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

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

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

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**R**eflexive paradigm *imposed* by the interpretative turn, which guides the article at hand, makes the qualitative research that embraces it “very much exploratory in nature” (Roman 2016:10; also see: Altheide and Johnson 1994). The aforementioned reflexivity, both encouraged and expected from qualitative researchers (see, e.g., Kvale 2004; Hammerslay and Atkinson 2007; Angrosino 2010; Flick 2010), calls for the researcher to analytically deconstruct one’s own experiences, reasoning, and actions, as well as the imagery of others in the pursuit of *unveiling* any elements deriving from and/or having an impact on the taken-for-granted assumptions one may have on the phenomena being studied (see, e.g., Archer 2007; Becker 2008; Whitley 2015; Roman 2016). “Above all, however, a reflexive turn provides the room for those being ‘researched’ to become engaged participants in knowledge creation...and, if they choose to do so, to assume leading roles in defining research” (Roman 2016:10; also see: Becker et al. 2014; Cataldi 2014). In fact, the relation arising between the researchers and research participants seems to be given primacy in the literature referring to methodological and ethical concerns in conducting qualitative studies, with the emphasis placed on issues such as developing rapport and winning trust, closeness and distance, the co-construction and contextualization of knowledge, power imbalance between the parties, to name a few (see, e.g., Lincoln and Guba 1985; Gergen and Gergen 2000; Konecki 2000; Finlay 2002; Kvale 2004; Hammerslay and Atkinson 2007; Angrosino 2010; Flick 2010; Adler and Adler 2012; Ślęzak 2018). And, although some researchers claim that, “attempting to *be* reflexive takes one no closer to a central source of illumination than attempting to *be* objective” (Lynch 2000 as cited in Button et al. 2015:103), allowing the research-

er to play a more central role in the study, as well as releasing one from discomfort or feelings of guilt due to *revealing* and *sharing* any concerns they may have encountered in the field, but adding little novelty to the research itself (see, e.g., Patai 1994), it seems that the contextual acknowledgement of potentially opposing perspectives and goals, that may have an impact on fluctuations of “power balance” between the parties and the related vulnerability of either one of them, can actually add to the research (cf., Niedbalski 2010; Roman 2016; Ślęzak 2018; Wojciechowska forthcoming). This is particularly true when it comes to ethnographic studies—when the researcher gets (and feels) immersed in the field, and one’s relation with the research participants, more often than not, goes beyond the study context (see, e.g., Adler and Adler 2012). Still, before a certain level of familiarity is reached—and one can refer to the co-construction of knowledge as one of the substantial advantages of ethnography—a classical metaphor that best captures the role of the researcher (ethnographer) is the one of the child<sup>1</sup> being socialized into a particular world with the meanings *ascribed* therein (see: Werner and Schoepfle 1987). In this context, it is the researcher who—from the beginning of one’s fieldwork—seems to be placed in an inferior position, being, to a certain degree, “at the mercy” of the research participants (Råheim 2016), and constantly working on winning their trust (Angrosino 2010). Thus, intertwined in ethnographic studies is a constantly changing “power balance,” as well as relationship, between the researcher and research participants. As Karnieli-Miller,

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<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the researcher can purposely take on the role of “the innocent child,” just pretending one’s “ignorance” of the phenomena under study—especially in the early phases of the research—for instance, in order to avoid being perceived as potentially threatening (see, e.g., Konecki 2000).

Strier, and Pessach (2009:282 as cited in Råheim 2016) stress, “to gain access to the participants’ private and intimate experiences...the researcher must enhance a sense of rapport with people and needs to build a considerate and sympathetic relationship and sense of mutual trust.” Taking a closer look at the aforementioned *point*—one of the many the researcher is advised to embrace while embarking on a qualitative (and especially—ethnographic) study—makes the vulnerability of both the researcher and research participants, surfacing in the context of the study, evident. Things can get even “messier” when the researcher aims at accessing the so-called hard-to-reach groups, and thus needs to look beneath the overt surface realities to understand the hidden ones. In fact, a number of researchers have addressed the above concerns, offering their insights and guidance; and yet, every research context seems to be *unique* in its own way, and so are the challenges and tricks of the trade that one draws from it. Still, I believe, this does not make the attempts to add to the debate insignificant, especially if one takes into account the importance of conducting ethically-informed research that would not impede the *well-being* of the research participants, as well as that of the researcher.

The aim of this paper is to discuss methodological, as well as ethical issues that gradually emerged in the course of doing my five-year ethnographic study of planned lesbian parenting in Poland. Due to no legal (and little social) recognition of same-sex families in Poland (in this case—lesbian couples whose child had been artificially conceived in the course of their relationship), embedded in the context of internalized heteronormativity (see, e.g., Abramowicz 2010; Oliwa 2012; Miziel-

ńska and Stasińska 2013; Slany 2013; Majka-Rostek 2014; Mizielińska, Abramowicz, and Stasińska 2014; Wojciechowska 2014; 2015; Wycisk 2014; Mizielińska, Struzik, and Król 2017), the population under study seems to fall into the hard-to-reach groups category. Thus, one may expect the paper at hand to be a *story* dwelling on difficulties regarding gaining access, establishing rapport, and winning the research participants’ trust, interspersed with “tales” referring to overcoming an inherent imbalance in our relation. Instead, I wish to discuss how—to my astonishment—it was the women under study who, on the one hand, literally structuring, and thus enabling the research to be *successful* in terms of reaching the population, and, on the other hand, symbolically controlling the generation of categories, *guided* the process of collecting data, as well as the flow of information, thus, to some extent, taking the role of the activists who “wished to be heard”; how the research participants’ definitions of the situation (those regarding the research itself, as well as those of *passing*<sup>2</sup> [Goffman 2007]) have been *disturbed* due to becoming acquainted with the analysis I offered, what made them reflect on their “because motives” (Schütz 1953), as well as challenge the way(s) we were making meaning; and how our different social locations, particularly—my outsider status, as well as specific ways of collecting data have had an impact on the co-construction and contextualization of knowledge. Thus, the paper does not focus on specific results of the study, but—instead—

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<sup>2</sup> In order to manage insecurity anchored in fear of experiencing the anticipated displays of homophobia, many women (especially—non-biological mothers) employ the strategy of *apparent invisibility*, “designed” with an eye to let them *pass* as a family in a variety of social spaces (see: Wojciechowska 2014; 2015).

represents a modest attempt to add to the debate about how various interactional and interpretational contexts arising from specific researcher—research participants relationship established in the course of doing ethnographic study, as well as different ways of embracing these, may factor into the research process. The actual examples from the fieldwork which I offer derive from an ethnographic study aimed at analyzing how the way lesbian mothers experience and interpret diverse phenomena, embedded in specific interactional, situational, and spatial contexts, they encounter in everyday life has an impact on how these women—raising a child artificially conceived in the course of their relationship—*create* and *adapt* specific strategies of acting as family in a heteronormative society, as well as how they make meaning of their role as a mother. In this sense, the way women under study see themselves in the context of acting under unfavorable socio-cultural climate and *conceptual invisibility* outlines the broader analytical framework of how they build interactional concepts, as well as the experiences of motherhood.

## A Study of Planned Lesbian Parenting in Poland—Methodological Notes

As mentioned earlier, issues discussed in the article at hand are based on data collected during my five-year ethnographic study of planned lesbian parenting in Poland.<sup>3</sup> Among the couples who participated

<sup>3</sup> At first, the scope of the project was much wider, encompassing the situation of same-sex families in Poland; still, since—during the course of the study—the issue of parenting emerged as one of the most important categories for the research participants (mostly in the narrations of women, but also in those of men), I decided to focus my research on the problem at hand.

in the study are 20 lesbian couples<sup>4</sup> whose child had been artificially conceived (due to intrauterine insemination or in vitro fertilization) in the course of their relationship.<sup>5</sup>

Semi-structured interviews, which I conducted in various configurations, were the leading technique of data collection. When meeting a given family for the first time, I interviewed both of the women, unless the couple split up or only one of the women was a biological mother of a child from previous relationship (marriage ended with divorce). The next step was to interview the women separately—during our succeeding meetings.<sup>6</sup> Although I am aware of the limitations of thusly conducting the interviews, my decision to do so was twofold. First, the majority of the research participants insisted on telling their stories in the presence of their partners (which, although can be interpreted in terms of anticipating *tension* such a meeting may cause, was explained in more “pragmatic” terms—since their child was still very young, one person was unable

<sup>4</sup> At the time of our first meeting the women were aged 26-38, and their children’s age varied from 2 months to 5 years (5 couples expected their child to be born). Before making a decision to enlarge their families, women were couples from 18 months to 5 years. One of the couples split up before their child reached 1 year of age, but they still raise the child together.

<sup>5</sup> Also, I interviewed 3 lesbian couples who raise a child being a biological descendant of one of them (conceived during her marriage which ended with divorce). Still, since the situation of those lesbian couples who form a reconstructed family (only one of the women identifies as an *actual* parent, since her child also has a father) is different from what experience the women who raise *their* child (see, e.g., Wojciechowska 2015), data obtained from the former mostly serve comparative purposes, and were not included in the article. In the course of the research, I also interviewed one gay couple where one of the men is a father of a child being raised by his ex-wife.

<sup>6</sup> Thus far 5 couples were not interviewed separately (and we met only once), although the women have stated that they were willing to further participate in the research (at the time of the interview their children were toddlers which had an impact on scheduling the succeeding meeting time-wise).

to simultaneously take care of the child and focus on narrating; another thing is that the women perceived such a solution as lucrative for me—instead of one person, I was able to interview two people, what was to “guarantee” that no important fact was to be omitted or distorted, which—on the analytical level—allows the researcher to make assumptions regarding the *nature* of the relationship the women had). Second, being aware that such a way of conducting interviews would allow witnessing how the women relate to their partners, as well as their child,<sup>7</sup> what, in the context of the study, is extremely valuable, I decided to comply with their request. During the interviews with both partners I paid special attention to not touch on any sensitive (or potentially so) issues, which, if emerged, were brought to light at the time of individual meetings. Moreover, since most of the couples do not publically reveal the *nature* of their relationship (in certain situational contexts or in front of certain people), the participants involved have been anonymized. Thus far I have conducted 64 interviews with the women whose child had been conceived in the course of their relationship—26 interviews with both mothers<sup>8</sup> and 38 individual interviews (17 with biological

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<sup>7</sup> The research participants’ children (usually toddlers) were present at the time of the interview. Still, none of the women insisted on keeping the interview short. Furthermore, as one of the participants has stated, our meeting was important for her, since she viewed it as the opportunity to raise—via potential publications based on their narrations—social awareness in the area of lesbian parenting. On the other hand, I do not exclude that such motives could have an impact on the way they constructed their narrations.

<sup>8</sup> Since one of my aims is to see whether/how the research participants’ situation evolve over time, I intend to interview each of the couples at—at least—two points in time. Thus far I have interviewed 7 couples twice (in case of 4 families in 2014 and 2016, and in case of 3 other couples in 2015 and 2017) and 2 families 3 times (in 2013, 2015, and 2017). One of the couples has been interviewed twice in the timeframe of one week (since our first encounter lasted longer than they

mothers and 21 with non-biological mothers<sup>9</sup>). The interviews lasted around three to five hours (in case of interviews with both partners) and around one to two hours (in case of individual interviews), and were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The second technique of data collection was overt participant observation, aimed at capturing how the women under study *present* and *practice* their family in a *visible* (both common and institutionalized) social space, as well as how specific social responses to their actions, as interpreted by the women, have had an impact on adapting certain strategies of functioning in the social milieus at hand (such issues were clarified during conversational interviews [see: Konecki 2000; Kleinknecht 2007]). Three families allowed me to accompany them in their everyday life activities such as going to the park, to the shopping mall, to the zoo, picking the child up from nursery school, or playing with the child in the yard or at the playground. Also, one of the families, whom I have known for 4 years now, invited me for their child’s birthday party. Depending on the research participants’ schedules, one (which is usually the case) or both of the mothers are present while I do the observation (we have been once accompanied by one of the research participants’

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expected, the women suggested we should continue the interview a few days later, when they would both have enough time to spare). It was, again, the research participants’ choice to be interviewed in the presence of their partners. Also, it is worth mentioning that although a two-year interval may not seem enough to offer an insight into potential shifts, many of the women narrated how (and why) they had revised their strategies of *presenting* their family as their child was growing up and thus becoming an *aware* social actor (preschool children).

<sup>9</sup> It was the research participants’ choice to be referred to—in potential publications—as non-biological mothers, since they believed the term at hand was the closest to their situation—in the socio-legal context—and to how they felt.

mothers, who wished to find out more about the research). Thus far I have conducted 24 observations lasting around one to three hours, with the notes being taken during or right after the observation. All data gathered during the course of the study have been analyzed according to grounded theory methodology procedures (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Konecki 2000; Charmaz 2009).

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

### **Let Me Let You In. When the Research Participants' Perspective "Changes the Rules"**

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

tricks of the trade a number of researchers had offered, I was "prepared." Only this time it turned out to be *different*.

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

### **Participants' Sense of Activism as the Main Drive and How It "Guided" the Research**

The first three couples who I interviewed in a similar timeframe were reached independently thanks to my social network, which is nothing new when it comes to conducting qualitative research. Still, to my astonishment, I have soon discovered that the

research participants not only know other families socially but also share the issues (both *factual* and *conceptual*) being discussed during the interviews. When I first met the second (to be interviewed) planned lesbian family, they—almost right after I entered the room—offered to get me in touch with their friends (as they knew how difficult it was to reach the population) who, as I figured judging by the amount of details the women provided me with, I was to meet just two days later. At first I was reluctant to reveal the information at hand, but I eventually did—to stop one of the participants from calling them—stating that it was too much trouble and, possibly, I might have already reached their acquaintances. Later that day I got a text, “Yeah, that’s them :) Good luck!”<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, this may be seen as a *good* thing—the participants were willing to vouch for me, what—in many instances—turned out to be of great importance. For example, one of the couples recruited via Internet consented to be interviewed—as I found out later—in the aftermath of having a chat with their acquaintances (planned lesbian family) who I had already met; the latter were not trying to convince them to have a conversation with me—all they did was to share their taking part in the study of lesbian parenting with their friends; so when I reached the couple to be interviewed, they already knew about my project, as well as that I was, in fact, an academic, and

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

not, for example, a journalist. But, on the other hand, such a situation may also cause several issues to be dealt with. Let me come back to the aforementioned example—at first I was willing to interpret the situation at hand in terms of a great, but how lucky, coincidence. This was until—on the later stage of the research—I met a couple who literally “guided” the recruitment process. Not only did they introduce me to three lesbian families but they also were the ones who made one couple get in touch with me, and not the other way around.<sup>11</sup> What is more, they would also follow up the process—to make sure that I, indeed, managed to schedule the interviews. For instance, again, as I found out later, one of the couples I had been referred to by the family at hand, knowing that I reside in a different city and teach classes on specific days (what can easily be googled, but was, in fact, communicated by the latter), scheduled the interview accordingly. One may ask why the research participants were so eager to give me a hand in getting to know them, or, more precisely, their situation. The answer to this question, I believe, is best embodied in the following interview excerpt:

What our society needs to understand is that we’re the same. When it comes to raising our children, we have the same problems, the same dilemmas, the same concerns, or... I don’t know, speaking about raising a child to be a good person... What I mean is that we’re not different, it’s our situation that is, yes? But, this [additional issues that make the situation dif-

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

ferent, resulting from being a lesbian mother in a heteronormative society] doesn’t happen in a vacuum. [individual interview with a 31-year-old biological mother of a 6-month-old child]

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

telic—benefit the women under study *receive* is, as stressed by Mizielińska, Struzik, and Król (2017), the one of enlarging their *support group*—mothers whose experiences can be compared with their own, and who may be capable of offering a valuable piece of advice.

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

<sup>12</sup> In the case of the study at hand, the participants’ engagement was, to a large degree, driven by the (commonly shared) sense of being (socially) framed as *deviants*. Still, as stressed by Becker and colleagues (2014), the participants may take on the role of social activists informing and educating the community members due to applying specific research strategies.



this case—reaching a particular population—is, to a large degree, a matter of luck? Yet another issue resulting from the participants' engagement in the research, which I will address in the remaining sections of the paper, referring to (re)framing some of the analytical categories emerging in the course of the study, is how—despite a number of conceptual and interactional *misunderstandings* we had—the research participants' willingness to share their stories contributed to the knowledge co-construction, which had an impact on the way I contextualized the data (and thus—analytically structured the results of the study).<sup>13</sup>

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

One of the issues—related to the extent to which some of the research participants engaged in the study at hand—that caused me a lot of trouble, was the problem of *supersaturating* “problem categories.” As I have mentioned before in this section, some of the women “supervised” the research process, meaning, they would discuss with their already interviewed acquaintances the issues we touched on during the meeting (as I clarified later with them, this has been done, for the most part, in order to “prepare oneself for the interview” or to satisfy their curiosity). What also needs to be mentioned here is that most of the research participants, claiming this would be a souvenir for them, as well as for their children, asked me to provide them with

<sup>13</sup> Since the paper is methodologically oriented, and thus does not focus on specific results of the study, I will dwell on experiences which contributed to analytically embedding the issue of non-heteronormative family *visibility* as *understood* and *practiced* by the research participants.

a copy of our conversation, which I did in every single case (what I did not know, however, was that some of them shared the copies with their friends who were to be interviewed in the future—so they would know what kind of issues I wished to discuss). The aforementioned situation can be best embodied referring to one particular encounter when, while explaining the purpose of the study, as well as of the interview, my utterance was interrupted by the following statement by a research participant, “No worries, Magda, you’re in good hands! [laugh] I had a word with Agnieszka and Kasia, so we know what to expect. I’ll tell you what you need to know!” I should have been happy, but I really was not.<sup>14</sup> Keeping in mind that some of the research participants wished to “prepare for the interview,” as well as being aware of their sense of activism, I relatively often reflected on the degree to which the *flow of information* has been “controlled” by the women under study, or—simply put—on the issue of “constructing” data. Still, since I believe that my task as a researcher is to gain a multi-sided insight into the reality under study and apprehend the participants' notions of “whatness” and “howness” (Kleinknecht 2007) rather than to capture a “true” reflection of analyzed reality (besides, considering that the way individuals present *themselves* seems to be, to a large extent, dependent on one’s volitionality—something a researcher has little *control* over<sup>15</sup>), the aforementioned issues were not my greatest concern. Instead,

<sup>14</sup> Although referring to the issue of herself being a subject of the research participants' discussions, Sylwia Męćfal (2016) also points out the obstacles a researcher may face when the informants *exchange* information regarding the study.

<sup>15</sup> The triangulation of data, as well as interviewing the participants more than once both contribute to capturing different dimensions of the phenomenon, thus minimizing potential biases (Konecki 2000).

I focused on a different obstacle, namely, *supersaturating* "problem categories," which, I believe, has been done with a lesser degree of intentionality involved when it comes to presenting oneself and more due to the mechanism of giving primacy to the already known (see, e.g., Zimbardo and Leippe 2004).

Since most of the participants wished to know how the data would be analyzed and used, including the methodological context, I offered extensive explanations, referring, among others, to generating categories (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Konecki 2000; Charmaz 2009), which—later on—some of the women framed as "problem categories." Having identified the issues that had been discussed with their acquaintances—and understanding these issues in terms of "problem categories"—some of the participants aimed at *filling* such conceptual areas with content (seeing doing so, as I have been told at some point, in terms of "contributing" to the study), thusly *supersaturating* "problem categories." The aforementioned *conceptual misunderstanding*, driven, to a large extent, by the level of participants' personal, but *politically* underpinned, engagement, resulted in specific models of structuring one's narration.<sup>16</sup> First, as already mentioned, the women

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<sup>16</sup> Of course, I am aware that the situation at hand was, to a large degree, "fueled" by how I acted as a researcher—after all, it was me who extensively *disclosed* the way I was going to analyze the data. Still, I decided to do so in response to how inquisitive (and *informed* in the area) the research participants turned out to be. As I figured out, some of the women under study were psychology and pedagogy graduates, and—for the most part—they were the ones who—for various reasons—*insisted* on finding out how the data were to be analyzed, including (in one instance) asking me for providing them with some references on grounded theory methodology. Hence, believing that the research participants have the right to know what (and how) *will happen*

under study were "determined" to cover (the surface of) all issues defined as "problem categories" (understood thusly, e.g., judging by the amount of time spent on discussing these with other couples) as vividly as possible, even if, from their point of view, such issues were not the most vital in the context of their experience (several such categories were, e.g., making an informed decision to enlarge their family, experiencing social [*conceptual*] *invisibility* of lesbian families, or projecting strategies for raising children, to name a few). Second, some women were reluctant to dwell on issues they thought were "insignificant," meaning, not falling into the "problem categories" (i.e., I remember listening to extensive narrations about *verbalizing* the family [in certain situational contexts and/or in front of certain people], and then facing their surprise resulting from being asked, e.g., how they do shopping when with their child<sup>17</sup>). Third, keeping in mind specific "problem categories," some of the research participants aimed several fragments of their narrations at highlighting similarities or differences identified between their experiences and those of their already interviewed acquaintances (i.e., "I know from Kama that they told you about those medical appointments [referring to those situations when a non-biological mother takes her child to a doctor], and, in our case, this is pretty much the same, that is...").

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

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with their narrations, I have decided to answer their questions regarding the methodological context of the study.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, this can also be due to not retrospectively analyzing the process of each action one takes (Schütz 1953).

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

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

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

One of the issues I analyze based on the data collected during the study is *conceptual invisibility* of lesbian mothers raising their children in Poland, the invisibility pertaining, to a great extent, to those women who *cannot* be socially “decoded” as *real* mothers or—for obvious reasons—*father figures*—the invisibility of non-biological lesbian mothers (those women who—in the light of ideological norm of monomaternality—simply cannot be *mothers*). Due to experiencing the conceptual non-existence of “ready-made” role scripts, coupled with internalized heteronormativity, while constructing specific ways of *displaying* their families, some women—in order to protect their children from anticipated emanations of homophobia—choose to “play the game” according to the rules imposed by *our* society, that is, they adapt a strategy based on *apparent invisibility* (in certain interactional, situational, or spatial contexts), which allows them *passing* as a family. To put long things short, a woman with a child will most probably be socially “decoded” as this child’s relative, possibly—a (*real*) mother. The issues raised above, as I suggested in the analysis, first, exemplify

how non-biological lesbian mothers *unintentionally* (choose to) self-marginalize themselves while opting between their need of identity realization and their child’s ontological security, and, second, may raise concerns as to whether the adaptation of *ap-parent visibility* strategy does not, in fact—in a long-term—have an impact on perpetuating the norms they find oppressive.

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

*Reservations* some of the women had mainly referred to the last part of my analysis—a suggestion that undertaking certain actions may result in perpetuating the norms they see as unfair.<sup>18</sup> Why was this assumption so disturbing? During a conversation with one of the couples participating in the study—one of those who allowed me to accompany them in their daily activities—it has been explained to me that it was due to how *accurate* the statement at

hand turned out to be. What also resulted from our conversation<sup>19</sup> was that my outsider status, allowing me to adapt a different perspective and thus highlight those elements of their verbalized experience that they do not *realize* (anymore) due to its *habitual* nature, *allowed* them to *see* a “disturbing paradox” which distressed them in the first place (of course, such a “wake” was a mutual experience); although, as I have been told, “some things are difficult to change” due to external forces (i.e., anticipated pejorative, if any, social recognition of *social mother* identity) one simply *cannot* control.

What has been learned from the encounter at hand? To start with, this *interactional episode* made the depth and the degree of previously deconstructed vulnerability of the participants almost “tangible”—I was aware of the complexity of their situation, as well as of the impact it had on their identity formation; still, the conversation at hand, framed around our (different) perspectives, allowed me to (more *fully*) grasp the *burden* associated with experiencing dissonance while symbolically oscillating between what they see as their children’s welfare and their longing for a sense of mother identity (also see: Mizielińska, Struzik, and Król 2017). Due to the clash of our perspectives, what has been framed as overcoming selfishness (choosing a child’s ontological security over one’s need of identity realization) “gained” yet another conceptual dimension—that of a *threat*. In this sense, reflecting on the projected state of actions (“in-order-to-motives”) has been *supplemented* by retrospectively grasping what—in a variety of contexts—led one to what had been

<sup>18</sup> I remember bringing up this subject with two couples, although I have been informed that the issue at hand had been discussed more broadly among several of the families.

<sup>19</sup> We had this conversation on a social basis, but I was given permission to share its content for analytical purposes.

projected (“because motives”) (Schütz 1953), and the consequences related to the process. Thus, the idea of a *role-model*, dressed differently from what has been *expected*, turned out to be yet another conceptual issue which, in order to be integrated with other self-designations, *needed* to be reframed.

Feeling *pushed out* of my comfort zone, I blamed myself for not taking enough responsibility for research participants’ well-being. After all, it was my *duty*. Still, the above reflections are not intended to make me feel *better* as a researcher due “confessing my sins.” Instead, I wish to highlight the importance of *co-operating* with research participants at every step of the way (see: Cataldi 2014) as proceeding so may result not only in the contextualization but also co-construction of knowledge embedded in a variety of perspectives (Becker et al. 2014). In this sense, if the process of *retelling* their stories is done in the hope of contributing to the understanding of their everyday lives, it should, I believe, be preceded by learning from one another. Would I *rephrase* my analysis if I knew how the conclusions I offered will at first be seen? No, I would not. Instead, I would choose to share my insights at a much earlier state—to be discussed *in the process* of analyzing data, and not when this has been done.<sup>20</sup>

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

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

<sup>20</sup> Such an approach is also advocated by Anna Wyka (1993).

*guage-mediated visibility* which embodies how the way research participants *practice* their families in the private context may be reflected and thus socially “decoded” on a *public* level due to language, and more specifically—naming practices that, in this context, may be seen in terms of a symbolic bridge connecting two *universes*—social and public spaces. The way children address their mothers (and vice versa) in different interactional, contextual, and spatial contexts, resulting from how the sphere at hand is being managed by the research participants, not only enables the *decipherization* of their relation but may also contribute to its symbolic legitimation, especially so when a third party (e.g., a family doctor) *speaks the same language*. Having the above in mind, and since the issue of naming practices was not yet decided by the majority of women (at the time of our encounter[s] most of the children were not *aware* social actors [i.e., they were toddlers]), I reflected on the avenues that would allow discussing the category at hand with the participants.

Of course, it was possible to observe family relations, as well as naming practices, during some of the interviews or—more likely—the observations I conducted; still, since the techniques at hand provided little to no space for grasping how the children would address their mothers in the public context, and I by no means intended to “include” the former in the research otherwise than to the degree both accepted by their mothers and that they are *safe*, I had to figure out yet another way of proceeding in this regard. And, eventually, it was one of the couples who *gave me a hand* in that respect. During one of the observations at the participants’ home, with both of the mothers and their child present,

the women have been viewing their vacation photographs taken a few months back. While doing so, they had been making their 3-year-old child join in the discussion by asking simple questions, such as: *Do you remember how we...?* When the observation was over, I asked both of the women whether they would agree to do a similar thing when we next meet—asking their child to then tell me what/who was in the picture(s)<sup>21</sup> (cf., Konecki 2010; Byczkowska 2012). Of course, I have explained my agenda behind the request at hand—I wished to see how the child would identify and linguistically convey the family relations to a person not being part of his close interactional circle, and later discuss the issue(s) at hand with both of the participants.<sup>22</sup> The women agreed to do so.<sup>23</sup>

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

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

<sup>22</sup> Of course, I am aware that since both mothers were present and it was them who asked their child to tell me what/who was in the pictures, I—most probably—had not been seen by the child at hand as belonging to the universe other than private. Still, my intention was to *invite* the women to a joint discussion regarding their language-mediated family relations—which, I hoped, was to take place due to presenting the content of the photographs—and not to “exclusively” focus on how the child would describe what/who was in the pictures.

<sup>23</sup> Such a way of collecting data has been used in case of 7 more families (whose child—at the time of our encounters—was—for practical reasons—more than 2 years of age). In 5 instances, the mother(s) asked their child to tell me what/who was in the pictures after the interview we had before.

thing specific, the mothers would ask him question such as: *Do you want to see the pictures of us? Can auntie join us? Which picture is your favorite? Will you tell auntie what’s in the picture? Who’s that?* The women had chosen a dozen or so photographs (only printed ones) to be discussed, although only three of them had been chosen by the child (1. of the child and his mothers [the biggest photograph], 2. of the child, his non-biological mother’s mother, and a dog, 3. of the child and his biological mother). Before the child got bored and expressed a wish to do something else, talking about the photographs took us approximately 12 minutes. Later on the child played with a toy in the garden while I discussed the issue of naming practices in relation to how language makes the family *visible* with the participants.

Although I have been told during the interview that—in order to *manage* their privacy—the women had decided that their child shall address his biological mother “mom” and his non-biological mother by using the diminution of her name, as it turned out at the time of describing who was in the photographs, he would go for the word “mom” referring to either of them (the thing I noticed before at the time of observations). On the one hand, the above insight offers analytical guidelines in terms of (“appropriately”) *deciphering* one’s family relations (by the child), and, on the other hand, it highlights that the language is, indeed, a means of *communicating* its *visibility* in a variety of contexts.

What resulted from having asked their child to tell me what/who was in the pictures were discussions providing the room for sharing our observations in the area of naming practices and jointly contextualizing

(as well as analytically embedding), to at least some degree, the category of *language-mediated visibility*—discussions embodying the process of knowledge co-construction. Still, two related outcomes were way more *important* for me. First, as I have been told, some of the insights we shared turned out to be beneficial in practical terms. Second, and the more important, due to taking part in the process of analyzing data, the participants felt *empowered* and, as some of them have stated, the actual *part(y)* of the study.<sup>24</sup>

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

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

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<sup>24</sup> Kamil Pietrowiak (2014) also reflects on the importance and benefits of including interlocutors in the ethnographic process. On the other hand, it should be stated that such an approach may, as well, limit the context of discovery (see, e.g., Ślęzak 2018).

I must confess that I had a hard time *understanding* their fears in this area, possibly due to our different social locations, until I personally “experienced” what it feels like to be seen as a *subject* to be “defined.”<sup>25</sup> A field note, which I present below, had been done right after one of my first observations—when I was in a park with one of the research participants and her child, watching them playing together at a playground.

What a weird situation... There’s this lady in her late 60s who sits next to me on a bench. No “Hello,” no small talk, she asks how often I come here with my sister (we both have black hair, must be that...). I gently replied that A. was not my sister but acquaintance, “what a lovely park...” New questions to come... I really don’t want to put A. in an awkward position (somehow I feel very uncomfortable about this “conversation” we have), I change the subject. The lady often comes to this park with her grandson (no grandson here...), since her daughter and son-in-law both work till late hours. Next, she informs me she quite often sees my **acquaintance** (she pronounced this word in a “funny” way) here with her child, but also with another lady, “Is she a baby-sitter? ‘Cause my daughter...” OH, COME ON! Guess I’m now ready to hear a question about a **daddy** (or, maybe I’m just paranoid?)... Don’t really feel entitled

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<sup>25</sup> Based on her study on climbing activity, Anna Kacperczyk (2012) describes how analyzing one’s emotions may factor into the research process, as well as have an impact on the research results. I have also raised the issue at hand (Wojciechowska forthcoming), describing how being presumed to be a future escort agency employee by one of the escorts (and thus introduced to the “rules,” as well as offered some tips as to how to “work” with the Johns) resulted in making me *realize* how it must feel to be somewhat “deracinated” and abruptly confronted with the previously unknown perception of one’s body, what, in turn, contributed to offering more focused analytical paths.

to have any kind of conversation about A. (plus I'm angry 'cause this morbid curiosity of mine makes me stay just a little bit longer), I tell the lady I have to go, wish her a nice day. She also left, maybe went to look for her grandson... A. tells me the lady I just spoke with is one of the local "bigots" who would walk around peeking in on other people's lives. A. knows them quite well, not the first time they've done this kind of stalking... "Male or female, young or old, healthy or disabled, these are your only options, nothing in between." "I got used to this." A. will be back in the park tomorrow, so will the "bigots." [field note]

Certainly visible in the above excerpt are emotions which arose due to having experienced a specific form of social control—in this case, mediated by one's *curiosity* regarding *others*. What can also be observed is that—at some point—I asked myself whether the way I framed the situation was not *paranoid*. Was this woman *really* making an attempt to gather (more) information regarding the research participant's private life, or was my (emotional) interpretation of her actions a result of becoming—in the course of the research—"oversensitized" to any form of inquiry potentially framing heteronormativity as a norm? In fact, it does not matter. What matters, instead, is that—regardless of my interpretational frame—taking part in this interactional episode made me *realize*, to at least some extent, what kind of contextual concerns the women under study face on a daily basis. What is more, as it turned out to be true based on the example at hand, *passing* as a family on the grounds of *apparent invisibility* is just a matter of time (Goffman 2007), since one's curiosity regarding *other(ness)* is a very

strong drive. Thus, lesbian mothers, especially non-biological mothers, may be *conceptually invisible*, but they definitely do not pass unseen; and being aware of this—of being *seen* and *watched*—has an impact on how planned lesbian families choose their strategies of acting in public (*visible*) spaces (be they common or institutionalized).

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



## Concluding Remarks

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

Focusing on the importance of deconstructing our imagery regarding specific researcher—research participants relationship, I dwelled on how the women's engagement in the study, enabling it to be *successful* in terms of reaching the population, may, at the same

time, represent one of the limitations one has to face (and *overcome*) in order to manage fluctuations of “power balance” between the parties, as well as to avoid the *supersaturation* of categories. Next, referring to the issue of research participants' (and researcher's) vulnerability surfacing in the course of doing ethnographic study on sensitive issues, I attempted to highlight how the way we reach our conclusions, as well as present our analysis, may challenge the way(s) the participants make meaning. Lastly, drawing on specific ways of collecting data and the outcomes thereof, I reflected on the importance of co-construction and contextualization of knowledge.

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

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## **„Powie ci, co powinnaś wiedzieć”. Negocjowanie nadawania znaczenia – refleksje metodologiczne na podstawie etnograficznego badania macierzyństwa lesbijek w Polsce**

**Abstrakt:** Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przyjrzenie się temu, w jaki sposób osadzenie relacji na linii badacz–badani, jaka powstaje w toku realizacji badań etnograficznych dotyczących zjawisk trudno dostępnych bezpośredniemu poznaniu, w tym przypadku macierzyństwa lesbijek w Polsce, w różnych kontekstach interakcyjnych i interpretacyjnych, jak i określone sposoby radzenia sobie w ramach tych kontekstów mogą wpłynąć na proces badawczy. Odnosząc się do konkretnych dylematów, jakich doświadczyłam w toku badania – począwszy od docierania do trudno dostępnej grupy, która – w pewnym sensie – *chciała*, by do niej dotarto, oraz następstw takiej sytuacji; poprzez poczucie *bycia wypychaną* ze strefy komfortu, gdy po zapoznaniu się z częścią analizy danych badane kobiety przechodziły od werbalizowania motywów „ażeby” do refleksji nad motywami „ponieważ”; po analityczne kontekstualizowanie emocji, które pojawiały się jako reakcja na *doświadczenie* problematycznych dla badanych obszarów ich codziennego funkcjonowania – moim celem jest naświetlenie tego, w jaki sposób – w kontekście relacji z badanymi – określone sposoby zbierania i analizowania danych mogą wpływać na kategoryzację i (re)konceptualizację danych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** macierzyństwo lesbijek w Polsce, badania etnograficzne, refleksje metodologiczne, nadawanie znaczenia, wyzwania w badaniach terenowych