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The Experience of Familiarness and Intimacy of People Living in Cohabitation*

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Abstract

The article presents selected results of qualitative research concerning intimate and familiar experience of cohabitating couples. It is an attempt to distinguish operating modes of cohabitation on the basis of gender roles and subjects' intimate life specificity. The implementation of phenomenological-biographical approach in studying cohabitation allowed for focusing on individual experience and processes of undergoing this experience. The chosen research perspective enabled us to find the answer for questions about ways of experiencing dailiness by cohabitating men and women.

In the studies carried out in the area of marital-family tasks, two – quite clearly opposing – models of cohabitation relationships have been distinguished. The first is close to the formal marriage, in which the man is the sole breadwinner, while the woman does not work, but takes care of the offspring and home. The second is characterised by a tendency to achieve independence, and the value is to achieve personal happiness.

Keywords: cohabitation, the idea of partnership, family, phenomenological-biographical research perspective.

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Introduction

Doubtlessly, cohabitation is an example of the transformation of social life in the question of forming close relationships and organising family life. It also suits modern discussions about the model of intimate relationships with all their contexts and controversies. The increasing number of informal relationships [within the past 25 years cohabitation relationships have become more widespread, mainly among the young (Szukalski, 2014; 2005, p. 35)], the increasing social acceptance for them (Wenzel, 2013) as well as the analysis of source literature all confirm the conviction that research on cohabitation relationships is an important and necessary field of academic exploration.

There are no doubts that cohabitation is analysed in detail by researchers all around the world. If we type the word 'cohabitation' in the Google browser, more than 6 million web addresses will come up concerning sociological, historical, psychological, pedagogical and medical analyses of this phenomenon (including many thousands referring exclusively to social sciences).

It has only been about 20 years since the phenomenon of cohabitation attracts researchers in social sciences in Poland. Krystyna Slany (2002) is perceived as a pioneer in this matter. The main fields of the research focus on the frequency of occurrence of this phenomenon (Szukalski, 2014, 2006, 2004; Slany, 2002), on the tendencies that are characteristic for the construction of informal relationships (Kwak, 2014; Matysiak, 2014), the assessment of the consequences of living in cohabitation, the impact of cohabitation on the durability and the quality of marriage, the comparison of cohabitation and marriage (Janicka 2006; Kwak 2014) with single life (Kwak, 2014), the assessment of the quality of relations of interfamilial cohabitants, the reproductive and economical aspects of informal relationships (Kwak 2014; Slany, 2006), legal aspects (Slany, 2006), and the attitudes towards the phenomenon of cohabitation and its practices (Juszczyk-Frelkiewicz, 2014; Kwak, 2014).

The analysis of foreign research on cohabitation from the recent years points to its shifting methodology and nature – more often qualitative than quantitative. The following fields of research appear: class differences in the processes of construction and termination of informal relationship (Sassler, Miller, 2011); individual motives for the involvement in an informal relationship or for not legalising one; the involvement of a peer group in starting up cohabitation behaviours (Manning, Cohen, 2011). The gender perspective for conducting research is also present (Baxter, Haynes, Hewitt, 2010; Schultz, Hiroshi, 2012).

The presented research data are distinguished from other Polish projects on cohabitation by the method and approach to the discussed issue. They trespass the discourse of thinking about cohabitation relationships existing in Poland – both in terms of popular consciousness and scientific research. This concerns mostly the narratives of those cohabitating partners who have children. The analysis of the content of interviews has permitted to see some mutual and family relations of the cohabitating couples, their experience, feelings and autoreflections.

Cohabitation and its changing role

Cohabitation is a complex category, very often referred to by researchers in the context of marriage and family (Janicka, 2006; Kociak, 2002, 2006; Kwak 2005, 2014). The complexity of this phenomenon, its internal diversity and the changing role of cohabitation as well as the difficulties in determining the duration of a particular relationship and the frequency of cohabitation of partners cause many problems with the definition.

In source literature cohabitation is defined as unmarried, heterosexual and continuous intimate and sexual relationship (Kwak, 2014, p. 224). The authors understand intimate cohabitation both as coexistence and living together of at least two people (Jabłoński, Ostasz, 2001, p. 224). In defining cohabitation (Trost, 1975, p. 37; Kwak, 2005, 2014; Slany, 2006), researchers emphasise the community nature of such a relationship and the lack of formality. The definition excludes cohabitating homosexual couples.

Cohabitation becomes more and more useful as it gains popularity. Informal relationships are created by both young people who have never been involved in any formal relationship and those who are already experienced in this matter (postmarital cohabitation). The latter occurs as a prelude to another relationship or its substitute (Kwak, 2014, p. 224). Source literature emphasizes the diversified role of cohabitation. This can be a periodic phase preceding marriage in which it functions like a ‘probational period’ – preparation to marriage, verification of mutual relations (without any responsibility for the partner and children)’ (Kwak, 2014, p. 225). Sometimes, cohabitation is also perceived as an alternative for marriage in which the durability, understood as the core of this deal, is refused. In a relationship determined in this way, flexibility becomes vital in forming rules and obligations as well as the essence of the relation between cohabitants, which is their emotional bond (Kwak, 2014, p. 225).

Cohabitation, as emphasised by Anna Kwak (2014, p. 226), is also ‘an alternative to a single life’. In this version it creates a much larger chance for self-

development and freedom than marriage. A cohabitation relationship does not resemble marriage nor does it constitute any alternative to it. There are no initial assumptions as to the durability of this relationship nor any explicit intentions to get married. In this form of cohabitation, we deal with a process of gradual involvement in a relationship. In order to facilitate their life, a couple decides to live together without giving up their own places. As the bond becomes stronger, the contacts gain in frequency, the partners buy more things for their flat, they share expenditures without any clear decisions about the durability of their relation or its legalisation (Kwak, 2014, p. 226).

Researchers connect the changing role of cohabitation, its increasing attractiveness and popularity (Szukalski, 2014) with the weakening of social norms related to the construction of non-married relationships. This is confirmed by the results of the research conducted by the Public Opinion Research Centre (Polish: Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej) (Boguszewski, 2008; Hipisz, 2013; Wenzel, 2013). The research of CBOS (Polish: Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej) (Hipisz, 2013) points to the significant change in the perception of marriage and family. Some alternative forms of conjugal life gain in popularity and these are, for example, cohabitation relationships. The majority of Poles (85%) has expressed their approval for the legalisation of heterosexual partnership (Wenzel, 2013). As Kwak (2014, p. 198) declares, the increase in the amount of positive social attitudes towards some innovative behaviours favours the expansion of the discussed phenomenon and the change of its role.

'The transformation of intimacy' as an exemplification of new trends in private life

While describing intimate experiences of cohabitants, the look at the transformation of intimacy plays a significant role. While analysing the changes within love and family relations, sociologists point to the fact that they fall within some more general tendencies of the development towards the modernity of the 21st century (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 2013, p. 98).

While researching modern changes in intimacy, Anthony Giddens focuses on the emotional order and describes the evolution of the relation nature between partners. The researcher reckons that the sexual revolution within the recent dozens of years has brought social change not only in sexuality but also in the whole sphere of human relations. In addition, it has launched the construction of the so-called pure relation. The author defines these relations – as opposed to traditional relationships – as 'based on the equality of gender and the

emotional equilibrium' (Giddens, 2007, p. 10). The foundation of the 'purity' of these relationships is the feeling between two people: when it passes, the relationship ends (Nowak-Dziemianowicz, in: Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 2013, p. 9).

The most pertinent example of 'a pure relationship' are homosexual couples. In the recent 25 years, homosexuality has gone through radical transformations and it displays changes of great significance and scope within the intimate sphere. Modern psychiatry abandons the definition of homosexual relationships as psychosexual disorders and homosexual people themselves have taken up a significant process of creating a new, public image of homosexuality. They have become pioneers of the adaptation to social phenomena, being the first ever to take up daily experiments to free themselves from the limits of the modern civilization. Homosexuals are ahead of most of heterosexuals in practicing 'being with each other' beyond the traditional frames of marriage (Giddens, 2007, p. 10, 24–25, 27, 163).

As Joanna Mizielińska, Marta Abramowicz and Agata Stasińska (2014, p. 11) emphasise in their report, there are about 2 million non-heterosexual people in Poland (lesbians, gays, bisexual and transsexual people) and about half of them live in intimate relationships. A lot of them bring up children together. They form so-called families of choice being very often deprived of social and legal support. They are not always related. The way a family is founded and understood is a question of choice.

Marriage has undergone a radical change under the influence of 'pure relationship'. However, it still occupies the central position in the social order. Regardless of the aim of the conclusion of marriage and of its model, it is close to the 'pure relationship' for the majority.

Giddens definitely stands for the separation of the modern relationship of two people from what it used to be like in the past, as well as from any other types of relationships. Contemporarily, marriage does not guarantee a durable relationship (Giddens, 2007, p. 164). Today, individuals get involved in a relationship for itself and stay in it as long as they retrieve some satisfaction from it. The characteristic features of such a relationship are not only the reciprocity but also the certainty that it can be broken at any time. Thus, it does not provide any sense of security. One of the aspects of 'a pure relationship' is trust which results from the course of the relationship and is not based on any other sources of support (Giddens, 2007, p. 166). The most crucial aspect of a relationship is trust towards the other person as well as the certainty that the bond will endure whatever time brings. Moreover, Giddens points to some inner contradictions of this relationship. In a modern relationship, partners are entangled in continu-

ous search for the balance between autonomy and dependence. Summing up, it can be said that the foundation of a relationship is the established closeness between partners and the independence in social and economic life (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011, p. 130).

Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim put it similarly in words – they point to the gradual individualisation and democratisation of intimate relationships. In their description of modern transformations in family life they emphasise the importance of the feeling between men and women, which is greater than ever (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 2013, p. 55). The turn towards strong emotional bonds results from a new phase in the development of the society – the phase of individualism which influences the way and rhythm of family life, changes traditional views, behaviours and values related to the sphere of family life. The process of individualisation ‘together with the romantic idea of absolute love’ (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 2013, p. 12) lets women and men abandon their traditional roles and search for their own path. Contrary to Giddens’ concept of ‘a pure relationship’, the authors of this idea see the reasons for the stability of the relationship not in the relationship as such but in the ‘escape into closeness’ to which a modern person is bound (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011, p. 130).

The considerations of Illouz and Luhmann – the authors of universalist social theories on love (Illouz, 2010; Luhmann, 2003), also indicate the evolution in the description of the relation between partners. Intimacy used to be defined as a set of social duties and conventions but now it is transformed into ‘some democratic deal’ (Chambers, after: Kwak, 2014, p. 6), which approaches closeness, intimacy and partnership. Moreover, they can be referred to as the triumph of ‘emotional individualism’ (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011, p. 131).

Phenomenological-biographical approach to the research on cohabitation

As it was mentioned in the introduction, the article was written based on the research conducted and analysed while writing the author’s doctoral thesis. The subject of the dissertation is focused on intimate and family experience of people living in informal relationships. This problem resembles a blind alley in the Polish research on family. Thus, the realisation of the phenomenological-pedagogical research project, focused on the analysis of family experience of couples living in cohabitation who have children, enriches the worldwide academic debate on the construction of new forms on relationships and families

with the content and context that have never been analysed before or it enriches it with some new theoretical or methodological perspectives.

The author places the experience of couples living in cohabitation in Poland as the subject of her research exploration. The aim of the conducted research was to reach the core of the experience of living in cohabitation through capturing the structure of this experience. The research has been designed based on the strategy of quality and included in the constructivist-interpretative paradigm. In order to gain some comprehensible insight into the researched reality at the stage of the explication of the issue and its operationalisation, the phenomenological-biographical approach has been applied. It has enabled the insight into the relationship and – in accord with the article’s objective – broader understanding of particular aspects of its functioning. The choice of the quality research perspective has allowed the author to find the answer to the question on the ways of experiencing daily life by women and men in cohabitation.

A deliberate, random selection of sample data has been applied and justified by theoretical-cognitive reasons. While selecting its criteria, the definition of cohabitation by Kwak (2005, p. 63–64) was applied. The researched people were selected with the so-called snowball method. 10 women and 10 men, who live in cohabitation and who bring up their children together, were selected. The research has been conducted using the method of a narrative interview. 20 individual narrative interviews have been conducted in sum. The issue discussed in the interviews deeply penetrates all the mutual and family relations of people living in cohabitation and concerns their feelings, thoughts, judgements and observations. The application of this method of data collection has let the author provide the phenomenological descriptions of the experience of people who live in cohabitation on the level of their meaning.

The material collected during the research fully presents the complexity of pluralised experiences of modern women and men. The considerations presented in the article are focused on two completely different – bipolar – examples of relations. They illustrate different values that people find significant for their family and intimate life.

Family and intimate reality of people living in cohabitation

If we take a closer look at the ways of forming everyday reality including the realisation of gender roles and the implementation of ‘the idea of partnership’, it appears that two – quite contradictory models of relationships – can be distinguished. Thus, the answers to the following questions seem to be interesting:

How do partners practise ‘the idea of partnership’ in their daily life? What are their expectations and assumptions as to their own family and intimate life?

According to the collected narratives, the dominant motive in the perception of an intimate relationship is treating it not as a form of common life before the conclusion of marriage – but as its alternative – a flexible and egalitarian form.

The narratives of the researched couples allow for the division of relationships according to the way they are constructed and according to how the intimate relation and family everyday life are understood (Kwak, 2014, p. 226–227). The crucial aspects of this division are: the realisation of gender roles including the completion of family tasks related mostly to the distribution of house chores and child care, as well as the involvement of partners and the way they form their relationship.

As it is emphasised by Joanna Ostrouch-Kamińska (2011, p. 231–234), family is subject to dynamic changes due to the transformation of present days. They are visible in the perception of the relation between partners, which is closer to ‘closeness (intimacy) and partnership’ (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011, p. 333).

The question of ‘the idea of partnership’ is essential in the considerations on family everyday life of women and men in cohabitation. It will be presented below.

The understanding of partnership in marriage is related to the subjective feeling of equality, freedom and justice. Equality does not refer to equal ‘calculation’ of benefits and losses or contributions and gains, it is not an equal division of duties, privileges and power, either. Equality means the balance in a relationship which can be reached by ‘respecting the dignity of the partner, dedication, trust, care and kindness as well as openness and honesty’ (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011, p. 331–334). It also means common decision-making.

Freedom can be understood in two contexts: the cultural one and the inner one. In the first one, freedom is meant as choice free from force, limits, violence and duties. In turn, inner freedom is about self-determination and self-decisiveness. This freedom belongs to the structure of human existence. This is the source of human dignity and the condition of ‘full development of personality’ (Fromm, after: Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011, p. 335–336).

The scope and limits of equality and freedom in a relationship are not strictly pre-defined but are constructed in the relationship with a partner (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011, p. 336). In the centre of the implementation of the idea of partnership there is the sense of justice, understood as a certain disposition. It

allows for ‘taking into consideration in one’s dealings the order and proportions between one’s good and the good of another person’ (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011, p. 337). Therefore, the analysis of the sense of justice in intimate, emotional relations is crucial because it decides about the high level of satisfaction of partners, of conjugal closeness and stability (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011, p. 337).

According to Ostrouch-Kamińska, the implementation of the idea of partnership is achieved through equality in a relationship. This is a process of constructing the balance between autonomy and responsibility. The conducted analysis of ‘the transformation of love’ indicates the change in perceiving the relations between partners. Therefore, the attempt of interpretation of the experience of women and men in cohabitation from the perspective of the implementation of ‘the idea of partnership’ in daily life (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011, p. 334–335) seems to be crucial.

Buunk (after: Kwak, 2014, p. 226–227) distinguishes four models of functioning in a cohabitation relationship based on the realisation of gender roles and the scope of their dependencies. They encompass: the traditional model, the community model of both sexes and the model with the tendency to independence as well as the model of full independence. Using Buunk’s typology and broadening it with the aspects of ‘the idea of partnership’, the author is going to present two – bipolar – biographical illustrations of the specificity of family and intimate life of the researched people.

Illustration 1. Alternative relationship as opposed to traditional family

The life of Hanna (aged 42) and Tomasz (aged 45) is an example of the implementation of the vision that is closer to a traditional family, although the researched couple remains in an informal relationship. After her divorce from the first husband, the woman became a single mother with two children. She has lived in cohabitation with Tomasz for one and a half years and she brings up a few months old baby with him.

Her everyday life is fulfilled with the care for ensuring some balanced space for satisfying her own needs and the needs of her partner [‘it’s just a family life, we can sit down in the evening and I can switch on a foolish TV series and then he will get a bit angry because he would prefer to see a match, for example. Sometimes I change the channel for him and I watch the reemission later so that he knows that I make a sacrifice for him...’]. The presence of Tomasz is

associated by Hanna with the sense of security [‘even when he doesn’t say or do anything but just sits next to me... [...] [I feel – annotation M.B.] well, safe... I’m not alone’]. The woman emphasises that her relationship with Tomasz builds up her sense and quality of life.

As Ostrouch-Kamińska (2011, p. 235) stresses it, the division of house chores reveals the level of partnership in a family. The researcher states that this activity informs about the functioning of a family. While describing her daily life, Hanna divides duties into typically male or female [‘things have to be put in order in that cellar and I left it for the male side’]. In her narrative, she points to the female domination in performing house duties and the attitude to them [‘I can find my own things because I keep my order but he keeps it in his own way, differently...’]. As far as child care is concerned, and both parties have categorised it as a house chore, it is also the woman who takes over the responsibility:

[...] I know that he has to go to work and wakes up early in the morning so when our boy is crying at night, then first – his dad wouldn’t help much anyway so I don’t even wake him up [...] why should I wake him up knowing that I would get nervous myself before he would get up, so...I know he needs to sleep, to rest so I take care of the baby at night even though I don’t sleep it off afterwards, during the day because how? When he sleeps, I try to learn...[...] so I sit all day long with him [with the son – annotation M.B.]...when dad comes, he eats something and takes care of him a bit, sits nearby, talks to him...’

Hanna’s partner takes over the entire child care in necessary situations [‘on Saturday and Sunday when I go to school’]. Thus, Hanna takes care of the house and children and Tomasz provides for the family, though – as our informer emphasises – ‘this is a family model which I don’t favour much’. She consciously accepts the current division of duties but she expects the renegotiation of roles when [‘(...) I’ll graduate from this school and I’ll find some job’]. The woman implements and accepts in her daily life the formulated expectations, norms and standards of a traditional family but as she makes it clear, this is a transient situation caused by the current organisation of life.

The consciousness of the changes in the sphere of the realisation of the idea of partnership and the means of constructing an intimate relationship, both distinguish a traditional family from the analysed couple. The interviewed woman notices the value of the dialogue in a relationship but this is a new situation for her to be learnt [‘but we can talk – yes! About children, grand-

children... the conversations like: should we redecorate the flat or not, what to buy and what not to buy and once I had to discuss such matters only with myself’].

Manifestations of her partner’s autonomy, for example, a night out in the workplace, are faced with a protest [‘he claims that he is slightly ill and says he’s going to get better there so I answer him: *good, it’s so interesting, I would also like to go somewhere to get better, to take care of myself elsewhere!* What kind of reasoning is that at all...when you have home, you return to it’]. It can be concluded from Hanna’s story that her concept of the family is very traditional, it is understood as a place ‘for better or worse, in sickness and in health’ (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011, p. 233).

The narrative of Tomasz exemplifies the traditional male role. The man deals mainly with professional work. Similarly to Hanna’s biography – Tomasz also went through a divorce.

The rules behind a marital relationship constitute crucial context for the analysis of the realisation of the idea of partnership within a family (Ostrouch-Kamińska (2011, p. 234). They both stress the role of trust they have for one another. In his narrative, Tomasz notices: [‘I think that... [...] the most important thing is to like and respect each other but most of all- to love. This is all that falls within this [relationship – annotation M.B.]’]. He repeats that they are in the course of constructing their family and intimate life [‘constructing, constructing, constantly constructing it’]. Moreover, the informer refers to the mutually experienced kindness [‘My expectations have actually been met, I come back home to a nice atmosphere, there is silence, peace and pleasure’]. In his daily life he pays attention to the aspect of communication [‘if there are problems, we talk, first of all, about everything, we explain things to each other, if something isn’t right, then we just give each other some time’].

In his narrative Tomasz has emphasised his active participation in daily duties related to the house and child care [‘and I also try to support her in everything, at school, with supper or the kids’ homework or with the care over her [the woman’s – annotation M.B.] parents’]. Hanna has presented this issue differently. In her view, her partner’s involvement in their common household could be bigger.

The narratives of Hanna and Tomasz are an example of a seemingly alternative relationship, though some of the aspects of its functioning point to some minor changes towards a more flexible and egalitarian form. It is very important that the experience of the family reality so close to the ‘traditional’ model was not dominant in neither of the narratives.

The couple lives in a cohabitation relationship but their family life is built on 'stereotypes and cultural-social abuse' (Jaworska-Witkowska, 2011, p. 193). The relationship of Hanna and Tomasz differs from a traditional family in the lack of formalisation and other means of building intimacy. Hanna takes care of their family life, while Tomasz gains their means to live (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2015, p. 350). Their daily life is focused on two goals: the hearth and home and their family. Their concept of a gender role is close to the stereotypical thinking (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011, p. 332). Hanna is focused on maternity and family. She feels the need of raising her qualifications, however, she is not heading for a professional success. The researched woman, as concluded from the interview, although temporarily accepting the 'ideology of hearth and home', nonetheless builds her identity on it (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2015, p. 350).

It is worth taking a look at the female position towards the male position according to the narrative of Tomasz (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2015, p. 350). The predominant assumption is that a family should follow the traditional model of lifestyle. It is possible that there is ignorance behind this attitude but also the attachment to the life according to culturally defined norms ['the adaptation to the encountered structures and their justifications'] (Kwieciński, 1995, p. 21)]. As emphasised by Jaworska-Witkowska (2011, p. 195), it is not easy to capture this because 'the enslavement brought by the strong cultural myths and processes (mechanisms) of naturalisation becomes transparent, it is not easy to describe it because it is barely visible in the imitated, female language'.

The way of constructing the intimate relationship by Hanna and Tomasz is something that falls behind the 'traditionally' understood model of a relationship. Here, the transformation of the way of thinking about relationships has come to the surface. The dedication with which they enter their relationship lets them realise their need of intimacy as well as it becomes the source of spiritual and psychological satisfaction. Their bond is built on a dialogue (they consciously agree to postpone work upon the partnership within a relationship), respect towards the partner and the mutually expressed care and kindness (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011, p. 335).

It is puzzling how the life in cohabitation of Hanna and Tomasz is free from limitations and duties and to what extent they make their decisions themselves, determine their own lives as well as their family and intimate relationship. Therefore, the level of autoreflexion of the researched can be put into question. The interview with Hanna suggests that she would like to change the distribution of house chores, however, the construction of her identity displays how strong her cultural-socialisation vision of the relationship is. According to

Mirosława Nowak-Dziemianowicz (2006, p. 272), it can be connected with the difficulties regarding the understanding of the foundations of the cohabitants' relations.

Illustration 2. Life in cohabitation as a realisation of an alternative model of a family

The narratives of Magda (aged 33) and Janek (aged 41) are an example of a different family and intimate reality. The couple emphasises broadly understood freedom, autonomy of choices and they talk about the redefinition of a relationship and the relations between partners. This redefinition, breaking the limits, changing the known world and transforming it into some new and better one (Kwieciński, 1995, p. 22) does not happen on the declarative level but it becomes the means of organisation of the daily reality in both the sphere of practice and in the minds of the researched couple.

Magda experienced two unsuccessful marriages. She is currently divorced. She brings up her daughter from the first marriage with Janek as well as their own daughter. In the field of mutual and family relations she ignores the externally established objectives, tradition and the opinion of others.

She perceives her life with Janek as satisfactory [‘so I have already started to think there is no guy for me at all and that it is impossible for me to find any happiness in my life but I made it’] and fulfilled [‘I live with such a wonderful man and I am loved by him and we have an interesting life together’].

The routine of daily life and the care for basic things irritate the researched woman [‘I’m an artist and I could create various things and I sometimes wonder about such stuff instead of doing more important things’, ‘typical, daily duties of a mother are very abstract for me’]. She calls her partner ‘a husband’ without any problems. In her story she reveals the context of creating an intimate relationship [‘certainly, we support each other’]. While involving into her relationship, it was important for Magda that she received a lot of acceptance and respect for her interests [‘he appreciates me as an artist’] as well as mutual trust [‘I would like us to always trust each other as much as we do now’].

The respect for the partner’s autonomy, the experience of freedom in a relationship has played a significant role in the constructed relationship [‘this is my greatest happiness that I have a partner who understands that when I drift away in my thoughts, this is not because I am so weird but because I need some time on my own, I develop artistically through painting – it calms my mind down and thus I can be a mom and a wife’]. Her relationship with Janek tres-

passes the cultural concept of a family compliant with her tradition and religious roots:

‘when people love each other very much and unconditionally, then everything is possible.. – he, poor him, I wash his clothes and cook everything for him and he doesn’t care so I don’t bend over backwards... to iron his shirts carefully because I don’t use any iron or to cook exquisite dinners...’

Nevertheless, the informer points to a certain lack of freedom from cultural duties:

‘[...] I wouldn’t have to cook him any dinner but I feel...I feel – shit, how I hate this feeling, I feel there is some imperative to do it, to feed him, just like this...and this is some kind of instinct – this is not a part of my character to stay at home and keep on cooking...this irritates me.’

Janek’s attitude towards Magda as far as the realisation of cultural norms of gender roles is very crucial. The man supports his partner in the realisation of her vision of life, he frees her from the feeling of guilt (culturally conditioned).

She redefines the spheres of family life through autoreflexion [‘dinner is the moment of the day when we meet and talk and here appears the discrepancy because Janek thinks that when he eats, this is the time for him to read a book... so now we both read but also talk – but when there are children with us, we try to talk a lot’]. In her experience of everyday life, the artistic invention turned out to be important for her [‘I would like us to have a creative house, to invent new things all the time and no matter what comes out of this, I would like the mind to be productive all the time’]. She does not accept any external interference within her relationship and family, she emphasises the meaning of individually created vision of a relationship [‘a beautiful life is when a person is free and of unlimited imagination, when he or she has the ability to share his/her experience and thoughts with people who understand him/her’].

In her narrative, Magda has emphasised her pursuit after the freedom from limitations imposed upon women by patriarchal ideologies, gender stereotypes and ways of perceiving womanhood (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2011, p. 99). In Magda’s view, it is not focused on the role of a wife and mother [‘let them grow up, we will take care of them but live for ourselves, such an *idée fixe*’]. Although family life is important for her, it does not stand in the centre of fulfilling her womanhood. In her intimate and family life she takes attempts to implement her

own vision of family and she overcomes the boundaries imposed by tradition and culture. She follows, though with difficulty, ‘the need of female emancipation from the prison of conventionalities, social stereotypes (conditions, possibilities, consequences)’ (Jaworska-Witkowska, 2011, p. 173). The woman becomes the actress of her life in which she actively and ceaselessly interprets norms, expectations and needs (Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2006, p. 164–165).

Analysing the aspects of intimate life of Janek, his understanding of the relationship with Magda can be pointed out [‘maybe let’s start with that we live for one another in a great sense of being with someone’]. Discovering the components of his relationship, he emphasises that:

‘we’ve been through such an evolution – from the fascination through more intensive getting to know each other, somewhat searching for our freedom in this relationship. How much can we do of what the other person is burdened or irritated by, how much can we let ourselves do? Where are the limits of our mutual trust, our needs, ambitions, are they the same or contradictory?’ [...] ‘the fact that I’m with Magda is the result of my will, her will, my acceptance for her and her acceptance for me.’

The relationship he currently forms with Magda is based on ‘mutual respect’ and acceptance [‘she is a person of some particular character features that shouldn’t be treated as something that can be modified for one’s needs, but accepted as it is’] as well as the consciousness as to [‘where this border (between me and my partner – annotation M.B.) lays...’]. What is crucial in building a relationship is mutual, experienced closeness and care for the quality of the relationship:

‘As far as our relations are concerned, we are very sensitive towards each other. It is all very different from the outside however the way it works between us is like a constant confirmation of our honest intentions, involvement and the fact that we simply want to be together.’

The way of solving conflicts is a very important aspect of their relationship [‘we try to resolve a problem and we usually end up involved in some dialogue [...] this kind of tension is released in real communication between people’].

In his story, the informer redefines the notion of family, which he perceives as:

‘a place where...everyone is assured that the people around wish them well. This is a secure place where all doubts can be abandoned, where we can talk about...let’s put it differently – where there are no stupid questions.’

The narrative of Janek, his profound autoanalysis constitutes an example of building a family and an intimate relationship in the opposition to the predominant ‘traditional’ vision of the family. In his relationship with Magda three features of partnership have been revealed: ‘equality, freedom and justice’ (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011, p. 334).

In the narratives of Magda and Janek there is no attachment to the culturally defined norms and values (Gromkowska-Melosik, 2015, p. 10). As concluded from their story, they do not have the feeling of ‘being normatively overwhelmed with the role’ (Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2006, p. 195). The aim of their common activities is to deepen their intimate relationship and the care for its condition as well as the understanding of their cohabitation. The main motives for the undertaken activities that go beyond the traditional model of marital and family life are located, as the author thinks, in their high self-consciousness, accomplished by the ceaseless autoreflexion as well as the sense of freedom and the resulting possibilities of creating one’s life according to inner convictions. What is visible here is the flexibility in forming rules and duties as well as relaxing the pressure on the realisation of traditional obligations, individually negotiated relations (Kwak, 2014, p. 231; Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011).

Summing up, the informers notice that a relationship and a family are first of all private issues, the question of decisions made individually and open attempts at defining these notions.

Constructing intimate relationship by cohabitating couples

The analysis of the whole empirical material has revealed that as far as building a relationship by couples living in cohabitation is concerned, the dominant and stable component of this experience is the emotional bond between the partners. In their answers about the quality of their relationship the feeling of happiness dominates [‘in fact my life is happy because I am fulfilled as a woman and Adam as a man’ (Anna, aged 26); ‘Janek is the greatest happiness in my life’ (Magda, aged 33)].

It results from the support and security experienced in the relationship with a partner, as well as from comprehension and empathy [‘the most important things are security, love and tranquillity’ (Anna, aged 26)].

When the researched couples were asked about their emotions towards their partner, they often found just one term for what they feel, which is:

‘Now this is love’ (Anna, aged 26).

‘[...] Love, I guess, if there is any feeling, then it’s love. I don’t have any more reflections in this area’ (Adam, age 26).

‘I love her – it’s just love’ (Antoni, aged 28).

This feeling of fulfilling the common space with love was related, among other things, to the experience of another person’s closeness in a relationship, to the support, understanding, mutual completion, respect and acceptance, freedom and care for the partner. Basing on the analysis of the interviews, some unchangeable components of experiencing a relationship can be distinguished. They reflect the categories which the cohabitants identify with the experienced intimacy in a relationship.

The question of ambiguity dominates in the narratives concerning constructing mutual relations. On the one hand, there is the feeling that people care for one another, which makes the couple feel secure within their relationship. On the other hand, there is the fear of losing what they have built. There is some accompanying feeling that they can lose everything that is between them at any point. The experienced fear was related to the loss of what has been accomplished together. This is how the 26 year-old Anna puts it:

‘Fear, for sure. Fear appears very often because it happens always when I feel well and secure that I’m scared I’m going to lose it. [...] So there is the fear that I’ll lose him [the partner – annotation, M.B.] [...] I’m very scared that one day he will be gone. I don’t know why but this is how I feel.’

‘In relationships like ours there is always this risk we take into account from the beginning. We invested emotions in it and suddenly there can be some huge boom!’ (Maciej, aged 29).

The analysed kinds of experienced feelings and the presented behaviours in the field of constructing a close relationship with a partner display the variety and opulence of meanings that a relationship can carry for people. The dominant issue regards the emotional involvement of partners in constructing a relationship. The foundation for the bond is the experienced closeness, mu-

tual involvement in a relationship, support, understanding as well as empathy (Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011).

Summary

The phenomenological-biographical approach to the research on cohabitating couples has enabled to reach the core of the experience of living in a cohabitation relationship and thus to broaden the social and cultural spectrum of their representation (Jaworska-Witkowska, 2011, p. 194) by new images of family life and illustrations which refer to the relation with a partner. The discussed aspects of experience can form a cognitive perspective for pedagogy by enriching our knowledge on family.

The two presented examples of such relationships illustrate a diversified scope of experience within family and intimate daily life of the researched couples: the first one resembles a 'traditional' model of a family, while the second lies on the other end of the stick – this is a liberal model.

In the field of academic research, what appears to be interesting is for instance the sphere of constructing individual identities of partners, which has been briefly presented in the article. However, it requires some further analysis in the next instalments. Hence, questions arise: how do cohabitants reconcile the individual and the collective? How do they join two separate biographies? How do they construct common, conscious identity? (see: Ostrouch-Kamińska, 2011). These questions concern 'male and female identity' (see: Nowak-Dziemianowicz, 2006, p. 161) constructed within collective family and intimate space of the cohabitants.

The above analysis of everyday life of cohabitating couples, which in the author's opinion reflects the majority of the dilemmas concerning the construction of a modern family, may contribute to the discussion on the transformation of intimate relationships.

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