




Colloquium 4(48)/2022  
ISSN 2081-3813, e-ISSN 2658-0365  
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DOI: <http://doi.org/10.34813/35coll2022>

## FAMILY IN THE BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES OF OLDER GAY MEN IN POLAND

### Rodzina w narracjach biograficznych starszych gejów w Polsce

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#### Abstract

The purpose of the article is to present examples of family contexts in biographical narratives of Polish gay men aged 50 plus. The themes extracted from the interviews (N = 23) are related to the family of origin, 'families of choice', partnerships and pets as family members. Respondents' statements illustrate the legitimacy of the transition from treating non-heterosexuals as 'non-family people' to the emergence and constitution of a 'family language' in the analysis of LGBT environments. The narratives presented have generational specificity - they are characteristic of the social situation of gays experiencing their youth in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s in Polish People's Republic.

**Keywords:** family, homosexuality, older gays, biography.

#### Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie przykładów kontekstów rodzinnych w narracjach biograficznych polskich gejów w wieku 50+. Tematy wyodrębnione z wywiadów (N = 23) dotyczą rodziny pochodzenia, „rodzin z wyboru”, związków partnerskich i zwierząt domowych jako członków rodziny. Wypowiedzi respondentów ilustrują zasadność przejścia od traktowania osób nieheteroseksualnych jako „osób nierodzinnych” do powstania i ukonstytuowania się „języka rodziny” w analizie środowisk LGBT. Przedstawione narracje mają specyfikę pokoleniową – są charakterystyczne dla sytuacji społecznej gejów przeżywających młodość w latach 60., 70. i 80. w PRL.

**Słowa kluczowe:** rodzina, homoseksualność, starsi geje, biografia

## **Introduction**

For years homosexual people had been seen by social scientists as non-family individuals — functioning away from the families and considering family relations to be of little importance (Weston, 1991). They had been treated as unable to form family relations or even as a threat to a family (Friend, 1990). This separation of issues of family and homosexuality was based on two assumptions: a) that gays and lesbians cannot or do not have children; and b) that every member of the LGBT community must be in some way rejected and thus alienated from their family of origin (Mezey, 2015). Since the 1980s there had occurred a gradual inclusion of ‘family language’ to analyses of LGBT communities. It resulted from a number of factors: socio-cultural changes which encouraged social ‘coming out of hiding’ of homosexual people, more and more thorough research which challenged stereotypes and also a change in dominating sociological perspectives which lead to a transformation of previous definitions of family (Mezey, 2015; Boddy, 2019). These changes arose from an observation that:

(...) the term "The family" not only oversimplified a large range of practices, statuses and experiences but it also carried some strong normative baggage that disadvantaged certain groups in society; not only gays and lesbians but also lone parents, couples without children and people living on their own for variety of reasons (Morgan, 2011, 4).

Noticing the simplifying and normative definitions of family was an element of a shift from presenting a family as a static institution whose main purpose is bringing up children to the concept of 'family practices', which considers family as the activities of family members (Morgan, 2011). Families understood as 'the practices' are constituted by the doing of family (Dermott & Fowler, 2020).

Emergence of ‘family language’ in reference to homosexual people resulted in a variety of terms for family structures created by them. The most general notion is ‘family of choice’ (Weston, 1991). This type of family can consist of some accepting members of family of origin, friends, ex-partners and their new loved ones, hetero- and non-heterosexual individuals. Blood and legal ties matter less in defining family than who ‘does’ family (Heaphy, 2009). Regardless of the structure’s details, what is important is the functions realised by it which are traditionally linked to biological family. There is a class of families of choice in the form of a ‘friends as family’ model. Peter Nardi (1992) noticed that homosexual people often rely on their friends in the same way that heterosexual people tend to rely on members of their traditional families. Friends provide identity and various forms of social support. Inclusive conception of family also leads to incorporating pets into the scope of its definition. Phenomena of anthropomorphisation of pets and their functioning as children have become a subject of contemporary sociological reflections (Cain, 1995). In the area of research of elderly members of the LGBT community, there are some results suggesting a positive impact of having pets on life quality. Pets are treated here as an element of social support which is very significant for older generation of non-heterosexual people (Muraco et al., 2018).

The family studies have undergone an evident evolution in recent years — from perceiving family as a monolith to recognising plurality of family forms. At first it was about differences related to shape of family structures, based on race, class, and gender consecutively. The next step was recognising the importance of sexual orientation and identity to the creation of diverse forms of family life (Allen & Demo, 1995). It became apparent then that a gradually changing family landscape consists of families which include homosexual people functioning as partners, parents, siblings, sons, daughters, further relatives, etc. (Crosbie-Burnett et al., 1996). Research on their family life most often concerns areas such as: coming out to parents (La Sala, 2000; Green, 2000; Savin-Williams, 2001; Nordqvist & Smart, 2014), partnerships (Kurdek, 1993; Murphy, 1994; O'Brien et al., 1997), and parenthood — families comprising of same-sex couples raising children together (Patterson, 2000; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Tasker & Bigner, 2007; Hebrand, 2018). Most of these studies are focused on younger people as they are the ones usually concerned by coming out to family or motherhood and fatherhood. They are also more easily available and more eager to participate in research. It is also true of Polish research: in a project led by Joanna Mizielińska which covered families of choice created by homosexual persons almost 90% of respondents were people aged from 18 to 40 (Mizielińska et al., 2014). Nevertheless it's noteworthy that the forerunners of forming family life which accommodated homosexual identity were gays and lesbians belonging to so called invisible populations, who grew up in times of universal lack of acceptance and stigmatisation of homosexuality. 'The cohort of gay men over 50 represents a unique opportunity for the study of the meanings of family and of innovations in family life.' (Muraco et al., 2008, 73).

This paper presents issues of various aspects of family functioning of elderly people — Polish gays over 50 years old who did not experience such social and customary liberalisation as the western Stonewall generation. Polish gays who are over 50 today grew up and experienced their youth in times of Polish People's Republic (1952–1989). Back then homosexuality was a taboo and it appeared in public discourse only in context of aberrance and pathology (Author's own, 2011). Situation of homosexuals had its symbol in Operation Hyacinth (1985–1987) — a secret operation carried out by Polish police near the end of the communist regime. It resulted in creating a national registry of homosexuals and their acquaintances which consisted of about 11 000 records. A generation-specific trait of gays living in times of communism was total or partial hiding of their orientation. Up to now many of them live in hiding which causes difficulties in finding volunteers for acting as respondents in research.

## **Methodology**

This research is one part of the broader project that studies life experiences of older gays in Poland. The research method used to obtain hereby presented data was the autobiographical narrative interview. The process of obtaining data drew upon Fritz Schütze's (1983) perspective. The autobiographical narrative interview relies on an assumption that there is an alignment between the structure of organization of experiencing life events and the structure of narration. Schütze rejects two extreme beliefs about biographical narration. First says that biographical narration is a mirror reflecting both social reality and the reality of individual's world, while second says that narration can be an arbitrarily fabricated fiction which mirrors narrator's autoperpresentational needs and performs current social functions. Biographical narration should rather be conceived as a reflection of biographical identity which takes form of a reflexive and negotiating process. The interview had a three-period structure: a period of main narration (commenced by an initial narrative question: asking for a self-structured biographical self-presentation), and periods of internal and external narrative questions (Schütze, 1983; Rosenthal, 2004). What's characteristic of the autobiographical narrative interview is striving for invoking such a story which unrolls without researcher's interference. First phase of the interview, initiated by a request to describe the story of one's life, requires the researcher only to actively listen. The biographical method, as proposed by Schütze, consists of precise and complex guidelines on procedures of collecting biographical data as well as on analyzing such data (i.e. breaking the narration into four process structures: biographical actions schemes, trajectories of suffering, institutional expectations patterns and creative metamorphoses of biographical identity). However researchers often treat this interview method as open to creative modifications and additions. For example, they might adopt from Schütze's proposals only key assumptions of reality as a result of interpretative processes and the very procedure of an interview as a method of collecting empirical material (see e.g. Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2006). It follows the fact that autobiographical narrations are employed in answering different research questions which arise in such distinct areas as gender roles, national identifications, social exclusions, health issues etc. These data constitute a so-called deep unit of analysis, where applying an appropriate analytical framework depends on a particular research problem (Eichsteller, 2019). In case of the present research Schütze's proposition provided main assumptions related to treating social reality as a result of interpretative processes and a method of gathering empirical material, whereas Schütze's methods of data analysis were not made use of. For the needs of this paper, the interviews were subject to first open and then selective coding (Glaser, 1978) which served to extract themes conceptualised as 'family experiences' from the narratives. The respondents consisted of 23 Polish males identifying themselves as gay, aged 51 to 86. All respondents lived in cities (mostly big cities). The interviews were conducted between years 2018 and 2020. Due to anonymisation, real names, age and exact places of residence are not published

(the assurance of anonymity was very important to some participants). Respondents for this research were recruited using snowball sampling, through LGBT organisations and social media. They were recruited among men who identified themselves as gay and were at least 50 years old.

## **Results**

### **Parents**

Parent figures appeared in narratives of each interlocutors, usually at the beginning of one's biography. Men talking about their lives presented their parents first — their occupation, origin, sometimes social class. In narratives concerning parents there was a significant element — the issue of coming out. Two oldest respondents did not treat revealing their identity to parents as a real possibility. For them it was obvious and unquestionable that it was never going to be a topic for a conversation with parents. Tadeusz believed that his parents, who lived in the countryside, did not even know about the very existence of homosexuality as a phenomenon. That's why he never thought about having a conversation about it with them. Another respondent, Wojciech, considered sexuality to be his private issue and also never considered the possibility or need of a conversation with parents. "Mom and my family never meddled with my life, never asked any questions. They were mannerly people. It is my private issue" (Wojciech).

Other men who never mentioned sexuality to their parents were convinced that parents, or at least mothers, had a clue, supposed, 'knew something'. Communication barrier was mutual in these cases — it lead to a 'Don't ask, don't tell'-type strategy. One of the obstacles could have been lack of parents' knowledge about homosexuality and lack of language adequate for conversations on this issue.

I think that my mom has a clue, once or twice she gave some signal, but she also couldn't talk about it... I didn't come out to my mother and I don't plan to do it. She might be able to understand it but I wouldn't like to encumber her with it or to experience some necessity of explaining it to her (...). Quite a while ago she used some euphemistic words like 'the way you are' or something like that (Adam).

A few interviews contained the phrase 'an open secret'. Authors of these utterances did not talk about mere suspicions of parents but were convinced that parents had knowledge about their homosexuality. It was never a topic of their conversation though. Partners played a significant role in these situations — their appearance in families of my interlocutors forced the parents to acknowledge their sons' homosexuality. Their identity and issues of relationships with men were never named anyway though, they stayed outside of the area of family's verbal communication. Partners of interlocutors were introduced to their parents by name, without explanations nor explications of details of their relations. The relevant words were substituted by specific practices which showed the character of the relations and then legitimised the presence of gay male

couples in families. On one hand one could look at these cases as examples of negating heteronormativity and thus normalising homosexuality that needs no special explanations. However, context of respondents' statements suggests that those were rather examples of avoiding confrontation due to ignorance, insecurity, lack of communication competence. Still, in spite of lack of explication, acceptance of a homosexual son displayed in social rituals and practices connected to treating his partner as a family member.

Someone started to understand and it happened wordlessly. First I had a conversation with my sister and she advised not to tell them explicitly, that they will gradually understand it. And it happened indeed. For example, my sister's mother-in-law understood it sooner. During a Christmas Eve supper there was a spare seat and she was like 'Oh, W. could have been sitting here.' Because they had already met here and there (Janusz).

Men whose coming out to parents had a verbalised character, that is being constituted by a conversation about their sexuality, presented various consequences of these situations. One of them was a repeated coming into the closet. Such a scenario is also called a transparent closet (Svab & Kuhar, 2014). It means that after informing family and friends about one's sexuality this issue is never addressed again. In respondents' cases it was parents who did not express willingness to continue the conversation. It can be inferred that their strategy of silence was a result of an internal conflict — on one hand they did not want to lose their son, they did not reject him, and on the other hand they weren't able to accept his sexuality.

We had a talk, exactly from 4 to 5 PM, my mom had a couple questions prepared — how I'm going to make a life further. And I'm like 'I've already living my life, I'm in my thirties, I've made a life somehow a long time ago.' Obviously, as one can suppose, pedophilia and pederasty were identical to her and she asked me how I can work with children. But when the clock started beeping at 5 o'clock it all suddenly ended and mom said 'We're going to watch the news.' Well, we never talked about it again, it's been many years (Daniel).

Another type of parents' reaction was a gradual process of acceptance. For some it took several months, for others over ten years. In these cases the first reaction was not unequivocal rejection but rather surprise, disorientation, fear. Lack of parents' acceptance resulted from various causes — among the influential ones there were e.g. religious issues, fear of sin and of impossibility of salvation. In parents' stances there were reflections of diverse negative stereotypes about gay people — they were afraid that their son was going to be alone, rejected, that he will fall victim to a crime, get into bad company, get a disease etc. There were also cases of parents blaming themselves, seeking causes in their or their spouse's inappropriate behaviour. Some mothers reacted with tears and perceived their son's homosexuality as a personal failure. In cases of single children the issue of lack of grandchildren was also raised. For a share of parents there was a significant problem of their's surrounding's reaction — 'What will people say.' Initially some hoped for a possibility of change of son's orientation ('maybe it will

pass'), thought about finding him a girlfriend or sent him to a doctor. The course of the acceptance process was influenced by a change of social conditions — a systemic transformation in Poland. Significant roles were played by greater availability of information about homosexuality, emergence of language connected to sexual minorities and presence of gay characters in media and pop culture. Due to this parents changed their attitude even in elderly age, which is illustrated by Wiktor's story:

Well, sometimes gays — besides, people didn't use this word back then — were maybe some artists, ballet masters, another world or some really scary phantoms (...). And mom... there were obviously grudge, tears, like what I was doing. And I gave my mom a few books, she started to dig, to try to change, it was a struggle (...). I educated my mom in that respect. Then she saw — that one is gay, that educated one, that one on television, she started to say — 'My child, I didn't know that they are also such nice people (Wiktor).

A common denominator of interlocutors' coming outs was that they did it in relatively old age — around thirty or even later. It resulted from either worries about parents' reaction or from a long process of jelling one's identity. Decisions to come out were made only when the men were already self-sufficient and independent from their parents. One factor which made it easier for parents to accept their son's homosexuality was him having a partner. Even those parents who had problems with verbal acceptance avoided open conversations or even displayed homophobic views tried to form a relation with son's partner and take a part in their life. They tried to adapt to the situation and to put into practice traditional family patterns related to roles of parents and parents-in-law.

At the time of the interviews interlocutors' parents were either in elderly age or already deceased. Elderly parents sometimes required care — respondents spoke about their infirmity, mental illnesses and lack of independence. Because in Poland a family-oriented and feminised model of care prevails, even if a person who needs care has only got a son, it is usually a daughter-in-law who performs primary caregiving duties. In case of single men or those living in same-sex relationships there is no such possibility. Men who were only children and only people responsible for their parents spoke about problems related to caregiving for them.

I look after my parents, I can't go anywhere, I stay here and it kind of depresses me. Parents are in their eighties, I have to wash my father, mom loses memory a bit, it kind of terrifies me when I look at their deterioration. How cruel ageing is, they are helpless like little children (...). Now the most important thing for me is to guide parents to their end (Wiktor).

#### Distant family

Men who I talked to used different informative strategies with their relatives. Sometimes they practised a so called 'family closet', that is parents' decision to keep their son's sexuality a secret from further relatives (Svab & Kuhar, 2014). Others themselves declared no need to inform them. Sometimes family members' behaviour and statements gave respondents grounds for a belief that disclosing their identity would be risky.

One time I talked to my brother, my family, about someone from the village, that there was this guy, he got married and then it turned out, that he only does it with blokes. So my sister was like ‘Oh, how is it possible, how can a lad get on top of a lad?’ And I replied that in the city it is normal that they are together, that they live together. And they were shocked. I had an unpleasant thing and I cut ties with my uncle because he used to attack me for not getting married, like ‘What, are you shooting blanks? Your pork sword didn’t grow?’ And he went on to say it obnoxiously at the table (Tadeusz).

In several cases interlocutors used a selection strategy — they informed only selected family members. Close ties, followed by lack of information barrier, concerned especially younger relatives. For example Wojciech maintains closest relations with his niece and her husband, while Szymon serves as an uncle for his nephew.

And I’m asking my sister if she had a conversation with him about me being gay. ‘Oh come on, what are you talking about.’ So I spent four hours talking to my nephew about it. It did us much good because the boy is 25 now and we are best buddies. If he has any problem... He doesn’t have a father, father is after divorce, they have no contact, so I became kind of a surrogate father in some talks which he needs (Szymon).

Men living in long-term partnerships had closer ties with relatives. Forming a family unit themselves might have facilitated their functioning in broader family structures. Most often they talked about acting as uncles which means they had strongest relationships with younger generation — children and grandchildren of their siblings. Even if they do not have frequent contact, they are never omitted in family ceremonies and rituals.

Even my brother’s second wife... We are an atheist family and this wife is a catholic bigot. She was able to regress her children to some kind of primitive, rural catholicism. But her attitude towards us must have been remarkably positive. Because she entered the family where we already were, these children were raised with us from an early age. I am one uncle and he is another uncle. Now the girl is getting married, for them it is obvious that they have to invite us together. And this is a progress of some sort. Back in the day it would probably be hard (Tomasz).

### Partnerships

Respondents are either people living alone or in partnerships lasting from a couple of years to decades. The latter group while talking about their relations with partners most often used normalising discourse — qualifying them as common, normal relationships. They put stories from their everyday life (shopping, holiday customs, favourite restaurants, chore division etc.) in various contexts in their narratives. On one hand the men placed emphasis on their ordinariness, but on the other hand they noticed the peculiarity of their situation which resulted from lack of institutional recognition of their relationships.

Well, we’ve been together for 18 years already. We live our life like an old married couple (...). We’ve already written our wills in case of deaths because everybody knows what the situation is like, we don’t want the assets that we’ve amassed to get torn apart later... both



sides of the family know about the wills. If civil partnerships were introduced we would have done it already, but for now it is what it is (Andrzej).

In Andrzej's above statement there appeared an issue of a criterion of perceiving one's own partner as a family — here it was the couple's functioning in broader family structures and acknowledgment from family of origin. Similar approach was presented by Zbigniew but in his case adopting such a criterion made it hard for him to perceive his partnership in family categories. He limited the concept of family to family of origin.

What a family this is if he doesn't know members of my family. Quite a measly statement it would be. Right... how am I supposed to see him... it's difficult to see him as a wife or a husband... well, rather as a close person who I share my life with. If the relationship is going to be till the end of time, then the issue of inheritance and care will emerge. But should I see him in the category of family? Well, certainly I have to say no, as I am not outed, as I do not take him to get-togethers, funerals and baptisms, I think that as they don't know him it's difficult to call him my family (Zbigniew).

Interlocutors' partnerships performed various family functions, although not everyone defined them that way. First of all it was an emotional function. Partners provided feeling of intimacy, belongingness, they constituted a significant or even fundamental element of social support. Partnerships also realised recreational and social functions (shared activities, excursions) as well as economic function (joint bank loans). In interlocutors' narratives there appeared stories of taking care of ill partners which exemplified realisation of protective function. Ill with cancer Stanislaw made use of his partner's all-round support and Jacek elaborately described a period of several years when he took care of his partner during the latter's illness. Jacek's strong involvement in his relationship (which, according to him, lasted for '27 years and one day') made him cultivate their relation despite his partner's death.

We still form a partnership. His illness got us even closer. This caring for L. I've never had this feeling that, since he died, he is gone. I'm using this phrase — L. is transparent. We still form a partnership, we are together, I've got his photos here, here I made a bigger one, two t-shirts with L.'s photos, so it's like... (...). He loved coffee. I don't drink coffee. When we meet this friend of ours, Malgosia, as a three, that is L. as a transparent person, then I let him taste coffee (Jacek).

### Families of choice

In participants' narratives the term 'environment' appeared as a term for gay social groups who spent time together and used — informal in communist times — gay infrastructure. Sometimes people from this environment created circles which could be named 'chosen families', realising not only social or emotional functions but also protective and socialisation functions. It is illustrated by Tadeusz's words who started functioning in said environment soon after moving to a big city — starting from purely sexual relationships up to creating diverse support networks around him. Family character of these networks was displayed also in generational aspect of socialisation. The older generation supported young ones — with information, socially, economically or with identity issues. Tadeusz later replicated these patterns with regards to younger gays, reproducing relations of support.

Then they started to invite me, kind of carnival soirees, name days, at homes, it was really nice, really pleasant, some jokes, some laugh, information about what was going on. There was this elderly man, so we were all ears, he told us various stories, how communist police had chased them away, we were absorbing all this information (...). Those gays trained me a bit. The older ones mainly. Because I can cook, I make jars, kompot, fruit preserves (...). Later I used to be a help for others too. I bought magazines for many gays because they were embarrassed to ask for them at the kiosk (Tadeusz).

Another type of 'family of choice' appeared in Zygmunt's narrative. Zygmunt functioned for a few years in a partnership with a man. However, his partner decided that he wanted to start a traditional family, have a wife and children. He got married and plans to become a father, yet, along with his wife, he is still present in Zygmunt's life and supports him emotionally. They have created some sort of a blended family which is sometimes also formed in heterosexual version by ex-partners and their new families.

This big love had already been, gone, finished and there is left a great friendship, a friendship one can really rely on because when I was alone, when my mom died, K. and his wife supported me very much in this very tough moment for me (Zygmunt).

Elements of a blended 'family of choice' appear also in Michal's story. He cut ties with his family of origin but he considers a man who he adopted (from orphanage) and the latter's previous female partner his family (he doesn't keep in close touch with his present partner). Michal described their relations using family terms — indicating that he acts as a father-in-law.

I met M. when I was looking for a carpenter. M. was a teenager, later on his girlfriend dumped him, he came to me heartbroken, he kind of stuck around and became a foster child. Nobody ever pretended that he is my son but he was adopted, later even legally. And then there was his life partner, so I was a father-in-law (Michal).

Creating various forms of 'families of choice' can be seen as adaptive strategies emerging from problems with functioning in biological family structures. They can also constitute a compensatory element in a situation of lack of biological offspring —

homosexual men have children relatively rarely. Non-biological support networks gain in importance in later stages of life especially, when needs of help from surrounding people intensify. Interlocutors talked about their fears connected to lack of self-reliance which could occur someday. Zbigniew mentioned ideas of concentrating members of mutually supportive community in one area.

There used to be plans to purchase one staircase in a block, to support each other, to build something together so we could live by each other, help each other, do shopping. Well, so far it hasn't been turned into anything, we don't know how it will be, the time is not distant (Zbigniew).

#### Ex-wives and children

Since for respondents their coming of age happened in times when homosexuality was stigmatised, their generational experience consisted of initial entering intimate relationships with women. For some it ended after one-time or several-times experiences, others started families. Motivations for forming marriages were diverse. Jan, who had been in a relationship with a man for ten years after divorcing his wife, stated that neither before marriage nor during it did he even consider the possibility of having an intimate relationship with a man. He explained it by his lack of knowledge, lack of any information about such possibility whatsoever. He claimed to have been heterosexual and to 'turn gay' only after divorce. At some point though he admitted that some unconscious aspects of his sexuality could have influenced the failure of his marriage. Lack of knowledge about sexuality also appeared in Jacek's narrative. He claimed that only in the middle of his marriage he started to become aware of his sexual interest in men. Through retrospection he noticed some signs of his non-heterosexuality already in primary school. However, due to lack of information and cognitive competence he wasn't able to define them properly. During his marriage his sexual identity was becoming increasingly apparent to him. At one point he even had an idea of forming some kind of alternative family — with his wife and a male lover. Eventually, after meeting his future long-term partner, he decided to have a divorce.

Everyone had girlfriends so I had one too. Now I know that it was cultural pressure. I remember that back then there was a boy I liked, I never showed him any signs of my feelings but he had my attention. This could have been a signal, had I had enough knowledge. A signal that I'm also interested in boys. This liking I had for him, this was something other than liking girls. It was high school. In primary school, had I had the knowledge, I could have realised too. My brother got me a great encyclopaedia. A thick tome. There were colour pages with images and I remember that on one of those pages there were Greek statues. I remember a Greek statue of a man which moved me in some way. I liked it in aesthetic categories but it was also something different (...). But I didn't have such knowledge (Jacek).

In case of Wojciech, lack of knowledge about homosexuality caused uncertainty of identity. During puberty he noticed some atypicality in himself but he wasn't able to name

it with other words than 'I am a bit different.' Even when he had satisfying intercourses with men met in baths he did not identify himself as a homosexual. Because a scientific authority supported him in this belief, he decided to marry a woman. After divorcing his first wife he still believed that he was a heterosexual person and he married another woman. Only after the failure of his second marriage and entering his first stable relationship with a man his identity underwent change and he began to call himself a gay.

And eventually I began to ask myself questions about myself. I had appointments with four — I don't remember whether they were psychologists or psychiatrists. It didn't do much. Well, the fourth one was a university professor, an elderly man. He did some tests with me and said: 'Sir, you are one hundred percent heterosexual. Forget about all this, get married and everything will be fine and you will be happy. Because if not, then when you will be an older man you will have to pay and boys will laugh at you behind your back, is that what you're aiming for?' Well, since I was one hundred percent heterosexual, I was 28 and I got married (Wojciech).

Jerzy, while talking about his marriage which lasted for 17 years, explained the decision to enter it by social pressure. Despite earlier homoerotic experiences, he treated forming a family as an obvious stage of man's life and he did not consider other options. Another significant factor was lack of acceptance of his own homosexuality and hope for a change of orientation.

And on the street I totally randomly ran into my old friend from college with whom we liked each other and after some time it came to a marriage (...). And it's very difficult to judge whether this decision to get married was right or a mistake which hurt this woman, but sadly in those times, in 70s, there was very common this folk belief that marriage changes people (Jerzy).

The case of Wiktor's marriage was different. It was a bogus marriage with a homosexual woman. His decision was caused by social pressure he felt and fear of homophobia. Specifics and place of Wiktor's occupation made him believe that revealing his sexuality would cause huge problems, including getting fired from work. Entering marriage was a rationally chosen adaptive strategy in face of expected danger.

My friend introduced me to his lesbian friend. And we decided to get married. It was purely self-serving, for the sake of my job. So I would be married and everyone would give me a break (...). Later on we divorced because she moved to Germany and there was another guy who needed a wife, she held German citizenship and some Polish gay there wanted a citizenship too, so I was like 'Alright, I'm handing my wife over to you.' (Wiktor).

Currently none of interlocutors maintains contact with his former wife. Two of them have children. Wojciech has an adult son but they do not have good relations. There is a communication barrier between them, they never touched upon the matter of sexuality. Son knows that his father was in two long-term relationships with men but he never raised this topic. Jacek has two adult children with whom he maintains no contact.

Decisions to marry made by interlocutors unambiguously arose from social conditions they lived in. Primary reasons for forming a family are lack of knowledge about homosexuality and lack of self-awareness, desire for normalisation emerging from social expectations and pressure, internalised homophobia with desire to change own orientation and striving to hide oneself in fear of homophobia's effects.

#### Pets as family members

In the participants' narratives there appeared instances of involving animals in the understanding of a family. Andrzej mentioned his cat when reflecting upon the possibility of raising a child. He himself suggested that cat acts as a substitute of an absent child in their relationship. Just like in case of a child, further family was involved in caring for the cat — primarily parents of both owners.

Maybe that's where our idea with K. came from when we wanted to move abroad, we thought about Canada. And back then I was thinking about children, about entering a legal relationship and adopting a child. Well, now that I'm going to be 60 soon, it would be too much of a responsibility at this moment even if there was such a possibility. Maybe that's why we have a cat (Andrzej).

In Tomasz's story cats appeared when he mentioned various situations of families formed by gays trying to conceal their identity. As he stood out against such a strategy, he presented his own family structure where pets had their place.

Surely several dozen percent of those gays, faggots, they have wives and families. It's obvious. It's a matter of social pressure, it's buying something for another thing. It's buying social peace, blending into roles (...). We didn't let that happen, there is just two of us with our three cats (Tomasz).

Similarly as children sometimes do, pets may act as binders in a relationship. This is the way that Robert framed it while talking about cats as catalysts of relations in a partnership. He perceived pets which he took care of alongside with his partner in context of shared responsibility, treating them as legitimate family members. According to him, the significance of this binding role of pets grows as the partnership gets into later stages and partners grow older, already past the time of initial infatuation and more focused on traits like tolerance, responsibility and cooperation.

It was a great infatuation and it still lasts, although now as we age there are some changes showing up, maybe not flaws, but they are in both of us and if it wasn't for pets we could have killed each other (...). What's interesting is that pets have an influence on our happy relationship, I think so. Cats cement our partnership in old age. Because there are obligations, some constraints, if you want to travel somewhere then you have to find a caregiver, pets also age with us, they start to get sick. They are cementing, it is like... it makes a bigger family, responsibility (Robert).

At one point the author of the above words also used explicit family terminology in reference to one of his cats. When he cited a scene of clash during a walk he presented himself in role of a protective father taking care of his child.

When I was walking the cat, there was this lady walking her dog around the neighbourhood, a humongous woman, she let the dog out and it ran at my cat. I prepared my voice and yelled at her, holding my cat, she came like for a fight. And she screams: 'You know, are you a man?' Nasty hag. Later she let that dog out on purpose. But it didn't hurt me as a gay, it's about the cat, I was like a father protecting his family, one can say (Robert).

Presenting pets as children usually contained elements such as responsibility, cementing a relationship, attentiveness, understanding, subordinating own plans and actions to pets' needs, pride of own pet's skills and traits, relatives' or friends' support in care and employing family terminology. Only men living in relationships talked about pets — the topic was absent in single men's narratives. It seems that for men forming partnerships pets are a complement to their family structures. The relation with a partner itself gains family quality when it is accompanied by shared care for pets, situated as family members.

### Conclusions

Although in current academic discussions using the term „family” is sometimes avoided, it should not mean a departure from noticing the significance of personal life seen in categories of family bonds, needs and functions (Edwards & Gilies, 2012). In the above presented research, family constituted an inherent element of biographical narratives of each respondent — chronologically first there appeared presentations of families of origin, next various types of relations formed throughout life with members of those families and then families formed through marriage, partnerships and/or practicing diverse forms of 'families of choice'. The generational specifics of respondents meant that they gained awareness of their sexual identity in times when homosexuality in Poland was a strong taboo. Lack of information on this topic influenced their family functioning — hiding own identity or late coming outs, problems in relations with parents, forming heterosexual families.

Respondents' life experiences support validity of treating family as a process rather than an established structure that one has to adhere to. A 'doing family' perspective assumes that family life can be grasped primarily in context of practicing it, creating and reconstructing it every day, not just static 'being' a family (Morgan, 2011). This shift of perspective results in significant increase of inclusivity of the notion 'family' and in moving away from normative distinction between 'normal' and alternative families. People doing family means that family members build them in everyday practices and in accompanying emotions and reflections (Carrington, 1999, 5). Respondents of

the interviews presented above used diverse forms of practising their families. If situation allowed it, then members of their families of origin were actively present in their lives. If not — family functions were performed by various forms of ‘families of choice’. Respondents are a part of the generation which were Polish pioneers of discovering gay identity and adapting their life strategies to it. They are the first generation which had the chance, although usually in older age, for independent and innovative construction of their family lives. It consisted of both adapting traditional models to own needs (entering roles of uncles, sons-in-law etc.) as well as creating non-traditional models (families of choice). Their narratives comprise a negation of stereotypes which present older gays as ‘non-family’, lonely and suffering from lack of support. They also validate the words of David H.G. Morgan (2020, 733) that ‘family life, however understood, was still important to large numbers of people throughout the world and should, therefore, still be taken into account’.

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