on being with one's loved one […] and with one's family.

In the cases of evident value transfer, the "lag" effect (Cunningham, 2021; Min et al., 2012) within transmission is explicitly not traceable, as the parents and adult children display consistent attitudes and values. The transmission of parenting faces little resistance within the broader Polish society, hence what parents transfer about family values is consistent with societal worldviews and preferences (cf. Slany, 2002; CBOS, 2019a).

Illuminating the irrevocability of "family" and "having children", these two constructs were often equated in this data pattern. Individual interviewees highlighted strong convictions that one does not get married unless one wants to become a parent, while statements about couples who have no children not being *real families* emerged in this context. Excerpts from interviews with 54-year-old Elsa, a mother of five and a grandmother, are below set next to the narrative of her 29-year-old daughter, Martyna, who is pregnant with her second child. Neither mother nor daughter imagines life without motherhood, and they talk extensively about parenting ideals and reproductive aspirations.

S1, Elsa, 54, mother
We always wanted to have many children. *You know, even twins,* ***I don't have to explain myself to anyone, (since I had five).*** *[…] I remember how one Christmas Martyna was crying. I asked "Baby, why are you crying?", and she said:* ***"Mom, when you meet your siblings, there are so many of you and there's only three of us".*** *After some time, I was pregnant with twins […].*

S1, Martyna, 29, daughter
As far as I remember, I always wanted to have children […]. Such ***a family with only a mom, a dad and a child is a bit incomplete.*** *Because I had two older brothers, I was the third one long before the twins were born,* ***I always wanted to have three children,*** *[…], I never thought that only one (would be enough). We always had a big family and everyone told me that* ***an only child would just be so unhappy*** *that my son would be unhappy because he is an only child. It stuck with me that* ***people with no siblings are unhappy*** *[…].* ***Three would be ideal.***

Particularly interesting in this mother-daughter pair are the reflections of the wider values. Elsa, who is a devout Catholic (e.g., *we are a Christian family, we are believers*), had to reconcile her faith with some choices that her offspring made in their personal lives, especially, when they cohabitated with their romantic partners without being married, or had children out of wedlock. While Elsa seems to intentionally skirt around these topics, she also blames this on the *pitfalls of the secular modern world* rather than socialisation at home, insisting that she was always *clear about the right values*. Still, she is absolutely insistent on the central meaning of children across her family generations, and even forgives value-transgressions, as long as her children have offspring. Martyna explains that her brother *should get married but since a child happened to be on the way, everyone had to focus on the child being safe and sound, as that's the only thing that matters.* With this example, an interplay between intergenerational transfer in families, and the broader society can be noted (cf. Monk, 2011). Multi-perspective accounts specifically demonstrate quite successful intergenerational transfer of parenting as a value and precondition to life that is happy and worth living in the interviewees' view.

Subtle transmission and transmission lag

Looking at the second type of intergenerational accounts, in this case, the transmission of parenting was much more subtle, making it harder to distinguish which values or views around parenting and procreation are related to family transfer, and which have been adopted from other socialisation agendas (cf. Schönpflug, 2001). One data example contrasts accounts of Gertuda and her daughter Maria, who frame the desire to have children in a completely different manner, despite the fact that both are mothers.

S1, Gertruda, 55, mother	S1, Maria, 32, daughter
I never imagined anything else than being a mother. Children give all meaning to life, what else does that? Now, it's just the two of us, […] alone at home, […] but for us, it wouldn't make sense to be together if it was just the two of us at the beginning. You live for someone, you do everything in life for somebody, this is the meaning of life. One starts a family to have children.	*I wanted children, but it was never this primary need. I saw myself as a career girl first, getting my career going, with children in the background, but not something at the top of my list […]. Then I met my husband and […] it was very clear from the beginning that we don't want to be engaged for years, [and] that we would not wait long to have children […]. We knew we wanted children together*

For the older generation of interviewees becoming a parent was often framed as "natural" and something that simply "happened" to a person, with little degree of agency (cf. Pustułka, 2023). Especially among women, being a mother was a *de facto* defining role for the parents' generation, while the younger women and men appeared more ambivalent. This can be attributed to multiple roles competing for peo-

ple's attention in an individualist society (Vollebergh et al., 2001; Yi et al., 2004; Copen & Silverstein, 2006). Quoted above, Maria serves as an example of numerous stories where young men and women underlined their desire to *make something of themselves* career-wise, to succeed economically and in terms of biographic aspirations and professional goals (cf. Inglehart, 2020; Szafraniec et al., 2009). However, it is also clear that both narratives in the end hinged upon meeting a partner to have children with, as both Gertruda and Maria speak of their husbands in relation to the crystallisation of parenting as their own value-aspiration (cf. Roest et al., 2010).

The transmission of values is mediated by individualist values and demographic change, yet appears in the stories of transitions-to-parenting around the age of 30, with consideration towards reproduction and parenting acting as a key transmission belt (cf. Schönpflug, 2001; Roest et al., 2010). The delay and permissibility towards reproductive ambivalence in one's 30s results in a transmission lag in relation to parenting as a value, personal aspiration and actual role. This is echoed in the narratives of Maryla (57) and her son Tymoteusz (24). The fact that Tymoteusz wishes to postpone becoming a father does not mean that he is rejecting the values of his mother. Quite the contrary, the excerpts show that the transfer of parenting as a value is strongly present during the transitions-to-adulthood, even if the broader societal trends indicate later entry into parenting and more reproductive ambivalence.

S2, Maryla, 57, mother	S2, Tymoteusz, 24, son
My husband and I have been together for 38 years […]. He tells me he loves me all the time […]. He's not afraid to announce to everyone who'd listen that he loves me and I'm the most important person in his life. I need a tissue because now I am crying […]. For me, to have a good life is to raise good children. To raise your children well. […] I have six children. Four have their own families and I have seven grandchildren. It's a party when they all come round.	*I would certainly like to have a wife in the future […]. I would like to spend my life with someone I will love and respect, and who will love and respect me. As for children, I'd rather not have them before turning 30, this I'm quite sure of. I'd like to settle down first and be able to provide so that we could then decide to have children together. […] Kids usually like me […] but I'm not ready for them yet […]. I'd be willing to get married though.*

Distinguishing between younger respondents with and without children, the data clearly shows that intergenerational transfer of parenting might not have been activated yet for the latter. In contrast, actual transitions-to-parenthood shift the previously lagging focus on family values and parenting. This could be traced longitudinally in S1 with the intergenerational accounts of Laura and Aida. When interviewed during her first pregnancy, Aida had a lot of ambivalence about having children. Unlike her mother and sister, whom she saw as very dedicated to being a parent and subjugating their other aspirations to motherhood, Aida wished to first organise her life to the point when having a child *made sense*. While Laura became a mother via an unplanned pregnancy at 22, Aida's first and very much planned baby was going to be born after she turned 35.

S1, Laura, 62, mother
When I got pregnant for the first time, it was not ideal, my doctor's first question was whether I was going to get rid of it [because I was in medical school]. But my partner actually behaved well, […] we sped up the wedding because of the pregnancy […]. I think having children is something absolutely natural, generally.

S1, Aida, 34, daughter
I did not always want kids. Actually, I don't like kids to be honest. […] Unlike my sister, for whom this was somehow the pinnacle of her life aspirations, having kids was not my dream at all. But at some point, I realised that I kind of wanted to have a small unit of my own. […] I looked at my nephews and I realised that, given my age, probably, I maybe should have kids, that now it is really time to have them […]. We felt, with my partner, that maybe something was missing, that we have a doggy, but maybe we should also have a baby.

At Wave 2, both women spoke about family and motherhood in similar, practical terms. After Laura's husband's infidelity, they see having children as a way to guarantee kinship support that cannot necessarily be counted on in regard to men/partners. When their stories about transferring values onto children are juxtaposed, a clear shift towards stronger intergenerational transfer can be observed:

S1, Laura, 62, mother
For me, it was very important for my daughters to be […] a bit egoistic so that they don't lose themselves in their relationships like I did. My two daughters are the most important people in my life. They are my pillars of strength. […] Family is really, really important. I am very glad they have each other.

S1, Aida, 34, daughter
Given that I have a son, I want to teach him that family is important and respecting women is very important. […] We are now trying for another baby […]. It's this safety net for us and for him: even if we're gone, he has this other person.

More so than transition-to-adulthood as a longer process, transition-to-parenting as a defined key moment (Pustułka, 2023), evidently "activates" the transfer of broader values around being a parent as a role fulfilled in life at a certain time (cf. Cunningham, 2021; Min et al., 2012). Shedding light on intergenerational transmission lag, longitudinal research enabled tracking of "missing" or "dormant" values in non-parent young adults, versus those "emerging" and "pronounced" value-transfers in the parenting domain of young respondents with children.

Challenges to intergenerational transfer of parenting

Finally, the third type found in the data shows that sometimes no clear transmission could be attested to. In many cases, a lot of discrepancies in how two members

of the family generations thought about family, having children, parenting, and reproduction, have boiled down to general social change that reshuffles the values of the younger generation. More specifically, the older generation (i.e., the young adults' parents) tended to subscribe to collectivism and familism (cf. Campos et al., 2014; Walęcka-Matyja, 2022; Farnicka, 2016). As such, they were similar to older interviewees' generation from the first type, underlining that being a parent was their most important life role. Contrarily, younger interviewees in this type differed strongly from their parents:

S2, Izabela, 50

*I was a student and it turned out we'd have a baby. This was not planned […] but I still believe that this was **one of the best surprises in my life**. […] My son claims he is certain about **not wanting to procreate**, about his wish not to have children […]. It has such an effect on me that I can't see him as an adult. […] His decision means he can stay immature longer […]. **It's a lesser adulthood than one you acquire through having children** […]. **I'd like to be a grandmother** […] so **I'm clearly not happy about it.***

S2, Marek, 25

*My rejection of wanting children has been unwavering and I think this won't change until I die. Firstly, because I don't like children. Children annoy me, **I see no benefits in having a child for myself. Having a child is difficult**, it requires sharing your resources – temporal, financial. It all seems superfluous to me. Secondly, **creating more human beings is morally questionable**. We should not allow beings to suffer […], so having them is risky […] when our planet will no longer be unsuitable for any type of life […]. Even without this, I'm against having children.*

In the third type, there is a strong resistance to transfer attempts from the mother to her son. Moreover, not recognising parenting as a value might be a site of intergenerational conflict, given that Izabela refuses to recognise her otherwise independent son as an adult due to his rejection of parenting as a valuable life role (cf. Bengtson et al., 2002).

In S1, where all interviewees had children, parenting was "a given", so the lack of transfer in many dyads was more about the different framing of family and parenting as values between mothers and daughters:

S1, Daniela, 62

*Someone told me I have very strong family attachments, emotions and bonds in the family […]. **I have had this traditional family model in my mind**, even when I was a teenager […]. **Family is everything. It has always been my dream** […]. University is something added but my biggest dream was to have a family, to have children. Family, my daughters, they are my entire life […]. My children appreciate*

S1, Magda, 30

*Family is a broad term for me because **I also consider my friends my family**. Sometimes I can count on them more than on my family members […]. I always thought that I'd like to have children. But I also always thought that **I'm not what is called "mother material"** […]. I was busy with other things, education, work, travelling […]. My focus was elsewhere […]. I still have doubts about how I'm going*

family, but they also see it differently […]. We do have quite a few fights about my daughter's parenting […]. Things I don't stand for, it comes down to values… They are not the same […]. I didn't think she was coping with [being a mother].

*to make it […] but we are quite old already, more mature. **I'm counting on my mum's help, she was the one who wanted a grandchild […]. I don't see [parenting] as my cup of tea…***

In the analysed data excerpts, the value shift in terms of parenting is consistent with the change from collectivist to individualist orientations, as well as postmaterialist values expressed by younger generations (cf. Inglehart, 2020). When comparing mothers and daughters in terms of values considered important within their respective parenting (cf. Cox et al., 1986; Farnicka, 2016), it becomes clear that the older generation focuses much more on the fundamental role of "family values", alongside respect and hierarchy. Contrarily, contemporary young parents tend to centre their ideas on individual happiness and their own and their offspring's metaphysical fulfilment (cf. Sikorska, 2019):

S1, Olena, 66

Family is everything to me, *my entire life […]. It is everything that I consider most important in my life. I can say that **I live for my children, for my family,** my immediate family […]. My children have all the best values, they run in the blood. These are **respect, telling the truth and love for one's family,** which is the foundation for everything. When these values are taken on board, and the person has good family relationships […], then that person can also succeed everywhere else, at work, with others […]. If this is not the case, and the family life is not in order, […] then such a person will fail in other spheres.*

S1, Adela, 37

*I feel close to women in my family, more so than to men. There's an affinity there […]. **Family to me is a microcosm, based on safety and love** […] but **family can also be destructive** […]. I would like my children to have self-respect. I want them to **trust the world, so these values around cooperation, or maybe community,** […] **are the most important** […] I want them to have this inner peace […]. I want them to know that even if they get lost somehow, they will be able to [find a way] good for them. I want them to lead life in accordance with what is most important to them, personally.*

In sum, the changing values make the transfer of parenting much harder, preventing also occurrence of transmission lag, since younger generations do not at any point recognise that the socialisation efforts of their parents were valid as far as their attitudes to parenting are concerned. Thus, it can be argued that data presented for the final pattern may signal a broader precipice of value-normative change in Polish intergenerational family bonds.

Conclusions

The paper contributes new knowledge pertaining to intergenerational transmission of parenting as a value, doing so in the context of competing visions of family life in Poland (cf. Sikorska, 2019; Slany, 2002; Walęcka-Matyja, 2022). It illustrates the value-alignment of young adults with globally recognised shifts towards individualism and post-materialism (Inglehart, 2020), yet more clearly confirms that intergenerational transmission in family perseveres as a significant source of value-normative order-production, at least when it comes to parenting (cf. Belsky, 1984; Farnicka, 2016). Thus, policy agendas should recognise both the potential and the inherent challenge that comes with parents shaping young people's desires to embrace or reject the ideas about parenting, as these flow from one generation to the next within families.

Given that the findings are set on the continuum, they seem to showcase the hybridisation of value orientations in Poland (Jasińska-Kania, 2012; Szafraniec et al., 2009). In the domain of family and parenting, the context of transmission may be used to track tensions and reconciliations of, on the one hand, the "traditional" thinking about parenting as a process that is "natural" and occurring without much agency on personal timelines and, on the other hand, the growing agency that young people execute to break away from the cycle of parenting they have known from their elders (cf. Egeland, 1988).

When set side-by-side, the values transpiring from the narratives of the parents' generation are often quite different from those of their young adult children. For the parents' generation, parenting and family are embedded in hierarchical relationships and implicitness of family roles (especially being a mother; cf. Manlove, 1997). Parenting becomes a key source of identity-valuation, and a backbone of the axio--normative value system (cf. Campos et al., 2014; Bertaux & Thomson, 1993). The narratives of young adults, contrarily, showcase much more variability, with stories ranging from full embracement of parenting as a value, through in-between attitudes, to full denial of parenting's significance.

First, the paper shows that parenting can have a bounding and bonding effect for family dyads, wherein young adults and their parents demonstrate consistent centralisation of parenting as a crucial value (cf. Chen & Caplan, 2001; CBOS, 2019a; 2019b). In such families, social coherence is high and, arguably, it can be expected that the intergenerational transmission will continue towards the subsequent generation under familism (cf. Campos et al., 2014). Second, the paper makes a contribution by qualitatively tracking the "transmission lag" in the context of parenting (Min et al., 2012; Monk, 2011; Cunningham, 2020). Reproduction yields itself well to such analyses, as transitions (to parenthood and to adulthood) trigger biographic reflections about values, including parenting and procreation. The data indicates that parenting may indeed be a dormant value, which becomes awakened and shifts from intergenerational ambivalence to intergenerational alignment when young adults ponder about being parents and reflect on what their parents believed in terms of the central role of family in one's life (cf. Schönpflug, 2001; Vollebergh et al., 2009). Finally, the data expectedly confirms the effects of value changes in Poland (see: Slany, 2002; Jasińska-Kania, 2012; Kajta & Pustułka, 2023) and the temporal dynamics of relationships in the life

course (Elder & Caspi, 1988). The global diffusion of individualism and post-materialism cannot be disregarded in this context (Inglehart, 2020; Vedder et al., 2001).

Using a generational approach to compare and contrast family dyads, the data offers important insights into three matrices of intergenerational transmission. More broadly, parenting should be seen and studied as one of the values transmitted in the "lagged" manner, namely, that the entry into adult roles can trigger latent predispositions towards parenting or its contestation (cf. Min et al., 2012; Cunningham, 2020). To an extent, these can be interpreted – through a qualitative lens – as a result of intergenerational socialisation and earlier family transfers.

Going forward, the study suggests that more research into the interplay of intergenerational transmission and social change is required to further clarify the directionality of changes and the propensity for each intergenerational setting of (non)transfer of parenting and reproduction aspirations. As a pillar of socialisation, the boundaries of intergenerational transmission examined over time can also serve as a pivot to researching intergenerational tensions, conflicts, and solidarity (cf. Repetti et al., 2009; Capaldi et al., 2003; Bentson et al., 2002; Roest et al., 2010). As this study shows, transmission belts between parents and young adults in Poland appear to be affected by the political sphere introducing intergenerational polarisation on key matters around natalism into the private family space.

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