

Voluntarily childless men: socio-cultural reasons why young Poles are not assuming a parental role

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Abstract: The author explores the phenomenon of voluntary childlessness in Poland. She presents the results of her own research as part of a broader analysis of the issue of intentional childlessness. The focus of the article is on the reasons why men do not take on a parental role. The first part of the article covers the socio-cultural context of the research into voluntary childlessness, while the second part discusses the results of qualitative research conducted using, among other things, focus group and in-depth interviews with voluntarily childless men. It shows the reasons why men do not assume a parental role and the types of male childlessness by choice.

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According to statistical data and the results of sociological studies, an increasing number of people are postponing the decision to start or enlarge a family, or are deciding to have one child, while some are giving up on parental roles altogether. The rejection of procreative ambitions may be put in the broader context of contemporary Polish society, e.g. processes of individualisation, individual empowerment, personal (psychologically-and-socially driven) choices. Moreover, the way of treating children and the value ascribed to them has changed dramatically. The literature on the subject usually focuses on the problem and causes of female childlessness, given changes in the social roles performed by women, while men and their in-

fluence on the discussed phenomenon are often overlooked.

The article explores the reasons behind childlessness among young men and types of deliberate male childlessness. The theoretical and methodological framework includes concepts of postmodern societies and interpretations of the gender approach in social research. The article draws on the results of the analysis of data collected within the framework of the author's own qualitative research (analysis of internet forums devoted to childlessness by choice, focus group interviews with voluntarily childless individuals, and individual in-depth interviews with deliberately childless married men).

The social context of the phenomenon of voluntary childlessness

Many social researchers describe contemporary reality using the category of postmodernity. Postmodernity is deprived of dominant ideology and is characterised, among other things, by a pluralism of life styles, family forms, and continuous decision-making. The pluralism of patterns, values, norms and meanings can be observed. In a society under 'postmodernisation' one can observe phenomena such as social differentiation, secularisation and individualisation (Nauman and Hufner 1985 as cited in van Raaij 2001:325). These phenomena especially strongly affect marital and family life, that is, forms of the contemporary family and the relations between its members. Experts in the field emphasise that we are currently experiencing a global revolution in this sphere (e.g., Slany 2002; Kwak 2005; 2014; Sikorska 2009; 2019; Szlendak 2010; Arcimowicz 2013; Dzwonkowska-Godula 2015, and others). Both the form of the contemporary family and the relations between its mem-

bers are closely linked to the transformation and processes taking place at different levels of social life. These processes are primarily generated by the broadly understood modernisation of societies, whereas the current acceleration - the postmodern phase of development - leads to the intensification of transformations in the sphere of intimate life and the conjugal family. The process of individualisation deserves special attention, as it emphasises, among other things, rationality, reflexivity and striving for personal fulfilment (which is not only an option but also as a structural constraint) (e.g., Giddens 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Beck 2004). It is one of the most significant processes affecting the modern family in Western culture. Other key phenomena and processes include the transformation of values and the central role of consumption, which has become one of the interpretative perspectives of contemporary social phenomena. In developed societies, individuals are attaching increasing importance to the quality of life, autonomy, and freedom of expression, and are questioning traditions which may limit them. There is a liberalisation of behavioural patterns, e.g. concerning marital and family life as well as sexual behaviour (e.g., Giddens 2001; 2006; Inglehart and Norris 2009). Apart from the phenomena affecting the contemporary family outlined above (especially the appearance of family forms alternative to the traditional one, including the phenomenon of voluntary childlessness), there are also socio-economic transformations, including the labour market; the development of medicine and modern technologies; transformations in cultural concepts of femininity and masculinity as well as in the relations between genders. The latter are closely associated with the transformation of contemporary motherhood and fatherhood and the perception and treatment of children.

The transformation of masculinity patterns and the phenomenon of voluntary childlessness

Nowadays, the tension between the traditional and modern cultural gender models can be observed. They differ, for example, in the way the differences between men and women are explained (nature *versus* culture), in the definition of gender characteristics and roles, and gender relations. In the traditional model of masculinity (and femininity) we are dealing with polarisation of the sexes i.e. the opposition of characteristics, entailing there are roles and spheres of activity that are considered feminine and masculine (e.g., Deaux and Lewis 1984 as cited in Mandal 2000; 2003; Bem 2000; Pankowska 2005; Arcimowicz 2003). This is based on the strong link between biological sex and the human psyche (Bem 2000), which implies the division into female and male characteristics, social roles and spheres of activity, which in turn determine gender stereotypes that reflect different roles attributed to women and men.

In the traditional model of femininity, the body and physiology determine women's anticipated social roles. The ideal of femininity is associated with procreation, while motherhood is its central and dominant element (Budrowska 2000; 2001; 2003; Bourdieu 2004). In the model discussed here, the roles fulfilled by men are not determined by biology to the same extent as women's roles. This is not to say that men are not expected to be parents, but the implementation of the parental role follows a different pattern. A man should, above all, pass on his genes and his surname, he should 'build a house, plant a tree and raise a son'. Masculinity is associated with fulfilling the role of the head of the family, as well as with responsibility for the family, above all in a material

sense, and is thus associated with external roles performed in the public sphere unrelated to household chores (e.g., Slany 2002; Arcimowicz 2003; Sikorska 2009; Dzwonkowska-Godula 2015, and others).

In contrast, the modern concept of masculinity (and femininity) refers to gender equality and partnership in every area of life. Thus, men are expected to be involved in family life and to share household duties equally. It must be emphasised that such changes did not occur at once. The processes that are interrelated and at the same time generate new patterns of masculinity (and femininity) and gender relations include, among others, mass professional advancement of women which above all undermined the previous position of men in society, including that of being the main or only breadwinner in the family (e.g., Titkow, Budrowska, and Duch 2004; Dzwonkowska-Godula 2015). Moreover, the development of modern contraceptives enabled women in particular to plan their family consciously and independently. The influence of feminism on changing the positions of women and men, patterns of femininity and masculinity and relations between the sexes should not be overlooked (e.g., Ślęczka 1999; Putnam Tong 2002; Slany 2011; Badinter 1998; 2013). As scholars point out, in the modern gender model, individuals are allowed greater freedom and autonomy in the negotiation of roles (Gębuś 2006; Sikorska 2009; Dzwonkowska-Godula 2015). The new gender model is also accompanied by freeing individuals from the imperatives of motherhood and fatherhood. Parenthood is no longer an intrinsic element of femininity and masculinity, which is reflected, among other things, in the phenomenon of voluntary childlessness, as well as the liberation from norms of sexuality (e.g., Giddens 2006; Arcimowicz 2008; Kwak 2014; Dzwonkowska-Godula 2015). According to Giddens, the effect of the aforementioned

processes is, among others, the search for, as well as the construction of, completely different intimate relations to those that existed before. The author of *The Transformation of Intimacy* puts forward the thesis that contemporary times have seen a departure from romantic love and a new type of love has developed – ‘confluent love’, which is based on a ‘pure relationship’ (Giddens 2006). In the search for a satisfying relationship, or if there is desire to maintain one, there is sometimes not enough space or time for a child who could shatter the existing arrangement. Some express the belief that maintaining intimacy and physical closeness with their partner will not be possible once a child is born.

According to Linda Brannon, we can currently distinguish between three categories of men and their responses to changing female social roles. The first category comprises traditional men who are troubled by the changes and do not see any advantages in the emancipation of women, and who perceive women as rivals. The second group consists of men in a state of transition who are able to interact with a woman as a partner in an intimate relationship. These men do not always support the emancipatory aspirations of women but try to adapt to changing female roles by adjusting their attitudes and behaviour accordingly. The third category consists of progressive men who support the feminist movement and especially the concept of the harmfulness of the traditional gender role (Brannon 2002:554-555). As Krzysztof Arcimowicz points out, today in Poland we are dealing with the clash between the traditional and modern gender models, the tension between old and new gender patterns (Arcimowicz 2014:22). The traditional gender model clashes with new ways of defining masculinity (and femininity) that are based on gender equality and partnership. According to Arcimowicz, the concept of speciali-

sation, i.e. the gender-based division of social roles, is being replaced by the concept of complementarity and androgyny (Arcimowicz 2003:55-56). He also points out that the boundaries of gender identity, femininity and masculinity are fluid and may change depending on the (socio-cultural or economic) situation. It is also noteworthy that the beneficiaries of the changes described here are mostly educated people and residents of larger cities. The new, individual order of life does not only influence the situation of women, it is also significant for the contemporary man, who - as Beck (2004) puts it – ‘frees himself’ from traditional family, environmental and religious ties. On the other hand, the fear of new, hitherto unknown demands put on men may appear, as well as the impossibility to cope with possible family and paternal duties, expectations of a female partner, etc.

In the case of men, attention should also be paid to another important aspect of the phenomenon under discussion, namely economic changes and the contemporary labour market. The nature of today’s labour market, which is oriented towards maximising the employee’s productivity and based on their full availability, is not without significance when we look for the reasons why men¹ do not take on a parental role. Arcimowicz states that ‘only a few decades ago there was a consensus that a ‘real man’ is the one who provides for his family through his work and that work is the core of male identity. Today, such a consensus no longer exists (...)’. (Arcimowicz 2003:17). Not only is it absent due to the emergence of the modern inclusive concept of masculinity in which masculinity is presented in a horizontal rather than hierarchical order (Anderson

¹ This issue is also relevant in the case of women who choose not to have children. However, I discuss this in other publications on the subject.

2009), it is also absent due to the emergence (especially in recent years) of the phenomenon of the precariat.² As Guy Standing points out, insecurity in the labour market is associated with the fear of losing what one already has. If we compare the current situation with the past, with previous generations of men, and with the expectations and aspirations instilled in them by family and culture, we can state that it is men rather than women who find themselves in such a situation. As precariousness becomes more widespread and jobs that offer a career path disappear, the loss of face goes hand in hand with a decline in wages and the associated status. As the labour market continues to change, a man accustomed to imagining himself to be in a stable position with a successful career may be at risk of trauma. The prospect of him becoming a 'breadwinner' in the future seems remote (Standing 2011). As Guy Standing points out, contemporary young men take much longer to mature and are not motivated to develop. One of the major consequences of their precarious situation is that more and more young men are living either with their parents or in the vicinity. Precariousness discourages marriage (the number of single-person households is growing; men and women postpone the decision about getting married), leads to late parenthood or abandonment of the idea of having children. After a certain period of living apart from their parents, being in informal or formal relationships, young people also increasingly often return to their families of origin. Such groups of people are sometimes metaphorically called: 'bamboccioni'; 'kippers' i.e. kids who have their hands in their parents' pockets, eroding their

² The precariat, is a social category of people characterised by the fact that their current place of employment is precarious, people who do low-paid work or their income is unstable, there is a high risk of them being laid off, e.g. in a situation of economic deterioration (Vostal 2014 as cited in Cymbranowicz 2016:3).

retirement savings; or 'ipods' (insecure, pressurised, overtaxed, debt-ridden, saving) (Standing 2011).

Changes in contemporary parenting roles and attitudes towards children

The way we treat children and the value we attribute to them has also changed considerably. Elisabeth Badinter points out that in European culture the ideology of parenthood based on love, tenderness and a close and strong relationship with the child did not appear until the end of the 18th century. Before that, due to the low status of children in the family and the perception of them as a burden, as well as evil and spoiled creatures, the attitudes of both parents towards their offspring were characterised by indifference and even dislike, emotional coldness and harshness (Badinter 1998:40-43). As Krystyna Slany (2002:100) notes, today a child "is economically useless, but emotionally priceless for those who want to have them." It has become an autotelic but relative value. Today, children are no longer of economic use, as they were for centuries, but they are sometimes perceived as a burden, primarily a financial one. 'Having a child' has been integrated into the world of consumption and choices. It is also seen as a luxury good, or as competing with other goods. It can be an obstacle to pursuing a professional career, a life focused on personal needs (personal fulfilment, unlimited consumption, etc.). Contemporary high standards of parenthood are also noteworthy. We are dealing with the professionalisation of parenting. Sharon Hays points to the 'ideology of intensive motherhood', involving an enormous amount of time, energy and money necessary for the proper care and upbringing of the child (Hays 1996:97 et seq. as cited in Budrowska 2000:165). The requirements for contemporary men/fathers are

also higher. In particular, they are expected to be more involved in childcare than earlier.

Another issue which used to be important in the context of having children concerns the need for security in old age as a motive for having children. Nowadays, this incentive is slowly losing its importance, among other things thanks to the wide range of insurance possibilities and institutional support. In connection with the changes outlined here, people have become less willing to invest time, money and energy in family life and parenthood, and are more willing to invest these resources in themselves or intimate relationships, in which there is no room for offspring.

The number of people who have an ambivalent approach to children and parenthood and who share an anti-natalist approach is growing. Currently, the main propagator of the anti-natalist philosophy is David Benatar. According to Benatar, life is so bad, so painful, that for the sake of compassion humanity should stop procreating. 'It is curious that while good people go to great lengths to spare their children from suffering, few of them seem to notice that the one (and only) guaranteed way to prevent all the suffering of their children is not to bring those children into existence in the first place' (Benatar 2006 as cited in Rothman 2020). From Benatar's point of view, reproduction is intrinsically cruel and irresponsible - not only because a cruel fate may befall everyone, but above all because life itself is 'permeated with evil'. As Joshua Rothman points out, contemporary works such as Sarah Perry's 'Every Cradle Is a Grave' or Thomas Ligotti's 'The Conspiracy Against the Human Race' are also popular among anti-natalists. There is also the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, which has thousands of members who believe that humans

should cease to exist for environmental reasons (Rothman 2020).

Despite the fact that the family is high in the Polish hierarchy of values, the phenomenon of intentional childlessness is also noticeable in Poland. It is a sign of the transformation of the contemporary family, both in terms of its importance and the functions it is currently supposed to perform. According to demographic data, in Poland the model of narrowed reproduction has taken root, which is evident from the fact that families with many children are being replaced by nuclear families and from the percentage of childless³ persons. The average age at which people become parents has risen considerably. According to various independent studies, deliberately childless individuals account for about 5-7% of respondents (Slany and Szczepaniak 2003; Ruskiewicz 2015; Dolińska 2016; Dróżka 2019). As highlighted by researchers on the issue, in addition to the decline in the fertility rate, the percentage of childless older adults (i.e. those who will not have children due to their age) is increasing (Dolińska 2016). The reasons for this phenomenon are attributed to the already mentioned socio-cultural and economic changes, which date back to the period of systemic transformation, have gained momentum in recent years and have led to the creation of the so-called post-modern society (see: Kluzowa and Slany 2004;

³ According to the Central Statistical Office, for over twenty years the fertility rate in Poland has fluctuated between 1.22 and 1.45, a figure indicating the number of children per woman of childbearing age. Theoretically, the rate should be around 2.1 to ensure the replacement of generations. Sometimes the fertility rate in Poland is slightly higher, sometimes lower. As emphasised by Piotr Szukalski, for years we have not been able to make a visible change in this respect. Hopes rose after a short-lived increase in 2017 turned out, unfortunately, to be in vain, because since then the value of the index has been falling again. Demographers predict a further decline in fertility. All the more so as there is also a decline in women of childbearing age, which is the result of reduced fertility between 1983 and 2003 (Szukalski 2021).

Kwak 2005; 2014; Slany 2006; Sikorska 2012; Marody 2014; Garncarek 2014; 2017). Although we are still witnessing social sanctions against people who deviate from normative patterns, it can be assumed that the contemporary trend towards pluralisation of lifestyles, including marriage and family, is irreversible, also in Polish society.

Theoretical background and research methods

The aim of the conducted research was to identify the social determinants of procreation decisions made by young Poles. To be more precise, the author of the article explores features of post-modernity on different levels of social life which function in the awareness of the respondents as reasons for their decision not to have children. Thus, the research studies the reasons perceived and indicated by individuals with respect to decisions about staying childless. Voluntary childlessness is understood here as deliberately not having a child (by choice/ of one's own volition), which obviously differs from childlessness due to biological reasons (caused by physical dysfunction - infertility or sterility). The multistage research project made it possible, among other things, to access the ways of justifying the decision about childlessness by contemporary young men (and women).

Theoretical references include postmodern concepts referring to socio-cultural and economic transformations in Western societies (e.g., Bauman 2006; 2007; 2008; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Beck 2004; Giddens 2001; 2006; 2008; Inglehart and Norris 2009). Particular attention is paid to socio-cultural and labour market changes. Reference is made to the transformation of values which places the individual at the centre, while the

family and the child are perceived as one of the available choices (e.g., Santangelo 2011; Slany 2006; Lesthaeghe 2010; Szlendak 2010; Kwak 2014). The local context is also taken into account, namely the socio-cultural and economic transformation that accompanied the process of systemic transformation in Poland. The transformation of the cultural context is important for the issue under analysis, as family formation and procreation is not an area that is entirely subject to individual decisions. People do not always have completely free choices when making important decisions, including those concerning marriage and parenthood. These choices are determined primarily by individual life circumstances (e.g. economic circumstances which they are unable to change at a given moment), and are also psycho-social or structural in nature. This 'error of rationalism', as Ulrich Beck puts it, is relevant when considering voluntary childlessness (Beck 2004), including in Polish society, which is subject not only to global cultural changes, but also experienced the internal socio-economic transformation initiated in the 1990s. Changes in the macro-social sphere and at the local level, in turn, influence the micro-social sphere and individual choices, and may therefore contribute to postponing or completely giving up on parenthood. As researchers into the transformation of the contemporary family propose to combine analyses at different (macro, mezzo and micro) levels and study interrelations between family practices undertaken by individuals and cultural, social, economic or institutional contexts (Sikorska 2019). By treating the social world as a multidimensional system, it is possible to analyse all human activity (at the individual and group level), and it allows us to guard against the absolutisation of the sphere of social action focused only on the micro-sociological dimension. Although voluntary childless-

ness seems to be a very intimate choice, a thorough understanding of the causes of the phenomenon of intentional childlessness requires an analysis of potential factors determining it not only in a micro, but also mezzo- and macro-social sphere.

At the same time, the gender approach in sociological research is also a frame of reference in the case of research into voluntary childlessness under discussion. According to Ewa Malinowska, gender plays a fundamental stratification role in all societies and cultures (Malinowska 2011). The application of the gender approach in social research consists, among other things, of the conscious use of knowledge about the existence of inequalities in the social status of women and men when conducting research (Malinowska 2011:5). As Malinowska points out, the gender approach in sociological research “makes it possible to perceive human beings not as abstract individuals devoid of gender, but as real individuals, as persons functioning in a society always in the social role of a woman or in the social role of a man, possibly in the role of a person who has difficulty defining his or her gender identity. Ignoring this fact inevitably leads to unwarranted generalisations” (Malinowska 2011:6). As Harriet Bradley (2008:17) states, “One can conduct a study of gender in relation to virtually any social or cultural phenomenon.” Terms such as *gendered society*, *gendered institutions*, *gendered interactions* or *gendered person* are used here to indicate the ‘genderisation’ of society and its various aspects, or even ‘the dominance of gender system in the social world’ (e.g., Kaschack 1996; Hearn 2003; Kimmel 2004; Wharton 2005; Bradley 2008). Gender is a characteristic of social life, manifested in different social institutions (*gendered society*). Cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity permeate various social phenomena. They are not gender neutral -

the gender of the individuals participating in them plays an important role, determines their position, the way they behave and are treated by others, and determines their access to socially valued goods (Dzwonkowska-Godula 2015).

Speaking of the reasons why men do not take on parental roles, it is important to mention two variants of masculinity. Eric Anderson calls one of them orthodox, and therefore highly homophobic and misogynistic, and the other one just the opposite, thus inclusive (Anderson 2009). The inclusive masculinity theory assumes that reduced levels of homophobia result in different forms of masculinity being able to function in a horizontal rather than hierarchical order (Kluczyńska and Wojnicka 2015). As Krzysztof Arcimowicz points out, alongside the traditional paradigm of masculinity, new patterns of masculinity have developed, and in some countries, they are germinating. Masculinity, the author writes, can have many facets, and men can build their identities taking into account different values. The emergence of new models of masculinity creates the possibility of choice, cooperation, allows for the exposure of features traditionally considered masculine as well as feminine, and in certain situations allows for the achievement of the fullness of a man’s individual potential (Arcimowicz 2014:20). Arcimowicz emphasises that there is no single ahistorical, universal masculinity, rather there are many forms of masculinity. Potentially, in a given society, many equally important but different concepts of man can coexist (Arcimowicz 2014:21). When we look at the transformation of the category of masculinity from a broader perspective, we can conclude that the rejection of the patriarchal paradigm of masculinity⁴ based on values

⁴ Cf. R. Connell’s (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity.

such as domination, power and unification can be the beginning of the construction of a new social order (Arcimowicz 2014:21). The author points out that today in Poland there are dynamic tensions between traditional and modern gender patterns (Arcimowicz 2014:22).

In connection with the aforementioned changes in the models and patterns of masculinity (and femininity), the research process also focused on the changes in the social position of women and men, changes in the patterns of femininity and masculinity as well as relations between the sexes, which influence, among other things, the repertoire of roles taken on by contemporary women and men, including those related to family life and procreation.

The research under discussion involved qualitative strategies. In the first stage of the research, discussions in selected internet forums devoted to the issue of childlessness by choice were analysed. Next, 4 focus group interviews (FGIs) and 30 in-depth (one-on-one) interviews (IDIs) were conducted with voluntarily childless women and men aged 25-40.⁵ In the case of FGI sessions, one session with women, one with men and two mixed male/female sessions (8 people in each session) were carried

⁵ The purpose of the FGI was to find out the opinions and experiences of voluntarily childless women and men concerning, among other things, the reason(s) for the decision to be childless, the 'advantages' (gains) and 'disadvantages' (losses/costs) of a childless marriage, the social image of women and men and whether there is room in it for 'being a mother'/'being a father', as well as the social perception of voluntary childlessness in the opinions of the respondents. IDIs focused on such thematic areas as: family of origin, history of the current relationship and rapport with the partner, social relations/social contacts, professional work, individual motives for not taking on the parental role, life goals, values, perceived reactions of the surrounding to childlessness of the interviewee, definitions of femininity/definitions of masculinity by the interviewees, perception of and attitude to children.

out. In the case of IDIs, 19 interviews were conducted with women, and 11 with men. It is noteworthy that both types of interviews were conducted with only one of the spouses (woman/wife or man/husband from a couple). This was a deliberate strategy. The author of the study wanted to avoid a situation where contributions are affected by answers of interviewees' spouses. This approach was aimed at obtaining greater freedom of expression when discussing the decision not to have children (as it later turned out, this was the right choice, as some of the interviewees - both men and women, pointed to issues related to the relationship with their spouses as one of the reasons (in several cases the main reason) for not taking on a parental role.

The participants of FGIs and those interviewed individually constituted a relatively homogeneous group in terms of socio-demographic characteristics (age: young people; family situation: married for at least two years, voluntarily not having a child; professional status: employed; education: higher or secondary; place of residence: Łódź). The sample selection was deliberate, and snowball sampling was used (Babbie 2008:213). The interviewees represent the so-called metropolitan middle class, they are beneficiaries of the socio-cultural changes described above and are at the forefront of individualisation. Most of them can choose from a wide range of options to develop their life path. The participants used similar communication codes (Daniłowicz and Lisek-Michalska 2004:20), and thus referred to similar preconditions and interpretative schemes, etc. (Bohnsack 2004:43 as cited in Daniłowicz and Lisek-Michalska 2004:20). The sample is not representative and therefore conclusions cannot be generalised to cover all young Poles who make a conscious decision not to have children.

Reasons why men are not assuming a parental role and types of male childlessness

The analysis of the collected data shows that there are many features of post-modernity functioning in the consciousness of the interviewed men who decide not to have children which are manifested at different levels of social life.

Interrelated features governing the decision to remain childless expressed at the global, macro-social and mezzo levels were identified, namely:

1. changes in values (incl. pointing out individualistic and consumerist values);
2. changes in the global and local labour market and their implications for professional life (incl. showing the desire and necessity to undertake professional activity, mobility and flexibility, changing the place of work or residence, sharing the belief that parenthood limits professional development, as well as pointing to the instability of employment as a reason for postponing parenthood);
3. changes in the patterns of masculinity (and femininity) (awareness of the unequal statuses of women and men in various areas of social life and discontent with this situation, as well as awareness of changes in this sphere, exemplified by self-reliance and taking on non-stereotypical social roles).

In their statements, the interviewees also recognised the features of postmodernity typical for the micro-social level, including:

1. individual and personal factors influencing the decision to be childless: personal/ character traits (e.g. the lack of desire to become a parent, the pre-

sumed or actual inability to be a parent, emotional instability, lack of patience with children, aversion to children, pessimistic view of the world, non-conformism, rejection of social expectations, declared egoism);

- individual (e.g. health-related) concerns about potential parenthood;
- pursuit of personal goals in which there is no room for parenthood;

2. relationship with a spouse:

- satisfaction with the equal status and division of roles between spouses, at the same time reluctance to change the current situation; or the unequal status and roles, and fear of the current situation deteriorating if a child is born;
- focus on the quality of the relationship (lack of space for the child because of the need to share emotions with the child; spouses' satisfaction with their joint activities, leisure time spent together; the belief that maintaining the current level of activity, intimacy and physical closeness with the partner will not be possible when the child is born);
- dysfunctional relationship, incompatibility of partners (e.g. cheating on a spouse);

3. family of origin as a socialising surrounding which reinforces the decision to remain childless (atmosphere favourable or discouraging the decision to be a parent, e.g. dysfunctional family, alcohol addiction in the family of origin, traumatic childhood experiences, approval/ disapproval of the decision to be childless by the family of origin);

4. influence of the financial situation on the decision to remain childless (despite sufficient financial resources, spouses are reluctant to take on increased financial responsibility related to having a child;

insufficient financial resources/ existing financial problems);

5. existing lifestyle (e.g. (deliberate or necessitated) professional activity, the belief that parenthood limits professional and personal development, practicing of hobbies, artistic or voluntary activities, excessive consumerism, unwillingness to devote time to a child);
6. role of the milieu and social circle (childless acquaintances and friends; acceptance of childlessness by the milieu and social circle);

The analysis of the collected data made it possible to identify three categories/types of voluntarily childless men: 1) those who postpone their decision about parenthood; 2) those who, in a way, fall into the first identified category, namely, they postpone their decision but they are not the ones who ultimately make the decision; they agree not to have any offspring ('if my wife decides to have a child, we will, if not, we will be childless'), they currently have a neutral attitude towards having offspring; 3) those who have made up their mind/ are strongly committed to not having any offspring.

First, men who postpone their decision about parenthood will be the focus of our attention. Next, the statements of men who strongly believe they never want to become parents will be analysed. In this part of the article, selected characteristic fragments of the interviewees' statements indicating their reasons for not taking on a parental role are also indicated.

Postponing the decision about parenthood

Voluntarily childless men belonging to the first category, as well as other interviewees (including wom-

en), attach great significance to personal fulfilment, especially in the professional field:

Everyone wants to develop in this sector. There's no spare time, and if there's a child, that would be a disaster. [M, 30 years old]

Work, promotion, we've reached a certain position, we fulfil our ambitions (...) the question is when to say stop. Maybe never. [M, 35 years old]

They focus primarily on their professional role, developing their career, which is a priority for them (at least at the moment). The lack of childcare responsibilities, greater opportunities for personal fulfilment and spontaneous mobility are of greater importance to them:

Nowadays, people are not employed in one company for life. Especially recently, all these changes, crises and demands of the labour market. You have to be available, mobile (...) it's very complicated. A job no longer provides stability in life, and you need that stability when you have a child. So how can you provide it if you are constantly at work or looking for a job? [M, 33 years old]

I don't know where I will work or live tomorrow, where does a child fit into this? [M, 29 years old]

Individualistic values which are not only a privilege and the result of an autonomous choice, as some of them noted, but also a duty of the contemporary individual, clearly reverberate in interviewees' statements. The decision to be childless appears to be partly autonomous as it is dictated by socio-cultural and economic conditions, including the contemporary labour market and organisation of work, which is emphasised by men who declared temporary

childlessness. In their opinion it is above all the lack of professional stability, the risk of job loss or professional degradation which are important factors influencing the decision to postpone parenthood. They drew attention not only to the instability of the labour market but also, in some cases, to the fact that they lack a place of their own as an additional factor not conducive to having children. In their view, child/parenthood can be an obstacle to financial success as well as living in line with contemporary consumption patterns:

It seems to me that a certain financial status is now more important than having children. You have to make money first, you have to see something, and only then can you think about a child. The hierarchy is changing. It's not like it used to be: a child, get married right away, because a child is on the way. Now everyone is careful. First you have to make money, reach a certain position, status, and then you can think about having a child. [M, 29 years old]

It is noteworthy that the interviewees are well aware of the contemporary standards of parenthood and requirements set for potential parents. As is evident from the statements of the interviewees, some contemporary men treat them seriously and at the same time some of them have doubts about their competence in this area. The analysis of the collected data shows that young people who believe that they are not able to meet the high requirements postpone the decision about parenthood. The child is also perceived in the context of commitments, especially financial costs (which was pointed out more often by the men than the women who participated in the study). They also mention the need to devote time to the child. Particularly in the focus group part of the research, contemporary requirements for young men/fathers were mentioned, i.e. the necessity of

greater involvement in family life, active upbringing of offspring. Some respondents admit that they are not ready for such responsibility and sacrifice:

You have to provide so much for your child nowadays, this is nuts. Tutoring, courses, trips, languages, from a very young age. You have to have time and money for it. [M, 33 years old]

It's almost like a NASA project. There's a risk that it won't work [M, 29 years old].

A child is a money pit. [M, 35 years old]

Someone calculated that it costs PLN 200-250 thousand to raise a child. [M, 33 years old]

Some interviewees also indicate a desire to avoid the stress of raising offspring:

When I look at my friends who already have children, I don't envy them. They can't go out for a beer anymore, because women are constantly nagging them about this or that, that the child is sick again, that they have to go for a vaccination, that they have to take the baby to the mother-in-law, that Jasiiek fell out of his baby crib and broke his arm, etc. They seem to be more relaxed than their female counterparts, because mothers are immediately hysterical and yell that he broke his arm, but I can see that he is stressed and I wouldn't like to be in his shoes. [M, 35 years old]

The analysis of the collected data shows that those who put off the decision of whether or not to become parents are more likely to explain it by reference to structural conditions, and thus in line with the vision of the world of risk and 'institutional individualisation' characterised by the Becks (Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim 2001).

A small number of male interviewees also mentioned their dysfunctional relationships and problems with their female partner (e.g. cheating on her); personal incompatibility; disagreements over the decision to have a child as (the main) reason(s) for postponing parenthood:

I might have a child one day, but definitely not with her (...) I have someone else (...) Basically we are with each other now only because of money. [M, 37 years old]

Among those postponing the decision about parenthood, there is a group of male interviewees who point to the above-mentioned factors, but despite the declared voluntary childlessness, they were not the one who made the decision. The majority of respondents in this group have a neutral attitude towards having a child, and they agreed not to have children due to decisions made by their female partners. She (the wife) would ultimately decide their future.

I might even want to [have a child] one day, but my wife doesn't want to, so we're living like this for now (...) Once she said that if I wanted to, she could give birth to a child, but that I would go on paternity leave and take care of him or her, so I gave up. (...) If my wife decides, we will have a child, if not, we will be childless (...). [M, 30 years old]

I neither want nor don't want to, it kind of all depends on how it works out. My wife doesn't want to [have a child] at the moment and it's fine with me as well. [M, 29 years old]

I don't know, I think not, but we'll see. For the time being, we are postponing the decision. If Gosia decides so, I'll agree, and if she doesn't, it will be fine too, or even better, because there will be peace of mind and less hassle. [M, 34 years old]

My wife didn't want to [have a child], and I agreed to it. [M, 38 years old]

Abandoning the idea of parenthood / confidence about the decision not to have children

The second group, i.e. men who declare that they have given up on parenthood altogether/ are certain of their decision not to have children, also highly value personal fulfilment. However, they perceive it not only in a professional context. These male interviewees also draw attention to the issue of living in harmony with oneself, fulfilling one's interests and practicing one's hobbies as important in their lives:

I knew what I wanted from an early age, I knew I would write, first I wanted to be a traveller and write books (...) I write for newspapers, I post articles on the Internet (...) we want to finish this book about the expedition (...) these are our priorities (...) there is no place for a child in it. [M, 38 years old]

I've never pictured myself as a father. I can be an uncle once in a while, but being a parent permanently is not for me. [M, 40 years old]

I don't compare myself to others. Nobody will tell me that I have to do something. I want to live, I live in harmony with myself. [M, 33 years old]

Some respondents stress that a child can be an obstacle to their current lifestyle and life plans:

As far as financial matters are concerned, this would not be a problem, rather time and attention, and a child needs this. It is precisely about the lack of time. We want to do other things than end up in diapers and rush to a kindergarten. We have life plans that we

want to fulfil. They include travelling, spending a lot of time and energy. [M, 35 years old]

Compared to the former group of interviewees, this group more often points to a satisfactory relationship with their partner. At the same time they admit their reluctance to change the current situation, which they find gratifying. These men emphasise their focus on the quality of the relationship. Some of them talk about the lack of readiness to share emotions with a child, they mention they are satisfied with their activities and leisure time shared with a spouse. Some of them are convinced that maintaining current levels of intimacy and physical closeness with their partner would not be possible once the child appears, or even if this is possible, it would be possible only to a limited extent:

Once you have a child, it often happens that the husband is put on the back burner. [M, 34 years old]

What we have now, this relationship of ours, that's what suits me best. I don't want to spoil it. Such a relationship, in such a symbiosis is good for us (...) we have time for ourselves after work, to rest, to go on trips from time to time (...) we do not want to spoil it. [M, 33 years old, FGI_2]

My wife is my best friend. We are very close, we have the same understanding. We share interests, but it is not as if we are constantly hanging on each other, because each of us also has their own interests (...). Sometimes I go out, hike in the mountains, for example for a week (...). She, for example, goes to a yoga camp or some kind of meditation for a few days and that is also cool (...). A child would shake our relationship, our peace of mind, which actually suits us very well. [M, 35 years old, FGI_2]

Another issue that reverberates in many of the narratives of men who declare that their decision is irreversible is the need to live in peace and quiet, given the stability they reached in their lives as childfree individuals:

A baby is unfortunately a nightmare and no peace of mind for the rest of your life. [M, 33 years old]

It is fine as it is. Peace and quiet. Living in relative harmony, living a relatively balanced life. [M, 39 years old]

I'm afraid that if we have a child, we will be attacked by a whole herd of family members and everyone will know better (...). If you don't have a child, you don't have to worry about the upbringing and surrounding of numerous all-knowing close and distant relatives. [M, 33 years old]

Children are noisy, they're shouting all the time, they always want something, they get on your nerves (...). I've never had patience with children. Generally, I try to avoid them, I try not to be in contact with them for a longer period of time. [M, 39 years old]

I don't go to places where there are lots of children (...). This noise drives me crazy. [M, 33 years old]

The statements of these men also indicate that they do not accept the definition of the traditional family. They mention that a family is not only a couple with a child, that a child is not needed to be happy in a relationship, to be happy in general:

We do not need a child to be happy. You reach personal fulfilment. You can be happy in a relationship without children. [M, 39 years old]

I don't think my family is worse than a family with two or five children (...). The two of us are happy to-

gether (...). I don't need a child to be happy. [M, 33 years old]

The men in this group are characterised by a more partner-like approach to relationships than interviewees from the first group. Some of them stress that this issue is extremely important to them. They are aware that a child can spoil a relationship. In order to examine this issue, one of the projection techniques was used, namely unfinished sentences: *a woman is.../a woman should be...; a man is.../a man should be...* The analysis of the collected data indicates the transformation of contemporary masculinity. The tendency for androgynisation in men's personality orientations is observed. Moreover, male interviewees underline the importance of partner relations between men and women:

Years ago there was a consensus that a real man was the one who built a house, planted a tree and raised a son. Today this is no longer the case, at least I don't see it that way. The roles of men and women have changed. The situation of men and women is different. [M, 39 years old]

A child spoils partner relations [M, 39 years old].

Generally speaking, I do more at home than my wife. I don't mind it at all. Some cleaning, laundry (...). I like to cook, and my wife doesn't. [M, 33 years old]

A man doesn't always want to, doesn't always have to be a father. [M, 35 years old]

Another issue has to do with personality traits. Some men admit they simply do not like children:

Frankly speaking, I don't like children. I've never been fond of them, and they actually annoy me, especially little ones. [M, 36 years old]

Few interviewees also indicate the role of the family of origin in their decision to remain childless, especially the influence of dysfunctional family relations. Some interviewees are critical both of the relationships between their parents and relationship between the interviewee and (a) parent(s). Some men in this group indicate a desire to avoid their parents' mistakes:

I don't want to be like my father. Never. He was drinking all my childhood, and I had to sit quietly in the corner. When he was drunk, we tiptoed around him (...) My wife and I have already made up our mind and we won't change our decision. (...) she also has similar experiences to mine (...) we are adults, we are rational and we know that we would probably pass on some behaviour to a potential child. We don't want to take any risks. It's fine the way it is. [M, 35 years old]

I don't want to make my parents' mistakes. They didn't get along with each other or... they were at loggerheads with each other, always fighting about money, about us. Something was always wrong. (...) In fact, I don't know why they got married. In fact, I know, because they were expecting me, so it was out of necessity. [M, 33 years old]

The last issue with this group of interviewees concerns egoism, which they acknowledge. It is noteworthy that this topic is not raised by women at all:

I think that it is more about selfishness than the material well-being. We care more about ourselves, about our own comfort. [M, 33 years old]

I am selfish and I am not ashamed of it. I think it's healthy egoism. I know what I want. As for the rest,

we're both aware of it and we're comfortable with it. [M, 29 years old]

Is it egoism or... I don't know. Maybe it is, but I want to live at peace with myself and not pretend to be someone else, push myself too far, because one has to (...) We both don't want to have children (...). When I look at my friends, everything revolves around the child, around this little egoist. They let them do everything, they walk over them and they will soon shit on them (...). I am not that kind of an egoist. I don't harm anyone. [M, 39 years old]

Conclusions

Voluntary childlessness, as one of the alternative forms of family life, is a sign of profound changes in the contemporary family, both in its essence as well as functions. Although in Poland we still have to deal with social sanctions against individuals who deviate from the normative patterns of the matrimonial state and procreation,⁶ in the light of the presented results (the author's own and cited research), it may be assumed that nowadays the trend towards individualisation and the pluralisation of lifestyles is irreversible.

The reasons for not taking on a parental role are complex. The analysis of collected data has shown that we are dealing with a conglomerate of factors influencing the phenomenon in question. Voluntary childlessness can be interpreted in terms of post-modern changes in values, cultural norms, changes in cultural concepts of gender, as well as economic changes and changes in work organisation. All of them are expressed at the level of individual decisions. In the case of

the issues discussed in this text, the influence of micro-social factors such as marital relations on deliberate childlessness is also clearly visible. Both successful relationships and dysfunctional relations may be reasons for not assuming a parental role.

The identified set of reasons which determine the postponement of fatherhood or giving up on having children allows for the identification of three strands in the male narrative of voluntary childlessness. First, childlessness offers an opportunity to avoid negative experiences related to parental duties, taking on responsibility for the child, deterioration of partner relationships and financial losses. Second, childlessness offers the possibility of maintaining the current (satisfactory) material wellbeing. Third, childlessness offers the possibility of gaining gratifying experiences, as it translates into, among other things, the possibility of personal fulfilment, building a professional position, the unrestrained possibility of experiencing the joys of life, building/maintaining satisfactory relations with the partner. Each of the narratives indicated here appears in the three identified types of male childlessness by choice. However, with a slightly different intensity in each type of male childlessness. Men who postponed their decision about parenthood were more likely to follow the first narrative (i.e. they postpone various negative – in their opinion – experiences they associate with parenthood) and the third narrative (they want to gain more gratifying experiences), while those who declare the stability of their decision to remain childless – the second narrative (the possibility to maintain their current material wellbeing, lifestyle, partner relationships is important for them, among other things).

⁶ Cf. inter alia: Garncarek (2010), Ruskiewicz (2015).

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Dobrowolnie bezdzietni mężczyźni – społeczno-kulturowe przyczyny niepodjęcia roli rodzicielskiej przez młodych Polaków

Abstrakt: Autorka podejmuje problematykę dotyczącą zjawiska dobrowolnej bezdzietności w Polsce. Przedstawia wyniki badań własnych stanowiących część szerszych analiz dotyczących zagadnienia intencjonalnej bezdzietności. Problematyka relacjonowana w niniejszym tekście koncentruje się na przyczynach niepodjęcia roli rodzicielskiej przez mężczyzn. Część pierwsza tekstu obejmuje społeczno-kulturowy kontekst w badaniach nad dobrowolną bezdzietnością, część druga zawiera prezentację wyników badań jakościowych, realizowanych m.in. techniką wywiadu grupowego i indywidualnego z dobrowolnie bezdzietnymi mężczyznami. Ukazuje przyczyny niepodjęcia roli rodzicielskiej przez mężczyzn oraz typy męskiej bezdzietności z wyboru.

Słowa kluczowe: przemiany współczesnej rodziny, dobrowolna bezdzietność, mężczyźni, badania jakościowe