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“I’ll Tell You What You Need to Know.” How Respondents Negotiate the Sense of Meaning-Making—Methodological Reflections from the Field Based on Ethnographic Study of Lesbian Parenting in Poland

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Abstract The aim of this paper is to shed light on how various interactional and interpretational contexts arising from specific researcher—research participants relationship established in the course of doing ethnographic study on sensitive, and thus often enough resistant to immediate cognition, phenomenon, namely, lesbian parenting in Poland, as well as different ways of embracing these, may factor into the research process. Drawing on specific dilemmas I encountered while doing the study at hand—from engaging a hard-to-reach population that, in a sense, wished to be reached, and the consequences thereof; through being pushed out of the comfort zone as the women under study, in the wake of becoming acquainted with the analysis I offered, “switched” from narrating their “in-order-to motives” to reflecting on the “because motives” behind their actions; to contextualizing emotions arising as my response to experiencing the issues they face (on a daily basis), to name a few—my goal here is to discuss how different ways of collecting and analyzing data—in the context of developing rapport with the women under study—have had an impact on conceptualizing and re-framing the data at hand.

Keywords Lesbian Parenting in Poland; Ethnographic Study; Methodological Reflections; Making Meaning; Challenges of Fieldwork

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Strier, and Pessach (2009:282 as cited in Råheim 2016) stress, “to gain access to the participants’ private and intimate experiences… the researcher must enhance a sense of rapport with people and needs to build a considerate and sympathetic relationship and sense of mutual trust.” Taking a closer look at the aforementioned points—one of the many the researcher is advised to embrace while embarking on a qualitative (and especially—ethnographic) study—makes the vulnerability of both the researcher and research participants, surfacing in the context of the study, evident. Things can get even “messier” when the researcher aims at accessing the so-called hard-to-reach groups, and thus needs to look beneath the overt surface realities to understand the hidden ones. In fact, a number of researchers have addressed the above concerns, offering their insights and guidance; and yet, every research context seems to be unique in its own way, and so are the challenges and tricks of the trade that one draws from it. Still, I believe, this does not make the attempts to add to the debate insignificant, especially if one takes into account the imbalance in our relation. Instead, I wish to discuss how—to my astonishment—it was the women under study who, on the one hand, literally structuring, and thus enabling the research to be successful in terms of reaching the population, and, on the other hand, symbolically controlling the generation of categories, guided the process of collecting data, as well as the flow of information, thus, to some extent, taking the role of the activists who “wished to be heard”; how the research participants’ definitions of the situation (those regarding the research itself, as well as those of passing [Koffman 2007]) have been disturbed due to becoming acquainted with the analysis I offered, what made them reflect on their “because motives” (Schütz 1953), as well as challenge the way(s) we study see themselves in the context of acting under unfavorable socio-cultural climate and conceptual invisibility outlines the broader analytical framework of how they build interactional concepts, as well as the experiences of motherhood.

The aim of this paper is to discuss methodological, as well as ethical issues that gradually emerged in the course of doing my five-year ethnographic study of planned lesbian parenting in Poland. Due to no legal (and little social) recognition of same-sex families in Poland (in this case—lesbian couples whose child had been artificially conceived in the course of their relationship), embedded in the context of internalized heteronormativity (see, e.g., Abramowicz 2010; Oliwa 2012; Mizielińska and Stasińska 2013; Slany 2013; Majka-Rostek 2014; Mizielińska, Abramowicz, and Stasińska 2014; Wojciechowska 2014; 2015; Wycisk 2014; Mizielińska, Struzik, and Król 2017), the population under study seems to fall into the hard-to-reach groups category. Thus, one may expect the paper at hand to be a story dwelling on difficulties regarding gaining access, establishing rapport, and winning the research participants’ trust, interspersed with “tales” referring to overcoming an inherent imbalance in our relation. Instead, I wish to discuss how—to my astonishment—it was the women under study who, on the one hand, literally structuring, and thus enabling the research to be successful in terms of reaching the population, and, on the other hand, symbolically controlling the generation of categories, guided the process of collecting data, as well as the flow of information, thus, to some extent, taking the role of the activists who “wished to be heard”; how the research participants’ definitions of the situation (those regarding the research itself, as well as those of passing [Koffman 2007]) have been disturbed due to becoming acquainted with the analysis I offered, what made them reflect on their “because motives” (Schütz 1953), as well as challenge the way(s) we study see themselves in the context of acting under unfavorable socio-cultural climate and conceptual invisibility outlines the broader analytical framework of how they build interactional concepts, as well as the experiences of motherhood.

A Study of Planned Lesbian Parenting in Poland—Methodological Notes

As mentioned earlier, issues discussed in the article at hand are based on data collected during my five-year ethnographic study of planned lesbian parenting in Poland. Among the couples who participated in the study are 20 lesbian couples4 whose child had been artificially conceived (due to intrauterine insemination or in vitro fertilization) in the course of their relationship.5

Semi-structured interviews, which I conducted in various configurations, were the leading technique of data collection. When meeting a given family for the first time, I interviewed both of the women, unless the couple split up or only one of the women was a biological mother of a child from previous relationship (marriage ended with divorce). The next step was to interview the women separately—during our succeeding meetings.6 Although I am aware of the limitations of thusly conducting the interviews, my decision to do so was twofold. First, the majority of the research participants insisted on telling their stories in the presence of their partners (which, although can be interpreted in terms of anticipating tension such a meeting may cause, was explained in more “pragmatic” terms—since their child was still very young, one person was unable...
to simultaneously take care of the child and focus on narrating; another thing is that the women perceived such a solution as lucrative for me—instead of one person, I was able to interview two people, what was to “guarantee” that no important fact was to be omitted or distorted, which—on the analytical level—allows the researcher to make assumptions regarding the nature of the relationship the women had. Second, being aware that such a way of conducting interviews would allow witnessing how the women relate to their partners, as well as their child,7 what, in the context of the study, is extremely valuable, I decided to comply with their request. During the interviews with both partners I paid special attention to not touch on any sensitive (or potentially so) issues, which, if emerged, were brought to light at the time of individual meetings. Moreover, since most of the couples do not publically reveal the nature of their relationship (in certain situational contexts or in front of certain people), the participants involved have been anonymized. Thus far I have conducted 64 interviews with the women whose child had been conceived in the course of their relationship—26 interviews with both mothers and 38 individual interviews (17 with biological mothers and 21 with non-biological mothers). The interviews lasted around three to five hours (in case of interviews with both partners) and around one to two hours (in case of individual interviews), and were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The second technique of data collection was overt participant observation, aimed at capturing how the women under study present and practice their family in a visible (both common and institutionalized) social space, as well as how specific social responses to their actions, as interpreted by the women, have had an impact on adapting certain strategies of functioning in the social milieus at hand (such issues were clarified during conversational interviews [see: Konecki 2000; Kleinknecht 2007]). Three families allowed me to accompany them in their everyday life activities such as going to the park, to the shopping mall, to the zoo, picking the child up from nursery school, or playing with the child in the yard or at the playground. Also, one of the families, whom I have known for 4 years now, invited me for their child’s birthday party. Depending on the research participants’ schedules, one (which is usually the case) or both of the mothers are present while I do the observation (we have been once accompanied by one of the research participants’ expected, the women suggested we should continue the interviews a few days later, when they would both have enough time to spare). It was, again, the research participants’ choice to be interviewed in the presence of their partners. Also, it is worth mentioning that although a two-year interval may not seem enough to offer an insight into potential shifts, many of the women narrated how (and why) they had revised their strategies of parenting their family as their child was growing up and thus becoming an aware social actor (preschool children).

8 Since one of my aims is to see whether/how the research participants’ situation evolve over time, I intend to interview each of the couples at—at least—two points in time. Thus far I have interviewed 7 couples twice (in case of 4 families in 2014 and 2016, and in case of 3 other couples in 2015 and 2017) and 2 families 3 times (in 2013, 2015, and 2017). One of the couples has been interviewed twice in the timeframe of one week since our first encounter lasted longer than they to two hours, with the notes being taken during or right after the observation. All data gathered during the course of the study have been analyzed according to grounded theory methodology procedures (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Konecki 2000; Charmaz 2009).

The remaining sections of the article, referring to specific issues I encountered while doing the study at hand, are based on my field notes (interspersed with brief narration excerpts), illustrating and revealing not only my concerns regarding certain dilemmas but also exemplifying the researcher’s (and, of course, the research participants’) vulnerability surfacing while doing ethnographic study on sensitive issues.

Let Me Let You In. When the Research Participants’ Perspective “Changes the Rules”

Embarking on a qualitative study involving the participation of the hard-to-reach, one certainly expects the path to be rocky. First of all, due to various reasons—in this case, internalized heteronormativity, not to say homophobia (see: Mizielińska, Struzik, and Król 2017), which has had an impact on the ways one controls information regarding their families—gaining access may represent a great challenge, and the failure to do so—cause frustration, everything I embraced a few years back while doing research on how female escorts see themselves—and are seen—in their professional context. Thus, this time, equipped with the knowledge and tricks of the trade a number of researchers had offered, I was “prepared.” Only this time it turned out to be different.

What I did not embrace in the course of constructing my imagery was that—if this was not already the case—most of the women I encountered during the study were striving to meet other individuals with similar experiences—for both practical (e.g., to find out how they deal with specific difficulties one encounters in the institutionalized social spaces), as well as symbolic (e.g., to have a support group whose “backup” may be seen as a milestone in achieving the state of ontological security [Giddens 2010]) reasons. Of course, the social stigma attached to non-heteronormative families, still prevalent in Poland (see, e.g., Oliwa 2012; Mizielińska and Staśińska 2013; Wycisk 2014), plays a role in their attempts to hide and reveal specific information, as well as to protect their children from anticipated interactional obstacles (see: Wojciechowska 2015). And, I was about to discover the importance of the aforementioned in the context of my fieldwork, especially in relation to how the research participants were making meaning of taking part in the project.

Participants’ Sense of Activism as the Main Drive and How It “Guided” the Research

The first three couples who I interviewed in a similar timeframe were reached independently thanks to my social network, which is nothing new when it comes to conducting qualitative research. Still, to my astonishment, I have soon discovered that the
research participants not only know other families socially but also share the issues (both factual and conceptual) being discussed during the interviews. When I first met the second (to be interviewed) planned lesbian family, they—almost right after I entered the room—offered to get me in touch with their friends (as they knew how difficult it was to reach the population) who, as I figured judging by the amount of details the women provided me with, I was to meet just two days later. At first I was reluctant to reveal the information at hand, but I eventually did—to stop one of the participants from calling them—stating that it was too much trouble and, possibly, I might have already reached their acquaintances. Later that day I got a text, “Yeah, that’s them:) Good luck!”10 On the one hand, this may be seen as a good thing—the participants were willing to vouch for me, what—in many instances—turned out to be of great importance. For example, one of the couples recruited via Internet consented to be interviewed—as I found out later—in the aftermath of having a chat with their acquaintances (planned lesbian family) who I had already met; the latter were not trying to convince them to have a conversation with me—all they did was to share their taking part in the study of lesbian parenting with their friends; so when I reached the couple to be interviewed, they already knew about my project, as well as that I was, in fact, an academic, and not, for example, a journalist. But, on the other hand, such a situation may also cause several issues to be dealt with. Let me come back to the aforementioned example—at first I was willing to interpret the situation at hand in terms of a great, but how lucky, coincidence. This was until—on the later stage of the research—I met a couple who literally “guided” the recruitment process. Not only did they introduce me to three lesbian families but they also were the ones who made one couple get in touch with me, and not the other way around.11 What is more, they would also follow up the process—to make sure that I, indeed, managed to schedule the interviews. For instance, again, as I found out later, one of the couples I had been referred to by the family at hand, knowing that I reside in a different city and teach classes on specific days (what can easily be googled, but was, in fact, communicated by the latter), scheduled the interview accordingly. One may ask why the research participants were so eager to give me a hand in getting to know them, or, more precisely, their situation. The answer to this question, I believe, is best embodied in the following interview excerpt:

What our society needs to understand is that we’re the same. When it comes to raising our children, we have the same problems, the same dilemmas, the same concerns, or… I don’t know, speaking about raising a child to be a good person… What I mean is that we’re not different, it’s our situation that is, yes? But, this [additional issues that make the situation different, resulting from being a lesbian mother in a heteronormative society] doesn’t happen in a vacuum. [individual interview with a 31-year-old biological mother of a 6-month-old child]

In fact, a bunch of women participating in the study—at some point of our meeting—would bring up issue(s) that need(s) to be understood by “our society.” Thus, what clearly emerge from the above narration are two issues—challenging, to some extent, the internalized heteronormativity (one’s own, as well as its very concept [“we’re the same”]) by re-framing the notion of difference in the context of externalization (the situation [not me] is different due to external causes [arising from the internalized heteronormativity, which is to be challenged]), and doing so by “becoming” an “example” (a role-model contradicting iniquitous stereotypes embedded in our social reality. Thus, being aware that understanding the concept of internalized heteronormativity does not equal overcoming the problem at hand, especially in the context of challenging the concept’s emancipation by referring to the concept itself, the research participants, I believe, took on the role of social activists who modestly attempt to challenge the problem by elucidating their perspective—making “our society” see where they stand by making them hear an alternative form of narration, the one resulting from lived experiences. And, that is why, I believe, the research participants engaged in the project at hand to such a large extent.12 An additional—automatic—benefit the women under study receive is, as stressed by Mizielińska, Struzik, and Król (2017), the one of enlarging their support group—mothers whose experiences can be compared with their own, and who may be capable of offering a valuable piece of advice.

As I have mentioned before in this section, the research participants’ great involvement in the study, although encouraged by many (see, e.g., Becker et al. 2014; Cataldi 2014; Roman 2016), may cause some difficulties to be dealt with. One of the most obvious dilemmas that may come to one’s mind is the one of power imbalance between the parties—the issue of being “at the mercy” of the research participants. Still, this is not the problem that I wish to address here, at least not until I reach the conceptual level of the study. In fact, I gratefully embraced what I had been offered in terms of gaining access—and this is where the problem starts. At some point of the research I realized that, compared to what I was used to when it comes to recruiting participants—that is, “fighting like a lioness” to be let in and win their trust—this time I become “indolent.” Was relying on the research participants’ social networks to such a large extent something bad? Actually, I am not so sure—after all, proceeding via snowball sampling is what we all do. Still, at some point I kept on wondering whether it would not have been better if I had exploited more avenues in reaching the participants—in order to diversify the population. On the other hand, although I still try to achieve my goal, despite many various attempts, I did not manage to recruit a planned lesbian family with a school-age child (which, for many analytical reasons, seems to be important). Thus, perhaps gaining access, in

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10 At some point of the research—still at its relatively early stage—when I realized how important it was for the research participants to get to know other lesbian families, possibly facing similar issues, and was asked by one of the couples to get them in touch with the women I have thus far interviewed, I would inquire—once the interview was completed—whether, if asked to do so, I was entitled to give their cell numbers, or other contact information, to other mothers participating in the study. All of the women consented, and some offered to do so without me asking their permission.

11 Of course, there were couples who—despite their acquaintances’ prompting—did not consent to take part in the study, since, as I have been told, they preferred to remain anonymous (to my knowledge, there were two such couples).

12 In the case of the study at hand, the participants’ engagement was, to a large degree, driven by the (commonly shared) sense of being (socially) framed as deviants. Still, as stressed by Becker and colleagues (2014), the participants may take on the role of social activists informing and educating the community members due to applying specific research strategies.
this case—reaching a particular population—is, to a large degree, a matter of luck! Yet another issue resulting from the participants’ engagement in the research, which I will address in the remaining sections of the paper, referring to (re)framing some of the analytical categories emerging in the course of the study, is how—despite a number of conceptual and interactional misunderstandings we had—the research participants’ willingness to share their stories contributed to the knowledge co-construction, which had an impact on the way I contextualized the data (and thus—analytically structured the results of the study).15

Supersaturating “Problem Categories”—Trying to Help vs. “Controlling” Information

One of the issues—related to the extent to which some of the research participants engaged in the study at hand—that caused me a lot of trouble, was the problem of supersaturating “problem categories.” As I have mentioned before in this section, some of the women “supervised” the research process, meaning, they would discuss with their already interviewed acquaintances the issues we touched on during the meeting (as I clarified later with them, this has been done, for the most part, in order to “prepare oneself for the interview,” as well as being aware of their sense of activism, I relatively often reflected on the degree to which the flow of information has been “controlled” by the women under study, or—simply put—on the issue of “constructing” data. Still, since I believe that my task as a researcher is to gain a multi-sided insight into the reality under study and apprehend the participants’ notions of “whatness” and “howness” (Kleinknecht 2007) rather than to capture a “true” reflection of analyzed reality (besides, considering that the way individuals present themselves seems to be, to a large extent, dependent on one’s volitionality—something a researcher has little control over), the aforementioned issues were not my greatest concern. Instead, I focused on a different obstacle, namely, supersaturating “problem categories,” which, I believe, has been done with a lesser degree of intentionality involved when it comes to presenting oneself and more due to the mechanism of giving primacy to the already known (see, e.g., Zimbardo and Leippe 2004).

Since most of the participants wished to know how the data would be analyzed and used, including the methodological context, I offered extensive explanations, referring, among others, to generating categories (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Konecki 2000; Charmaz 2009), which—later on—some of the women framed as “problem categories.” Having identified the issues that had been discussed with their acquaintances—and understanding these issues in terms of “problem categories”—some of the participants aimed at filling such conceptual areas with content (seeing doing so, as I have been told at some point, in terms of “contributing” to the study), thusly supersaturating “problem categories.” The aforementioned conceptual misunderstanding, driven, to a large extent, by the level of participants’ personal, but politically underpinned, engagement, resulted in specific models of structuring one’s narration.16 First, as already mentioned, the women under study were “determined” to cover (the surface of) all issues defined as “problem categories” (understood thusly, e.g., judging by the amount of time spent on discussing these with other couples) as vividly as possible, even if, from their point of view, such issues were not the most vital in the context of their experience (several such categories were, e.g., making an informed decision to enlarge their family, experiencing social (conceptual) invisibility of lesbian families, or projecting strategies for raising children, to name a few). Second, some women were reluctant to dwell on issues they thought were “insignificant,” meaning, not falling into the “problem categories” (i.e., I remember listening to extensive narrations about verbalizing the family [in certain situational contexts and/or in front of certain people], and then facing their surprise resulting from being asked, e.g., how they do shopping when with their child). Third, keeping in mind specific “problem categories,” some of the research participants aimed several fragments of their narrations at highlighting similarities or differences identified between their experiences and those of their already interviewed acquaintances (i.e., “I know from Kama that they told you about those medical appointments [referring to those situations when a non-biological mother takes her child to a doctor], and, in our case, this is pretty much the same, that is...”).

What is visible from the above observations is to what extent the participants’ engagement in the

15 Of course, I am aware that the situation at hand was, to a large degree, “fueled” by how I acted as a researcher—after all, it was me who extensively discussed the way I was going to analyze the data. Still, I decided to do so in response to how inquisitive (and informed in the area) the research participants turned out to be. As I figured out, some of the women under study were psychology and pedagogy graduates, and—for the most part—they were the ones who—for various reasons—insisted on finding out how the data were to be analyzed, including (in one instance) asking me for providing them with some references on grounded theory methodology. Hence, believing that the research participants have the right to know what (and how) will happen with their narrations, I have decided to answer their questions regarding the methodological context of the study.

16 Of course, this can also be due to not retrospectively analyzing the process of each action one takes (Schütz 1953).
research may actually be seen in terms of a limitation; in this case, “holding down” the context of discovery (Konecki 2000). I have no doubt (due to many conversations we had on the subject) that the women under study’s intention was, in fact, to contribute to the project, along with pursuing their own agenda. Still, it is here where the previously mentioned power imbalance took its toll—seen as the one who needed help (but also the one who can potentially give a hand if offered the tools), I was provided with “what I needed to know.” Be it due to intentional or unintentional actions of the participants, or perhaps my “mistake” in the process of collecting data I compared the process at hand to the participants, or perhaps my “mistake” in the process of collecting data I compared the process at hand to an awkward dance where the parties’ perspectives and understandings clash. What did I do to overcome this obstacle? Besides discovering and thus treating the issue as yet another exploratory and analytical area, I proceeded as I usually do—I let the participants speak, grasping and then deepening the problems embedded in their lived experiences; and perhaps that is why our encounters lasted longer than one hour—a timeframe that our students are at times advised to embrace when attempting to “get to know” the respondents’ perspective. Of course, the above is not to suggest that the longer an interview the better; rather, my intention is to highlight the importance of “following” the research participants wherever they choose to go, guiding them in the process by the questions we ask, for two reasons—first, this is, I believe, one of the symbolic ways of actually “controlling” the process of collecting data; second, the context of discovery may lie where one does not expect to find it.

Negotiating One’s Definition of the Situation Due to How the Story Has Been Told

This section provides the room for discussing how phrasing my analysis, as well as the conclusions I offered, has had an impact on negotiating the meaning of one’s actions in different contexts and how our different social locations have been identified as a factor which has had an impact on the contextualization of knowledge, but also as a trigger to re-think one’s definition(s) of the situation.

One of the issues I analyze based on the data collected during the study is conceptual invisibility of lesbian mothers raising their children in Poland, the invisibility pertaining, to a great extent, to those women who cannot be socially “decoded” as real mothers or—for obvious reasons—father figures—the invisibility of non-biological lesbian mothers (those women who—in the light of ideological norm of monomomatalism—simply cannot be mothers). Due to experiencing the conceptual non-existence of “ready-made” role scripts, coupled with internalized heteronormativity, while constructing specific ways of displaying their families, some women—in order to protect their children from anticipated emanations of homophobia—choose to “play the game” according to the rules imposed by our society, that is, they adapt a strategy based on apparent invisibility (in certain interactive, situational, or spatial contexts), which allows them passing as a family. To put long things short, a woman with a child will most probably be socially “decoded” as this child’s relative, possibly—a (real) mother. The issues raised above, as I suggested in the analysis, first, exemplify how non-biological lesbian mothers unintentionally (choose to) self-marginize themselves while opting between their need of identity realization and their child’s ontological security; and, second, may raise concerns as to whether the adaptation of apparent visibility strategy does not, in fact—in a long-term—have an impact on perpetuating the norms they find oppressive.

As I have mentioned before in the previous section, for most of the women, the main “drive” for contributing to the study was their hope that “producing” an alternative form of narration, the one resulting from lived experiences, would bring on an educational effect—resulting in the understanding of their situation. For this reason, I believe, they were willing to share their stories. Also, I have been asked to provide them with their stories when these are embodied in my words, which, being aware of the value of their insights, I gladly embraced. But, what happens when the way I dress one’s story is different from what has been expected? Well, I was about to find out.

Reservations some of the women had mainly referred to the last part of my analysis—a suggestion that undertaking certain actions may result in perceiving the norms they see as unfair. Why was this assumption so disturbing? During a conversation with one of the couples participating in the study—one of those who allowed me to accompany them in their daily activities—it has been explained to me that it was due to how accurate the statement at hand turned out to be. What also resulted from our conversation was that my outsider status, allowing me to adapt a different perspective and thus highlight those elements of their verbalized experience that they do not realize (anymore) due to its habitual nature, allowed them to see a “disturbing paradox” which distressed them in the first place (of course, such a “wake” was a mutual experience); although, as I have been told, “some things are difficult to change” due to external forces (i.e., anticipated pejorative, if any, social recognition of social mother identity) one simply cannot control.

What has been learned from the encounter at hand? To start with, this interactional episode made the depth and the degree of previously deconstructed vulnerability of the participants almost “tangible”—I was aware of the complexity of their situation, as well as of the impact it had on their identity formation; still, the conversation at hand, framed around our (different) perspectives, allowed me to (more fully) grasp the burden associated with experiencing dissonance while symbolically oscillating between what they see as their children’s welfare and their longing for a sense of mother identity (also see: Mizielńska, Struzik, and Król 2017). Due to the clash of our perspectives, what has been framed as overwhelming selfishness (choosing a child’s ontological security over one’s need of identity realization) “gained” yet another conceptual dimension—that of a threat. In this sense, reflecting on the project—ed state of actions (“in-order-to-motives”) has been supplemented by retrospectively grasping what—in a variety of contexts—led one to what had been...
projected (“because motives”) (Schütz 1953), and the consequences related to the process. Thus, the idea of a role-model, dressed differently from what has been expected, turned out to be yet another conceptual issue which, in order to be integrated with other self-designations, needed to be reframed.

Feeling pushed out of my comfort zone, I blamed myself for not taking enough responsibility for research participants’ well-being. After all, it was my duty. Still, the above reflections are not intended to make me feel better as a researcher due “confessing my sins.” Instead, I wish to highlight the importance of co-operating with research participants at every step of the way (see: Cataldi 2014) as proceeding so may result not only in the contextualization but also co-construction of knowledge embedded in a variety of perspectives (Becker et al. 2014). In this sense, if the process of retelling their stories is done in the hope of contributing to the understanding of their everyday lives, it should, I believe, be preceded by learning from one another. Would I by no means intended to “include” the women in the study as research participants—in the case of my comfort zone, I blamed myself. When the observation was over, I asked both of the women whether they would agree to do a similar thing when we next meet—asking their child to then tell me what/who was in the picture(s) (cf., Konecki 2010; Byczkowska 2012). Of course, I have explained my agenda behind the request at hand—I wished to see how the child would identify and linguistically convey the family relations to a person not being part of his close interactional circle, and later discuss the issue(s) at hand with both of the participants. The women agreed to do so.20

To keep things as natural as possible, we make sure that the child did not feel forced to do any-

20 Stating that, “we can no longer rely on adults’ reported accounts of children’s lives if we want to fully understand how young people experience changes in family relationships,” Jacqui Gabb (2013:21) stresses “the incompleteness of LGBT-parent family research when intergenerational perspectives are omitted.” Thus, as Gabb advocates, listening to children—engaged in the study due to using participatory techniques (e.g., photo elicitation)—“emulate them as an integral part of family life (the youngest children Gabb has interviewed were 6-year-old). Although I agree that the children’s perspective cannot be omitted, I also consider their safety in mind. Did I not want to include them in the study as research participants—in the case of my research, they were much younger and not aware social actors (the oldest child was 5-year-old).

21 Of course, I am aware that since both mothers were present and it was them who asked their child to tell me what/who was in the pictures, I—most probably—had not been seen by the child at hand as belonging to the universe other than private. Still, my intention was to invite the women to a joint discussion regarding their language-mediated family relations—which, I hoped, was to take place due to presenting the content of the photographs—and not to “exclusively” focus on how the child would describe what/who was in the pictures.

22 Such a way of collecting data has been used in case of 7 more families (whose child—at the time of our encounters—was for practical reasons—more than 2 years of age). In 5 instances, the mother(s) asked their child to tell me what/who was in the pictures after the interview we had before.

How the Concept of Language-Mediated Visibility Contributed to the Co-Construction of Knowledge

One of the categories that emerged from the data at a relatively early stage of the research was lan-

The women have been viewing their vacation photographs taken a few months back. While doing so, they had been making their 3-year-old child join in the discussion by asking simple questions, such as: Do you remember how we…? When the observation was over, I asked both of the women whether they would agree to do a similar thing when we next meet—asking their child to then tell me what/who was in the picture(s) (cf., Konecki 2010; Byczkowska 2012). Of course, I have explained my agenda behind the request at hand—I wished to see how the child would identify and linguistically convey the family relations to a person not being part of his close interactional circle, and later discuss the issue(s) at hand with both of the participants. The women agreed to do so.20

To keep things as natural as possible, we make sure that the child did not feel forced to do any-

20 Stating that, “we can no longer rely on adults’ reported accounts of children’s lives if we want to fully understand how young people experience changes in family relationships,” Jacqui Gabb (2013:21) stresses “the incompleteness of LGBT-parent family research when intergenerational perspectives are omitted.” Thus, as Gabb advocates, listening to children—engaged in the study due to using participatory techniques (e.g., photo elicitation)—“emulate them as an integral part of family life (the youngest children Gabb has interviewed were 6-year-old). Although I agree that the children’s perspective cannot be omitted, I also consider their safety in mind. Did I not want to include them in the study as research participants—in the case of my research, they were much younger and not aware social actors (the oldest child was 5-year-old).

21 Of course, I am aware that since both mothers were present and it was them who asked their child to tell me what/who was in the pictures, I—most probably—had not been seen by the child at hand as belonging to the universe other than private. Still, my intention was to invite the women to a joint discussion regarding their language-mediated family relations—which, I hoped, was to take place due to presenting the content of the photographs—and not to “exclusively” focus on how the child would describe what/who was in the pictures.

22 Such a way of collecting data has been used in case of 7 more families (whose child—at the time of our encounters—was for practical reasons—more than 2 years of age). In 5 instances, the mother(s) asked their child to tell me what/who was in the pictures after the interview we had before.

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(as well as analytically embedding), to at least some degree, the category of language-mediated visibility—discussions embodying the process of knowledge co-construction. Still, two related outcomes were way more important for me. First, as I have been told, some of the insights we shared turned out to be beneficial in practical terms. Second, and the more important, due to taking part in the process of analyzing data, the participants felt empowered and, as some of them have stated, the actual part(s) of the study.

Collecting vs. “Experiencing” Data. The Importance of Contextualization

As mentioned in the previous sections, one of the concepts that, to a great degree, structured both research participants’ narrations, as well as my resulting analysis was the one of internalized heteronormativity, which—in the context of the study—can be seen as a form of social control upholding traditional values. It is worth stressing that although most of the women participating in the study did not experience any emanation(s) of homophobia aimed at them, being aware of how non-heteronormativity is addressed in public discourses (see, e.g., Oliwa 2012; Mizielińska and Stasińska 2013), they nonetheless anticipate that such an instance may take place in the future. Also, for many of them, this is the immediate reason for adapting a strategy based on apparent invisibility when it comes to “presenting” their family.

I must confess that I had a hard time understanding their fears in this area, possibly due to our different social locations, until I personally “experienced” what it feels like to be seen as a subject to be “defined.” A field note, which I present below, had been done right after one of my first observations—when I was in a park with one on the research participants and her child, watching them playing together at a playground.

What a weird situation... There’s this lady in her late 60s who sits next to me on a bench. No “Hello,” no small talk, she asks how often I come here with my sister (we both have black hair, must be that...). I gently replied that A. was not my sister but acquaintance, “what a lovely park...” New questions to come... I really don’t want to put A. in an awkward position (somehow I feel very uncomfortable about this “conversation” we have), I change the subject. The lady often comes to this park with her grandson (no grandson here...), since her daughter and son-in-law both work till late hours. Next, she informs me she quite often sees my acquaintance (she pronounced this word in a “funny” way) here with her child, but also with another lady, “Is she a baby-sitter? ‘Cause my daughter...” OH, COME ON! Guess I’m now ready to hear a question about a daddy (or, maybe I’m just paranoid)... Don’t really feel entitled to have any kind of conversation about A. (plus I’m angry ‘cause this morbid curiosity of mine makes me stay just a little bit longer), I tell the lady I have to go, wish her a nice day. She also left, maybe went to look for her grandson... A. tells me the lady I just spoke with is one of the local “bigots” who would walk around peeking in on other people’s lives. A. knows them quite well, not the first time they’ve done this kind of stalking... “Male or female, young or old, healthy or disabled, these are your only options, nothing in between.” “I got used to this.” A. will be back in the park tomorrow, so will the “bigots.” [field note]

Certainly visible in the above excerpt are emotions which arose due to having experienced a specific form of social control—in this case, mediated by one’s curiosity regarding others. What can also be observed is that—at some point—I asked myself whether the way I framed the situation was not paranoïd. Was this woman really making an attempt to gather (more) information regarding the research participant’s private life, or was my (emotional) interpretation of her actions a result of becoming—in the course of the research—“oversensitized” to any form of inquiry potentially framing heteronormativity as a norm? In fact, it does not matter. What matters, instead, is that—regardless of my interpretational frame—taking part in this interactional episode made me realize, to at least some extent, what kind of contextual concerns the women under study face on a daily basis. What is more, as it turned out to be true based on the example at hand, passing as a family on the grounds of apparent invisibility is just a matter of time (Goffman 2007), since one’s curiosity regarding others (sense) is a very strong drive. Thus, lesbian mothers, especially non-biological mothers, may be conceptually invisible, but they definitely do not pass unseen; and being aware of this—of being seen and watched—has an impact on how planned lesbian families choose their strategies of acting in public (visible) spaces (be they common or institutionalized).

Was the aim of this section to highlight the “obvious”—that the triangulation of data enables capturing different dimensions of the same phenomena, or to stress the importance of apprehending the research participants’ perspectives? In fact, I wished to address two related issues. First, as mentioned earlier in the paper, not only is the participants’ everyday perception significantly reduced but they also decide, based on a variety of criteria, what is worth including in their stories—for instance, when asked if she had ever experienced being “watched” in a specific way due to being a lesbian (non-biological) mother (referring to what the women I accompanied in the park had said about her fears resulting from living in a society that “doesn’t tolerate those who stand out in any way... and I feel like they look at me as if they knew”), the participant denied; still, it was her who later on, during the observation, told me that she knew by sight the woman who inquired about my acquaintance. Second, and more importantly, my intention was to show the relevance of contextualizing the data, including one’s emotions, since doing so, as suggested above, may significantly contribute to both grasping the participants’ perspective(s), as well as (re)framing the data and, thus offering more (focused) analytical paths in the presentation of their stories.
Concluding Remarks

Based on my five-year ethnographic study of planned lesbian parenting in Poland my intention was to share in this article how various interactional and interpretationnal contexts arising from specific researcher—research participants relationship, different ways of collecting data, as well as what we consider to be our data may factor into the research process and have an impact on how one conceptualizes and (re)frames the data. In doing so, and the hope that other researchers operating in similar conceptual or contextual areas will find my insights useful in their endeavors, I interspersed my experiences with several analytical reflections in order to contextualize specific dilemmas I encountered on my way.

Focusing on the importance of deconstructing our imagery regarding specific researcher—research participants relationship, I dwelled on how the women’s engagement in the study, enabling it to be successful in terms of reaching the population, may, at the same time, represent one of the limitations one has to face (and overcome) in order to manage fluctuations of “power balance” between the parties, as well as to avoid the supersaturation of categories. Next, referring to the issue of research participants’ (and researcher’s) vulnerability surfacing in the course of doing ethnographic study on sensitive issues, I attempted to highlight how the way we reach our conclusions, as well as present our analysis, may challenge the way(s) the participants make meaning. Lastly, drawing on specific ways of collecting data and the outcomes thereof, I reflected on the importance of co-construction and contextualization of knowledge.

A surfacing remark that structures the insights I offer in this article is that doing ethnographic study on sensitive issues gives us the possibility to learn not only about the people we encounter on our way but also about ourselves, and such a lesson, I believe, can only be learned if we embrace our research endeavors in a (methodologically) reflexive way.

References


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Abstrakt: Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przyjrzenie się temu, w jaki sposób osadzenie relacji na linii badacz–badani, jaka powsta-
je w toku realizacji badań etnograficznych dotyczących zjawisk trudno dostępnych bezpośrednio poznaniu, w tym przypadku
macierzyństwa lesbijek w Polsce, w różnych kontekstach interakcyjnych i interpretacyjnych, jak i określone sposoby radzenia sobie
w ramach tych kontekstów mogą wpłynąć na proces badawczy. Odnosząc się do konkretnych dylematów, jakich doświadczyłam
w toku badania – począwszy od docierania do trudno dostępnej grupy, która – w pewnym sensie – chciała by do niej dotrwać, oraz
następstw takiej sytuacji; poprzez poczucie być wyszuconą ze strefy komfortu, gdy po zapoznaniu się z częścią analizy danych ba-
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Słowa kluczowe: macierzyństwo lesbijek w Polsce, badania etnograficzne, refleksje metodologiczne, nadawanie znaczenia,
wyzwania w badaniach terenowych

Citation