

# Doing Mothering in Non-Monogamous Relationships. Strategies and Practices of Women in Poland

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This paper examines the topic of mothering within consensually non-monogamous relationships (CNM) and families in contemporary Poland, which is often perceived as a conservative, Catholic country. It discusses the emotional and practical challenges, such as time management and social perception, and dealing with emotions. The empirical data derives from fieldwork on women's strategies and practices for living in non-monogamous relationships in Poland, conducted since October 2019 to the present day. The author uses the method of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), which allows her to explore the uniqueness of the individual dimension of the phenomenon and root the narratives of research partners in the social and cultural contexts and discourses that shape them. In Poland public and political debates about maternity and family planning consistently lead to disputes about the nature of family, gender roles, and, ultimately, Polishness. Women, as biologically predisposed to bear children, automatically play the role of reproducers of the nation, as well as carriers of national traditions and values. I argue that despite the hegemonic conservative discourse on family, sexuality and reproduction in contemporary Poland the sphere of practices that accompany women in CNM's relationships reveal different approaches and understandings of motherhood and family and show their agency and resistance in alternative mothering strategies. This article contributes to expanding the state of research on new family forms and practices while accounting for gender, class, and sexuality. It also shows changes in family practices in the Polish context.

The paper aims to answer the following questions: How do women in CNM plan and practice motherhood? What are their definitions of motherhood and family? What do maternal care and responsibility look like? How do women deal with the mononormative and heteronormative stigma?

**Keywords:** motherhood, doing mothering, social stigma, family, non-monogamy, intersectionality

*Here family is mum and dad, if there are additional people it is cool, like an aunt and an uncle, but very rarely we find a different familial configuration. (Monika 38 years)*

The lack of legal recognition in a romantic relationship may give rise to feelings of uncertainty or unease. Without formalized legal status, people are often left without clear legal protections and entitlements, which can generate ambiguity in matters such as financial security, healthcare rights, inheritance, and familial responsibilities. Maintaining a non-monogamous relationship as a woman of reproductive age living in Poland can definitely be a burdening social mantle to wear. Mothering or planning to become a mother within a multi-partner family adds an extra layer to the challenge due to the serious threat of social stigmatization. Gender, age, and sexual identity (often both non-monogamous and non-heterosexual), placed outside the normative borders, reveal the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1993) of my research partners, women in consensually non-monogamous relations who assume/take on the mothering role. I employ this intersectional framework in order to advance a comprehensive examination of the ways in which several social identities, crucial for my research partners, juxtapose and interact with one another. Moreover, an anthropological approach to the subject matter allows for an in-depth analysis of the intersections between age, gender, sexual identity, on the one hand, and the relational styles rooted in the Polish socio-cultural context, thus gaining insight into their specificity.

The empirical data for this article derives from the on-going project “Ethnography of intimate non-monogamous relationships – experiences, strategies, practices. A woman’s perspective”<sup>1</sup> and focuses on consensually non-monogamous (CNM) constellations between partners with children. I argue that despite the hegemonic conservative discourse on family, sexuality and reproduction in contemporary Poland (Graff, 2008; Hryciuk, 2012; Hryciuk, Korolczuk, *Eds.*, 2012, 2015; Sikorska, 2012, 2019), the sphere of practices that accompany women in CNM’s relationships reveal different approaches and understandings of motherhood and family and show their agency and resistance in doing alternative mothering. I understand this concept as a broad term that grasps maternal care of more people than two biological parents. Motherhood here is practiced and defined beyond the constraints of the biological (Gumbs, Martens, Williams, *Eds.*, 2016, McKenzie, 2022). The socio-political conservative context under which these relationships function increases the risk of social stigma, and as a consequence it weighs heavily on familial coming-out strategies. Women are

1 The research project, “Ethnography of intimate non-monogamous relationships – experiences, strategies, practices”, is being conducted at Doctoral School of Humanities at the University of Warsaw.

therefore compelled to decide what aspects of their identity should remain invisible in order to maintain the wellbeing of their families. The paper aims to answer the following questions: How do women in CNM plan and practice motherhood? What are their definitions of motherhood and family? What do maternal care and responsibility look like in CNM? How do women deal with the mononormative and heteronormative stigma, which is the first assumption when discussing intimate relationships?

The paper begins with an introduction to the topic, followed by an examination of the socio-cultural context and existing research around the concept of motherhood in Poland, with a particular emphasis on family dynamics and conservative values. Subsequently, the research methods employed in the study are delineated. Next, the paper provides a brief discussion on non-monogamy, contrasting experiences and scholarly perspectives in Poland with those from other countries. This discussion paves the way for the findings section, where I analyze the implications of non-monogamous practices within the context of family and motherhood, as well as the potential for social stigmatization. I then present four key topics derived from my fieldwork: the concept of family structures, motherhood, external caregiving, and child protection. Finally, I conclude with a synthesis of the insights gained from the research.

## Family, motherhood and the conservative values in Poland

The following section is an outline of what constitutes the conservative discourse that permeates Polish politics and society. According to the Central Statistical Office in Poland (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, abbr. GUS), in 2022, 92% of Poles still identified as Catholic<sup>2</sup> (GUS, 2022). The country was ruled for eight years by a conservative political formation – Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, further referred to as PiS). To this day, there is no legal recognition of non-heteronormative relationships in Poland, not to mention families. Since 2015 the Polish Government has attempted to tighten up the current abortion ban, in place since 1993. Poland has one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe, making abortion available only in cases of grave fetal defect, rape/incest, or if the mother has a ‘life-threatening’ condition, and only up to twelve weeks of pregnancy. Since January 2021 a near-total abortion ban has been in force, as ruled by the Constitutional Court – a body that under PiS influence outlawed terminating pregnancies, when a severe birth defect is diagnosed.

In October 2023 PiS lost the election. The issue of women’s rights was a pivotal point of contention in the lead-up to the election of the new government. The opposition’s victory was significantly influenced by the electoral support of women. It is important that although the right wing party lost the election already almost one

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2 Statistics Poland (Główny Urząd Statystyczny) – Derived from the book “Religious denominations in Poland in 2019-2021” – 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the cyclical publishing series of the Statistic Poland.

year ago, legally nothing has changed yet in the matter of women rights (or same-sex civil unions) up to the present day.

Against this background, the concept of a family based on non-monogamous relationship is completely unthinkable, and term “polyfamily” actually unknown in the public sphere. However, the debate on family is always present in the daily Polish socio-political sphere. Polish national identity is often associated with a strong emphasis on the family unit, valuing its welfare above that of the individual. According to sociologist Filip Schmidt (2015: 27), the family is highly idealized and carries a significant emotional weight that evokes intense ideological and political debates. Therefore, any modification to its form may result in concern, potential conflict, and social tension. Consequently, public acknowledgement or change in legislation is not happening. Polishness, according to the reasoning of right-wing politicians and hierarchs of the Catholic Church, is based on non-negotiable traditional values such as marriage, religion, or the nuclear family. Therefore, as anthropologist Agnieszka Kościańska rightly observes, topics such as sexuality consistently lead to disputes about family, gender roles, and ultimately to arguments about the very essence of Polishness (Kościańska, 2021). Since the concepts of gender and nation are inextricably linked, as discussed by sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis (1997), women, as biologically predisposed to bear children, automatically play the role of reproducers of the nation, as well as carriers of national traditions and values. As they reach reproductive age, their bodies no longer belong to them; they become part of the public discourse and public dispute. Consequently, their sexuality must be controlled and regulated (Kościańska, 2021).

Conversely, all of the aforementioned elements coexist alongside the ongoing process of secularization in Poland. The latest CBOS (Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej) – Public Opinion Research Center communiqué (July 2024) indicates that 89% of the Polish population identifies as Catholic. Among adult Poles, 88.8% report a sense of belonging to the Roman Catholic Church, while 0.2% adhere to other Catholic traditions.<sup>3</sup> As indicated on the website of the Institute for Catholic Church Statistics “the data should be compared with the results of the 2021 National Census, which indicated a decline in the number of individuals identifying as Catholic, regardless of rite. In 2011, Catholics constituted 87.8% of the population, whereas in 2021, they accounted for 71.4% of the population. Additionally, the 2021 National Census revealed an increase in the number of individuals identifying as non-religious. Over the past decade, this figure has grown from 929,420 to 2,611,506, representing a significant shift from 2.4% of the population in 2011 to 6.9% in 2021.”

Progressing secularization is also a visible, significant and actively addressed concern for The Catholic Church. In his most recent publication, entitled *The Catholic Church in Poland in a Social Context*, Janusz Mariański – theologian, sociologist and a priest, states and confirms that during the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>

3 Institute for Catholic Church Statistics (Instytut Statystyki Kościoła Katolickiego).

century, there has been a discernible acceleration in the processes of secularization among younger demographics (Mariański, 2018). According to sociologists, the religious attitudes of Poles have been changing in recent years, and their faith is becoming more selective, individualized, and axiologically relativized.

As Przemysław Sadura in his sociological report from the analysis “Liberalisation and secularization of The Polish Society 1989-2020”<sup>4</sup> writes: “The values, attitudes, and moods of Poles today are shaped by two opposing trends: one that is gradual and transformative, and another that is reactionary and violent. The significant social modernization that occurred in Poland following 1989 was, for numerous Poles, somewhat involuntary. This encompassed the transition to a new political system, the necessity to join the European Union, and the integration with its values. Additionally, there was a therapeutic and pedagogical aspect to the Polish transformation, with foreign and domestic experts offering guidance on navigating the new reality. The society was undergoing a process of adaptation, albeit not necessarily with great enthusiasm.” (Sadura, 2020: 6).

Poland’s cultural landscape reflects a complex interplay between traditional Catholic values and modern Western influences. This dynamic can be seen in various aspects of society, such as politics, social movements, and public discourse. The tension between conservative and progressive ideologies often shapes debates on issues like gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and environmental policies.

The figure of “the Polish Mother” (Matka Polka) is a formula for women’s participation in the Polish national community. Through motherhood, “a woman in Poland buys into this community” (Walczevska, 1999: 53). This figure remains one of the strongest presences in contemporary Poland, widely discussed and critically analyzed by several Polish authors in an edited collection that looks at “old” and “new” practices, discourses and representations of motherhood from an interdisciplinary perspective (Hryciuk, Korolczuk, *Eds.*, 2012). Three years later, a second multi-author volume by the same authors was published, this time taking on political aspects of parenthood and reinforcing the argument that the private is political (Hryciuk, Korolczuk, *Eds.*, 2015). Both volumes examine motherhood and parenthood as a social practice that may involve not only those biologically related to the child, but also others engaged in care work. In this way, motherhood is both individual and collective in nature (Hryciuk, Korolczuk, *Eds.*, 2012, 2015) and can be also seen as a part of feminist strategy.

The articles scrutinize the Polish specificity – both cultural and historical context of social changes that impact practices such as mothering and parenting over the past decades. Following Nakano Glenn (Glenn, Chang, Forcey, *Eds.*, 1994), the authors frame contemporary mothering as a contested terrain “where different, often conflicting, images, practices and discourses of motherhood or, more broadly, parenthood

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4 Liberalizacja i sekularyzacja społeczeństwa polskiego 1989-2020. Analiza socjologiczna.

collide” (Hryciuk, Korolczuk, *Eds.*, 2012: 10; Hryciuk, Korolczuk, *Eds.*, 2015: 20). They show the entanglement of different, sometimes contradictory discourses that are visible in contemporary Poland. On the one hand the strong influence of the Catholic Church translates to a strong presence of romantic patterns, pre-modernization sentiments, and nationalist ideologies. On the other hand, clearly visible are also the consequences of the profound political transformation of the past twenty years, including the expansion of social stratification, the dismantling of institutionalized forms of care, and the restriction of women’s reproductive rights, along with the socio-cultural shifts under socialism, such as the universalization of women’s professional work. The figure of the Polish Mother encompasses these conflicting discourses:

*The confluence of the post-Romantic myth of the Polish Mother, embedded in a nationalist vision of social relations and legitimized by Catholic doctrine, with the neoliberal discourse of efficiency and individual responsibility has placed women in a paradoxical situation.* (Hryciuk, Korolczuk, *Eds.*, 2012: 15)

In their anthropological approach, these volumes address the notion of family as an ideological construct associated with the modern state, but also examine the Polish cultural context and reveal its uneasy entanglement of conflicting discourses such as Catholicism, neoliberalism, nationalist ideology and modern feminism. This multiplicity of discourses allows for the multiplicity of different family and maternal practices to coexist with one another and slowly change gender and parental patterns (Hryciuk, Korolczuk, *Eds.*, 2012, 2015).

Although in both volumes different forms of mothering can be found (for example patchwork or homosexual perspectives on care and mothering), mothering in non-monogamous familial forms was still very new at that time and therefore absent in publications mentioned above. In Poland, the phenomenon of non-monogamy was studied by Katarzyna Michalczak (2015), who examined family practices in intimate non-monogamous relationships. The sociologist employed Michael Maffesoli’s (2008) theory of new tribes to investigate the phenomenon of consensual non-monogamy within the context of a Warsaw group with high and similar social and cultural capital. Michalczak presents an intriguing practice of returning to a monogamous arrangement for the birth and first months of a child’s life (that is also consistent with some of my findings). Ultimately, the sociologist concludes that it is polyamory, which carries the potential for social change, that will be the most significant social phenomenon of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Małgorzata Sikorska is another Polish scholar who focuses her work on showing the changes in the sphere of family life that have been observed in Poland over the past twenty years (2012; 2019). According to her the most significant of these changes is the increasingly widespread prioritization of the well-being of the individual rather than the well-being of the family (Sikorska, 2012). It is caused mainly by the process of individualization of family life (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 2001, 2007; Giddens, 2013;

Inglehart, Norris 2003). Sikorska states that individuals (their emotions, “well-being”, ambitions, separate hobbies and friends) matter increasingly more in modern Polish families, while families understood as a whole gradually diminish in their importance. And although individualization of family life shows a significant change in social family practice, it does not immediately indicate a “crisis” of the family concept. Sikorska concludes by saying that the Polish family is gradually adopting a Western model of family life, with instances of greater individualism, democratization, and freedom being granted to family members on occasion. I find this statement accurate, although its generalized nature appears problematic. There are different conflicting discourses presented by Hryciuk and Korolczuk (*Eds.*, 2012, 2015) that are still very much present in Poland.

My research is a contribution to the study of new familial forms, new familial practices while accounting for gender, class, and sexuality and a broader study of changing family practices and forms in the Polish context. In Poland, this field of study is now dominated by topics such LGBTQ+ familial practices and their lack of legal recognition (Mizielińska 2009; Bieńko, 2013; Mizielińska, Stasińska, 2014; Mizielińska, Struzik, Król, 2017). Therefore, I see the necessity to include the perspective of non-monogamous women in contemporary Poland on forming alternative familial constellations and doing mothering within them.

Taking into consideration the fact that I can quite easily find interlocutors, it is tempting to assume that understanding the concept of family in Poland is more and more diversified. However, the willingness of my research partners to participate in the project cannot be translated into a general conclusion that the concept of family in contemporary Poland is unambiguously liberalizing.

I engage with Sikorska work (2012; 2019) through my research showing the nuances of class and cultural capital that play an important role. Despite the widespread conservative discourse, I had no problem to find women who practice non-monogamy in Poland, but my open, leftist and non-judgmental positionality is probably significant here. Because the research is conducted in different Polish cities, there are often (but not always) progressive environments.

## Research methods

I use the method of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), which allows me to explore the uniqueness of the individual dimension of the phenomenon and root the narratives of research partners in the social and cultural contexts and discourses that shape them. I have conducted twenty-five individual, in-depth, non-structured and non-standardized ethnographic interviews with twenty-two women aged 27–63.<sup>5</sup> Twelve of them already have biological children. The interviews usually lasted from one and a half hours to three hours and with some women I spoke several times. They

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5 The vast majority of my research partners are in their reproductive age, only one woman is older.



were conducted in various larger and smaller cities: Warsaw, Krakow, Poznań, Rzeszów, Katowice, but my research partners come from different parts of Poland. I treat these accounts as my principal source (also for this article) but my knowledge comes also from analyzing media discourse, pop-culture and from the fact that I am a Polish anthropologist, rooted in the cultural context. Apart from the interviews, participant observation during expert conferences, meetings of polyamorous groups or regular research diary and field notes are important elements of my research. I have participated in three polyamorous meetings, organized in Warsaw (also by one of my research participants Maja) for people who want to meet, talk and potentially also date other non-monogamous people. These were fairly casual meetings for a beer or two where people of different non-monogamous identities (open marriages, polyamorous constellations or just open to the new experience) met to talk with other people who think similarly and have already experience in the field of non-monogamy.

In the recruitment of the research group, I have employed a variety of strategies. Some of the people I found through online Facebook groups that were created for people, who want to gain knowledge about the non-monogamous lifestyle, meet other people or just share their experience. Sometimes people who I know introduce me to their friends who live non-monogamously. Another group of research participants I met during polyamorous meetings in Warsaw. For some of the mentioned interviews I was able to continue using the 'snowball method', which seems very much adequate, given the field site I have chosen (Marcus, 1995).

A significant portion of the research process involves conducting interviews with experts in the field, including psychotherapists, sexologists, and psychologists who specialize in working with non-monogamous individuals. I have conducted interviews with six experts so far (and in this paper I include data from all six of them). Merging the points of view of women living in non-monogamy and those of experts facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. One of the common topics that people bring to the table during therapeutic sessions is a question of how and when to tell the child that their parents live in a non-normative way.

It is worth mentioning that in the beginning of the interviews I always asked my research participants if they have questions they want to ask me. Usually, it opened a short conversation about the choice of the research topic and my interests, openness, curiosity and non-judgmental approach to non-monogamy. Undoubtedly, this was a significant factor that contributed to the research participants feeling safe and more comfortable when discussing their intimate lives with me. Even though I position myself as mononormative, my approach and progressive beliefs helped them to trust me and not be afraid of stigmatization.

In accordance with the methodological approach proposed by Marcus (1995), I also incorporate an analysis of media discourse, including articles, interviews, and online forums where interested individuals exchange experiences, seek advice, and recommend movies, books, and podcasts to each other. Additionally, I scrutinize the discourse of Catholic Church institutions and the political discourse surrounding



topics such as family, sexuality, gender roles, and non-monogamy in general. The media, church, political, and pop-culture discourse, as well as the expert voice, provide the female interviewees' narratives with important context, significantly contributing to the understanding of the phenomenon.

## Being non-monogamous in Poland

Although the official discourse can definitely be perceived as conservative, the sphere of social practices significantly differs from it. There is also no generational pattern or cultural script to follow when it comes to non-monogamous relationships or parenting (Stasińska, 2024). Furthermore, there is no adequate language to precisely describe the constellations, relationships, and family forms that they build.

What is significant, when trying to depict how research partners experience the socio-cultural context of contemporary Poland is a shared fear of social stigma and a common feeling that a non-monogamous relationship has no manual. Interviewees often say that this is one of the most challenging aspects of being in a non-monogamous relationship – the need to “figure everything out on your own”. It means that unlike monogamous relationships, non-monogamous ones do not have pre-established cultural and societal norms to ensure their proper functioning. It is worth mentioning that expert interviews so far have shown that there is no systemic knowledge imparted in therapy schools or psychology studies on how to work in therapy with people who live in non-monogamous relationships, not to mention on how to be a parent and raise a child in polyamorous family.<sup>6</sup> Those therapists seeking to gain such knowledge typically consult Western (mainly U.S. American research) literature and inquire independently. One of my interlocutors provides therapy to individuals and couples in non-monogamous relationships (including those involving children). Among the peculiarities of the Polish cultural context she mentioned the lack of cultural scripts, the dearth of representation of the group in the public space, the absence of literature embedded in Polish cultural realities, the absence of polyamory in cultural history, and above all, the lack of experience of living non-monogamously in families and older generations, strongly related to the inability to inherit such patterns. According to my interviewee, most people living non-monogamously in Poland are those who traverse the path from monogamy to non-monogamy and usually live in forms of open relationships, which she claims to be the most common form of non-monogamy in Poland. In my research process, it was more common to encounter open relationships (often marriages) from which other relationships (sexual and romantic) have moved away, rather than polyamorous. This is consistent with my observations and supported by interviews with women who live in CNM.

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<sup>6</sup> Therapists who want to educate themselves on the topic of non-monogamous relations and families need to search for knowledge outside the curriculum of the studies.

A notable proportion of my female interviewees do not utilize the term “polyamory”, (but rather non-monogamy or multi-person relationships) do not pursue literature on the subject, nor do they attend polyamory group meetings. During the five years of fieldwork, I observed that the use of terms such as “polyamory”, “polyfamily”, “polycommunity” or “polycule” is related to certain cultural capital and practice through active acquisition of knowledge about polyamory by reading books and handbooks, listening to podcasts, viewing thematic films and participating in polyamorous group meetings – which is not applicable to all research partners. Such individuals may encounter greater difficulty in establishing the parameters of their relationship, since the only pattern known to them is that of the mononormative relationship.

Available Western literature (mainly U.S. American research) on ethical non-monogamy and polyfamilies addresses these issues also in polyparenting, such as for example coming out to children, introducing partners or organizing multi-partner family life (see Anapol, 2010; Easton, Hardy, 2017). Even though for my research partners the search for information on the topic and examples from Western literature are helpful in the way of showing “that you are not a freak”,<sup>7</sup> oftentimes the advice and examples do not fit to Polish realities.

## Family

For all the women I have spoken to, the family of choice, formed by partners and their partners, and sometimes just friends, is equivalent to the biological and nuclear family. It is noteworthy that my research partners include individuals who identify as heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual or more complex. There is a shared understanding between the LGBTQ+ community and non-monogamous individuals (who often, though not exclusively, belong to non-heteronormative communities) of the concept of family that is not constrained by the traditional understanding of kinship.

Monika (38 years old) is married to Michał (38), and together they have an 11-year-old daughter Lucja. Aneta (41) is married to Jan (42). Both heterosexual marriages currently form a love quadrangle.

Aneta, 41, answered the question about what family means to her as follows:

*I think that now Monika, Michał, Jan and Łucja are my closest family, these are the people I care about the most in the world. For whom I am able to sacrifice ... give something of myself, give a lot of myself, so that this social unit of ours, the cell, is simply happy. That's it. For us to be just fine. Family is also peace, support, the fact that you can always come and speak about various things. That you're not afraid. Great security. Such basic things.*

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Magda – 36 years old bisexual and poly woman, currently living in polycule. In the article all names have been changed in order to protect the anonymity of the research partners.

Oliwia is 47 years old, lives in Warsaw, and has a husband for 20 years with whom she has two children (a daughter who is 12, and a son who is 18). They live in an open marriage. She has two more partners (one of which is Zofia's husband).<sup>8</sup> Although Oliwia together with her husband and two kids form a typical nuclear family her definition of the family is also focused on choice.

*It's just that I've always thought that these are not people that I'm related to, but these are people that... that I can count on, that I can count on, and I know that I'm ready to be there for these people at any time, I don't know, and it doesn't matter, I don't know, distance, age, gender, nationality. It's just... family is people who are together by choice, not by force.*

Kasia 33 years old, Polish living permanently in the Netherlands and Belgium presented a different, more out front perspective. She lives in non-monogamous relationships, mainly with men. Although she is currently in a relationship she calls a relationship with her female friend, they are planning to have a child together, would like to create a family and a relation with the potential father of the child (they wouldn't want him to be just a sperm donor, but a partner mainly to Kasia).

*This is my friend, it all started with friendship, I'd say more... although physical too, but we just have a relationship that's more about you know talking, being together mentally, not physically. We both had partners when we met. She still does, I kind of don't have a man anymore, and we found that we got along well, well enough that we'd like to have a family together. But of course, it's biologically impossible, so we need a third person, but we also don't want it to be a third person just out of nowhere, who will just be a sperm donor or by chance, we just want to consciously decide that it will be part of this three-part family.*

Kasia on the difference between friendship and a relationship:

*I think the only difference between a relationship and friendship, apart from the sexual sphere, which I don't think belongs only to a relationship, is the awareness of building and shaping the future, or at least wanting to build the future together.*

According to Kasia a relationship must contain a component of time, common thinking about the future, in this case planning to have a child. Also, this definition of a family assumes having children together ("starting a family"). It is worth noticing that Kasia's dream would not find recognition, nor would it be legally accepted if she lived in Poland. She mentions during the interview that she observes that both in

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<sup>8</sup> Oliwia and Zofia are parts of the same polycule.

Belgium and in the Netherlands, at least in her circles, people speak and practice alternative structures of relationships. Although neither Poland nor Belgium or Netherlands legally acknowledge non-monogamous relationships; In the Netherlands since 2001 and in Belgium since 2003, there is a legal recognition of same-sex marriage.

## Motherhood and extended child-care

Although the topic of motherhood appears in research of multi-person parenting quite often (Sheff, 2010, 2011; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010; Riggs, 2010; Andersson, Carlström, 2021; Alarie, 2024) both the experience and the approach to motherhood differ from American, Australian, and Swedish political contexts. A vast majority of my research partners have already experienced motherhood in previous monogamous relationships (marriages or informal relationships) and their children are already teenagers. These circumstances often give them the possibility to focus more on their lifestyle choices outside mothering. Some of them plan to have children within the non-monogamous constellation (some are childfree and do not plan to have children at all). In non-monogamous families where the children are at the age when they require more attention and family care, women see the notion of support in daily life that can arise from multi-parenting.

In these constellations where children still need a lot of parental attention, care may spread to partners and not necessarily only grandparents as it usually happens in Poland. One example is the love quadrangle formed by Monika with Michał and Aneta with Jan. They knew each other for more than a year and their relationship developed to the point that at the end of September 2022 Aneta and Jan moved in with Monika and Michał, leaving their city of about 80.000 inhabitants in Lower Silesia for Warsaw. During the interview with Aneta, Jan and Michał were building a bed that would fit all four of them.<sup>9</sup>

Monika, when asked about the issue of taking care of Łucja since they all moved in together, replied as follows:

*M: I can see now that it's spreading over the four of us. Aneta recently studied with Łucja for a biology test, so it's great because Łucja comes back from school early, we are at work, Aneta, due to the fact that she is on notice, is still at home. So came back, ate dinner and sat down to biology. Yesterday or the day before, Łucja had a problem with math. I come back home, and Łucja is sitting there with Jan and they are learning mathematics, so in educational matters I can see that they support her a lot.*

R: Do you feel that you have less responsibilities related to Łucja?

*M: Certainly, at least with these lessons. Biology has never been my strong point, so*

<sup>9</sup> They sleep in it every night all four of them, but they switch the order in sleeping positions between each other.

*I'm glad Aneta took it over. Once we even talked about who can support Łucja with which subjects.*

I conducted three interviews with Monika and two with Aneta in different periods of the research and at different stages of their relationship. Two of the most recent interviews with Monika were focused on motherhood and raising Łucja together with her partners. Monika mentioned many times that Aneta and Jan have an absolute right to educate and pay attention to Łucja when the situation requires it. During the last interview Monika told me that recently Aneta and Łucja had a talk about future education and the path Łucja should pick, wanting to choose psychology as her career. There are plenty of situations when they are going shopping together or Aneta is picking her up from school. Although when it comes to disagreements concerning Łucja upbringing it is Monika and Michał who have a final say.

When asked how her motherhood has changed since the five of them live together under one roof, Monika replied:

*You know what, it has changed. Whether I wanted to or not, I had to learn to give some space to others, even to make decisions about Łucja's upbringing. It wasn't that easy because unfortunately I like to control everything. If something doesn't quite go my way, then "okay, so be it". But I'm all for it, and I'm really glad that I could divide my space and time that I used to have only with Łucja with additional people. It wasn't easy, but yes, I wouldn't change it.*

Although Łucja does not have the full picture of her parents' romantic situation, and she calls Aneta by name, she also talks about Aneta as a "third parent" or a "second mother". At the beginning Aneta was quite excited when talking about her unspecified role of a potential "older sister", "friend" or "aunt" to Łucja. When we talked in April 2024, more than one year and a half after they moved in together, she mentioned she feels the expectation of being a parent to Łucja, but when she does things her way it's not always welcomed by Monika. They are at the stage when the first parental differences appeared.

Lara McKenzie (2022) notes that contemporary feminist anthropology and sociology require an examination of various forms of parenthood beyond maternity and paternity in order to recognize and grasp less binary and less traditional performances. The complexities of modern parent-child relations in polyfamilies definitely require this approach. Investigating different forms of performing parenthood is effective while examining for example individuals who are spending a lot of time with the child of their partner, performing the role of a parent but not being socially recognized as such. Aneta definitely performs the role of a parent, even though Łucja's both biological parents are very much present and invested in her upbringing. This account facilitates the observation and interpretation of the culturally diverse meanings and realities of parenthood. Their example also shows

that the role of a parent can be performed without being specified or named.

Sonia and Daniel are married and together they raise a 3,5-year-old autistic son from Sonia's previous relationship. They did not want to get married, but ended up doing it because it was the only legally accepted way for Daniel to legally adopt Sonia's son. Sonia is bisexual, and at the time of the interview, they were looking for a person (rather, a woman) to enter their relationship permanently and form a romantic, but also familial triangle. They live in a Polish city of 200,000 inhabitants. We talked about getting a third person into a relationship where there is already a child and about potentially living and raising a child together and creating a family. During the last part of my interview with Sonia, her husband came in to the room and Sonia invited him to join the conversation.

*S: Well, but ... it's easier to come with three or even four people, but generally with more than two people, just like that ...*

*D: But in general everything is easier ...*

*Sa: It's easier than that, no. To go away, rest, relax, well... everything is always easier to do when there are more people, because it's easier to share a task or I don't know, to come up with something or organize or create, well ...*

*D: Even cleaning the house is easier, isn't it?*

*R: And with the child?*

*S: Well, we would definitely like her to have a bond with him.*

*R: Uhm. And also ... would she also be a person, probably, potentially relieving you?*

*S: Well, if... if they had a bond strong enough and she would say: well, uh... I don't know, we'd like to go out somewhere and she would say, you know, "lol, go, don't worry, have fun" (laughs) right? Because me and my buddy (the son) are going to do something here, well, it would be nice, sure, of course it would be great. But it's not like you know you're looking for a third person because you have a baby and you need a babysitter for that baby, right?*

When we talked about what role she or he would play, Sonia perceived it more in terms of an aunt or uncle but was strict about imagining the person as a potential family member.

*We want to live in more than two people, than such a classic well, and we don't want to keep in the basement this person for sure. That you know, some family celebrations or something, birthdays, etc. well it certainly won't sit in a closet locked up like a Goblin, but just well.... she's part of the family, right?*

This example shows that even though the discourse is still very well-based on monogamy and a nuclear vision of the family, my research partners have no problem thinking about and pursuing an alternative vision of the family.

## Protecting the child – masking behind mononormative assumptions to avoid the social stigma

The majority of research on non-monogamous parenthood, which in the cases below is referred to as polyamorous parenthood, has focused on the interactions between parents and educational institutions and authorities. In this context, polyamorous parents have had to develop strategies for navigating the complexities of openness and concealment, as well as the challenges of dealing with stigmatization (Palotta-Chiarolli, 2010; Riggs, 2010; Sheff, 2010). Palotta-Chiarolli (2010) drawing upon her research in Australia and United States, describes three main strategies of polyfamilies: 1) “passing” as heterosexual or same-sex couple families 2) “polluting” the mono-normativity of the school by being “out” as polyfamily and 3) “bordering” – negotiating and navigating the advantages and disadvantages of various stages of being out. Elisabeth Sheff (2010) writes about perceiving advantages and disadvantages of polyparenthood perceived by people living in polycommunities in the United States. In the case of my research, I have not met any family that would be open about their non-monogamy at school or in the workplace. Most of my research participants do not know many people who live in non-monogamous ways. They know well the concept of openness and honesty, although this is a strategy between the partners, not in a public sphere.

I observe the issue of social stigmatization throughout the course of my fieldwork, from the initial interview to the present moment, as I conduct expert interviews. It occurs during conversations about who has the knowledge about their non-monogamous way of living, if they are planning to come out to their relatives, friends, and children and how much they are going to tell. Even though all the women I talked with practice ethical non-monogamy, where all the partners have the full knowledge of the type of relationships they live in, in the public sphere the threat of social stigma is a category that organizes strategies and practices of social visibility. The peril of social stigmatization is additionally difficult when a child can also fall victim to it. Sometimes they can be very open about their way of living, but when the child is involved, they become more careful, protective and silent. Due to these fears, behaviors such as public displays of affection or putting a photo of the whole family on the desk at a place of work, are hidden or put out of sight. There is a common dream frequently expressed during interviews about living in a poly community and in a place, where holding hands with your three partners and your children would not mean exposing yourself and your child to social ostracism. This dream does not meet the reality of living in Poland.

Zofia is 33 years old. She is the mother of 5-year-old girl and identifies herself as polyamorous and bisexual. She has a husband (the father of the girl) and a partner and they're both a part of the polycule with two of my other interlocutors. Her dream is to live all together close by, preferably in the same residential area, but considering that she lives in Poland, she calls this dream utopian. During the interview Zofia told me that when her partners stay over and they sleep in one bed, in the morning she always wakes up very early and moves to a separate bed in order not to be seen by her daughter. When



asked if she was planning on telling her about polyamorous way of living, she said that she was planning to do it soon but she wanted to consult it with a polyfriendly therapist, who is not so easy to find, in order to communicate it to her daughter properly.

*In the kindergarten I probably would not dare, I'm a little afraid, so, for example, yesterday I was going to pick up my daughter and Piotrek (the partner) was escorting me, I told him that "here we say goodbye with a kiss on the cheek", since "we are too close to the kindergarten ... let's be careful". That's me, but I would prefer that it doesn't negatively affect my daughter's life, that suddenly it turns out that she has a good friend, but her parents are conservative Catholics and there is no way at all that they should be friends now. So, I would prefer not to influence the child's life in this way, and also in virtual spaces, for example, like there are some closed groups, I write openly that I'm poly and sometimes people ask, so I describe what it looks like, but in completely open ones, however, I keep it to myself, so yes given that I'm quite... Well yes, I don't really care that someone will say something bad about me, yes, I do hide a little bit about it though. My mother knows. Well, but it's, let's say it's a matter of what kind of relationship we have and what kind of views she has, so no... I would never tell my mother-in-law.*

Protecting the child is inscribed into performing motherhood well. Women and especially mothers feel the obligation to protect the child from potentially unpleasant consequences that their identity and lifestyles choices might cause. This model is largely derived from the conservative and patriarchal gender contract (Titkow, 2007) promoted by the state and the Catholic Church (Hryciuk, Korolczuk, *Eds.*, 2012).

The same argument of child wellbeing and a fear from social stigma is used in the love quadrangle of Monika, Aneta, Michał, Jan. Despite the fact they live two years together under one roof they still haven't openly told Łucja (who is now 12 years old) that they are all in an intimate, romantic relationship. As mentioned above they use the strategy of avoiding a proper name such as "partner" and use "auntie, and uncle or simply the partner's names". When I asked Monika why they are not saying it straight, she explicitly expressed her fear of potential harmful consequences that Łucja might suffer, that for her as a mother is paralyzing.

*We cannot pretend we live in different times than we are actually living. Seemingly everyone is tolerant, but I have an impression that kids need stability like in old times. Over here family is mum and dad, if there are additional people it is cool, like an aunt and an uncle, but very rarely we find different familial configuration. It might be a bit easier if she had been raised in a configuration like that from the very beginning, but she met Aneta and Jan when she was 10.<sup>10</sup>*

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10 Quote from the third, most recent interview (April 2024) with Monika.

Beyond the social stigma, this quote shows the lack of family patterns and also the language of roles and practices that differ from the nuclear one, that could potentially help to increase acceptance of different parenting roles and visibility of non-monogamous families. There is a strong attachment to the nuclear image of the family in Monika's way of thinking, even though she herself identifies as a non-monogamous person.

Not so long ago Łucja asked her biological parents why all four of them were kissing each other on the lips. From what she understood, many would consider this kind of behavior as betrayal or cheating. They used the explanation of being close to each other (but as friends). This situation clearly indicated that Łucja sees and understands a lot more than anybody wants to admit, despite the fact nobody called the situation by a proper name. Later on, Monika came back to the difficulty expressed in previous interviews that comes from not having any guidance on how she should not only make relationships with four people work, but also act in it as a parent. "It's extremely difficult and tiring that the only way is a trial-error way", Monika said.

The internal conflict of my research partners over whether to tell their children or not, and if so, when and how, shows that there are no well-known ways to do it and also reveals a lot of fear around it. For this reason, this is a common question according to experts such as therapists and coaches. As explained by one of my expert interviewee Katarzyna Grunt-Mejer,<sup>11</sup> who is a psychologist, philosopher, therapist and one of the first researchers who took on the topic of non-monogamy in Poland.

*Parents sometimes ask when they can tell their children how they live. I listen to these people who are in their 40s, have an 8-year-old child, for example. I say "your child has known for four years what kind of arrangement you live in" meaning "you don't have to say anything, just go on living and be honest in this life". You don't have to say anything, the children observe whether either parent... I don't know, your parents may, of course a lot of assumptions are behind this question, but let's imagine that you have a traditional family, at some point your parents invite you and "we live in a monogamous relationship, we want to tell you something: we are heterosexual".*

Beatrice Gusmano (2018) uses an intersectional perspective in order to grasp the experience of people living in contemporary conservative Italy, who identify themselves both as bisexual and polyamorous. When describing the process of coming out, staying visible and invisible, Gusmano points out that both strategies are characterized by resistance. She noticed that although they usually are being forced to stay in the closet, because of mononormative and heteronormative oppression, they also "resist through the choice of coming out or staying invisible" (2018: 15). My findings align with those of Gusmano, as my interviewees have the possibility to "play with the system" despite being compelled to stay invisible. Although it is true that

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11 Katarzyna Grunt-Mejer agreed on being quoted by her real name and surname.

non-monogamous vocabulary is not so well known in Poland yet and there are certain voids in the language that could be filled, the practice of not calling both the relationship and its members by its name, is a part of the strategy of masking behind mononormative assumptions.

As one of the psychotherapists, who chose to stay anonymous, said during an expert interview: "In Poland as long as you are a couple of two people from opposite sex, no one asks any questions". On the one hand this quote clarifies the true definition of mononormative stigma. On the other hand it leaves the room for some resistance by playing with the norm. Another aspect that evokes this strategy is the fact that the matter of childcare in Poland still lays on women, usually of two generations – mothers and grandmothers, but also other mothers and female friends. This cultural pattern helps to turn the social gaze away from any women who are taking care of any child. That is also why when Aneta sometimes attends Łucja's school events instead of Monika or Michał no one perceives this situation as odd.

For a long time, they hesitated to come out to their kids, because they both come from very conservative, catholic families who are not aware of Oliwia's and her husband way of living, and they are afraid that especially the daughter (described by her mum as having a big mouth) will tell the secret to their parents. At the moment of the interview, they had just made a decision to come out to their kids.

*O: Yeah, I mean with the older one... our older child is generally non-binary and he... it seemed to us... he has a... he has a... he has a nocturnal lifestyle like any teenager and as a result of that when we had these nocturnal conversations with each other these two years ago we felt that he might have heard something so in order for him not to guess the unknown and in order for him not to develop a feeling that his family was falling apart my husband just went to him one time. He told him, "Listen, there's this situation and this situation. It turns out we are both polyamorous. Do you know what that means?" He said: "Well, I know." Well, the fact is that he also has a lot of acquaintances who are either neurotypical or non-binary or transgender in general, because a lot of his acquaintances are... one is in transition, the other is already after, so it's like... it's... he's among those people he turns to. He is non-binary himself. He uses pronouns....*

R: Interchangeable?

*O: Female and male, yes. So it was natural to explain it to him.*

R: What exactly was his reaction?

*O: Okay. It was just a kind of teenage "okay". The next day I happened to work from home, so my kid came up, came over, ...smiling from ear to ear, which is rare in his case because he's generally dark and gothic, and he says he's thought about all this through and he's very proud of us for having just such non-normative parents. So that...yeah.*

According to my research participants who have teenage kids say coming out to the older kids who come from the generation that very quickly gain the knowledge

about possible diversified sexual identities is much easier, than coming out to your catholic parents, and explaining what consensual non-monogamy is.

## Conclusion

In contemporary Poland, parenting issues have become a battleground not only for family models, but also for the shape of social life and democracy. The concept of motherhood and family still brings a lot of emotions in the Polish political and public debate that is constituted by conflicted discourses. Although the conservative party (PiS) is no longer ruling, there are no legal changes – for example in the matter of women rights, abortion law or same-sex civil unions and that is because the vast majority of the Polish political sphere is more conservative than at least a significant part of the Polish society itself. Even though the parliamentary elections were won by a coalition of parties promising to liberalize abortion laws and legalize non-heteronormative unions, Poland is not even close to implementing these pre-election promises.

As Agnieszka Graff rightly observes Poland is not the only country where a hegemonic discourse of motherhood exists, where the symbolic mother plays a central role and elements of nationalist, neoliberal, and Catholic ideologies blend and reinforce each other. However, compared to other cultural contexts, this discourse appears to be more enduring in the Polish context and has less potential for emancipation (Graff, 2008). Although the Polish society is far from being dominantly liberal, if we look at the way of living of my research participants – the change on the individualistic level of practices is already happening.

My research demonstrates that despite prevailing conservative discourse and gradual changes, social familial practices and approaches to mothering can undergo significant transformations and exhibit forms of resistance. Thus, Poland cannot be regarded as a monolithic country in terms of values. Even in a context dominated by conservative norms and mononormatic stereotypes, individuals and families can find ways to resist, adapt, and redefine their roles. The mononormative assumptions that are very much present in Polish society give an opportunity to play with it, escape the social stigma and stay invisible if one wants to. Some families may adopt non-traditional approaches to parenting that challenge societal norms, such as shared parenting and mothering. The choice to remain invisible or visible can also be a powerful strategy for negotiating identity and belonging within a complex social landscape. This socio-cultural context, marked by contradictory values and an absence of established frameworks for openly engaging in non-monogamous relationships, combined with the common sentiment among my research participants that they must “figure everything out on your own”, makes my research topic distinctly unique.

In conclusion, the examination of the strategies and practices of non-monogamous mothers in Poland reveals that, despite the significant influence of prevailing

conservative discourse, Polish society is more diverse than the dominant narratives suggest. The processes of secularization, coupled with the advancing individualistic discourse and a selective approach to faith, contribute to a gradual liberalization of societal norms and values. Even though most of the familial constellations based on non-monogamy cannot be visible in a public sphere nor they can be socially or legally recognized, there are people who practice multi-partner parenting and alternative ways of doing mothering in contemporary Poland. In doing so they are slowly affecting a monolithic notion of (nuclear) family based on heterosexual marriage. There is a hope that the social practices of this minority will gradually influence the broader understanding of parenting potentially leading to at least partial but safe visibility in the public sphere in the future.

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