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## Transitions and Threats to Family from the Standpoint of People in Their Thirties

**Abstract:** The aim of this study is to present certain aspects connected with transformation of contemporary Polish families and to indicate threats to performing their functions. Systematic, economic, social and cultural transformations have influenced lives of people and families and new opportunities emerged to improve standards of living, change attitudes and lifestyles. Contemporary families are characterized by varied structure and dominance of non-productive families formed primarily on non-economic grounds, which control and plan birth of children. However, families are facing a number of challenges and threats that affect performing the basic family functions. High unemployment rate, poverty, violence and addictions are only part of the phenomena that negatively affect quality of living of Polish families. This study presents opinions of young people about transitions and threats concerning family functions.

**Key words:** family, transitions, threats to family functions, unemployment, poverty, addiction, dysfunctions, social opinions, people in their thirties.

### Introduction

Political and socio-economic transitions in Poland have been followed by cultural changes which had a substantial effect on lifestyles of people and families. Technological advances, development of medical sciences and ecology, computerization and virtualization of the world have caused the improvement in quality of living and changed lifestyles.

Economic and social globalization brought about cultural clashes and transitions in functioning of Polish families. Socio-economic aspirations have increased substantially while better conditions for achievement of higher standards

of living and meeting the needs in terms of goods and services have emerged. The willingness to improve professional competencies has been observed as they determine the success in the labour market while the period of learning and entry into the adulthood is increasing.

Humans are becoming more autonomous and this phenomenon is accompanied by the development of the idea of freedom of a person and his self-realization. On the other hand, the substantial part of society is unable to adapt to new economic reality, which causes impoverishment of families and threats to performance of their basic functions [Tyszką 2001, p. 14 ff.].

Among the determinants of roles in contemporary marriage and family are demographic and social factors connected with the socio-demographic structure of population and processes that occur in society. These include in particular decreasing the number of births and shift in the moment of birth as well as increase in common-law marriages and families, single parent families and blended families. A distinct correlation has also been observed between professional activity of women, their education and tendencies for limitation in the number of children. The birth rate is decreasing with the increase in education level and position at work. Among socio-economic factors which are the consequence of processes of restructuring of the economy and system transformations, one can list: lack of financial stability of individuals and families caused by unemployment, which results in serious psychosocial consequences and disturbs family functions [Rodziewicz 1997, p. 159 ff.].

Cultural transitions have caused changes in the structure of the 21st century family while the traditional patriarchal model, with fathers as primary breadwinners in their households, was replaced with a partnership model, with women ceasing to be financially dependent on husbands. The influence on family life is changing and the relationships between the spouses are mainly based on emotional rather than material relationships. The nuclear family is also becoming more and more isolated from the extended family.

The characteristic feature is formation of new types of families: besides the extended family, there are also small families composed of only parents and children as well as patchwork families and "distance" families. Parents living separately, engaged in business trips and professional work experience difficulties in meeting basic family functions.

Transformations connected with changing attitudes towards marriage and family have caused the emergence of a new form of extramarital relationships: cohabitation and concubinage. With popularization of the attitudes of liberalism towards marriage, increasing individualization of human and decreased importance of legalization function, these forms are more and more common. Living of two unmarried adults together in one household is becoming more and

more often accepted by society. Cohabitation is chosen most frequently by young people as a form that precedes entering into formal marriages [Karpuszenko 2014, pp. 40–45] as well as by widows, widowers and the divorced.

A “two-step” marriage is also emerging as a new form, first being an informal relationship, without children, followed by a formal marriage and started after having a child. The demographical reports have demonstrated that ca. 45% of marriages are started after the birth of the child and the number of children born in extramarital families is on the increase.

New models are being developed for attitudes towards procreation while conscious planning of children or not having children in favour of other values are observed. New models of seeing a child as a value (e.g. extension of the lineage, support for families or family “investment”) are emerging.

Furthermore, getting married is being delayed and the mean age of spouses is increasing. Since the late eighties, marriages have been started by increasingly old people, i.e. those aged 25–29 and 30–34, which is correlated with giving birth to the first child and decreased fertility of women [Doniec 2003, p. 97].

Intended childlessness can be caused by sociological, personal or economic factors. Decline in multi-generation families, ineffective family policies, traumatic experiences, lack of proper parental models, negative identification models, sacrificing family for professional careers, birth control, increase in physiological infertility in developed countries are only some factors in childlessness [Dąbrowska 2005].

Family and neighbourhood ties are also more loosened, with people isolating from each other. More and more gated communities are being developed, with access being more restricted. A departure has been observed in contemporary families from traditional values towards rationality, pragmatism, subjectivism and individualism in views and behaviours of parents and children. The feeling of freedom and making choice is increasing and the attitudes of self-realization, higher educational and professional aspirations and achievement of success in life are emerging. Other changes include higher family tolerance, acceptance of egalitarianism and ideological differences between generations while the roles and norms are less strict than in the traditional families [Tyszka 2003, pp. 26–27].

Monoparental families, with one parent and at least one child, are becoming more frequent in Polish society. These tendencies are caused by divorces, separations, emigration or death by one parent or it can result from the deliberate decision on becoming a single parent. These families might be formed by lone mothers or lone fathers and are often characterized by financial problems, discrimination of children by peers and lack of models of mothers and fathers. [Slany 2012, p. 124 ff].

New forms of social life which have arisen during the period of transformation have caused the increase in “singlehood” i.e. living as singles, alone by choice.

Although singlehood has always been present e.g. due to the death, split-up or difficulties to find a lifetime partner, a deliberate choice is also becoming the frequent occurrence. New way of thinking about life, higher feeling of independence, acquiring of comprehensive education and financial stability requires greater commitment and giving up traditional forms of family life. Status of a single person gives much freedom in making decisions and adoption of lifestyles [Osińska 2002, p. 24 ff.]. The discussions on contemporary family often concern homosexual relationships i.e. relationships between people with the same gender. For cultural reasons, such people often used to conceal their sexual preferences. Nowadays, with more freedom in traditional family and partnership obligations, many people come out while public tolerance to such behaviour is increasing. Much controversy arises around the problem of adoption and raising children by homosexual couples, which is connected with the lack of social acceptance and no legal regulations concerning the privileges of children in families with heterosexual parents. Economic and cultural transitions that have been observed in the last decade have caused a number of difficulties in functioning of Polish families and threatened its stability.

### **Threats to functioning of contemporary Polish families**

Contemporary families are facing the problem of adaptation to social changes and the market economy, which in part of them has caused disintegration and dysfunctionality. Social inequality is becoming more noticeable in the areas of incomes, access to goods and services, education or culture.

The onset of the market economy, limitation of social assistance in workplace and new demand in the labour market caused that unemployment has become the most difficult social problem. The phenomenon of the unemployment among people who are able to work is affected by the fluctuations in economic tendencies, seasonal changes in the unemployment level, automation of production, degree of the use of labour resources in agriculture. Seasonal unemployment is caused by periodical variability of climate conditions and production cycles whereas prolonged unemployment results from structural properties of the economy as well as maladjustment of workplaces to the structure of employee competencies and their place of residence [Mała Encyklopedia PWN, 1996, p. 92]. Current unemployment rate in Poland is ca. 12.5% (report from May 2014), with 11.2% in the Silesian Voivodeship and 27.2% among people aged 21–24 years in the first quarter of 2014 [Monthly information..., April 26, 2014].

If the economic situation in Poland does not improve, the unemployment rate at the end of 2014 is likely to exceed 14% and 50% of all the unemployed in the next year will be young people [<http://kariera.forbes.pl/w-2014-roku-mlodzi-ludzie>, September 16, 2014]. In the economic terms, this status is undesirable

and involves substantial expenses on unemployment and social benefits and affects in particular young people who want to start their families and bring up children. This contributes to extension of the area of poverty and intensification of marginalization and social exclusion. Obviously, the effects of unemployment and poverty affect the whole family, particularly children and young people since the economic and security functions are becoming threatened. Financial deficiency is reflected by deprivation of the needs in the area of health, relax, education, participation in the culture and family life. Children from poor families experience much humiliation. They are often discriminated by their peers and feel worse, which limits their self-esteem. This represents a serious pedagogical problem, noted by many teachers and parents.

In the EU countries, children of single parents are the most threatened with poverty, whereas in Poland, this problem concerns large families. In 2009, ca. 22% of large families lived below the minimum standard of existence. From the social standpoint, families affected by poverty are reflected by such characteristics as: unemployment, permanent using of social assistance services, low education level, living in the country and small cities. Pathological phenomena are occurring in unemployed and poor families, such as violence and addictions, which leads to development of dysfunctional families [Szukielojć-Bieñkuńska 2010].

Domestic violence is usually concealed and it is children who suffer the most, with the violence leaving the mark in their minds. Violence humiliates, causes suffering, physical and psychical damages and stimulates the feeling of hatred and revenge. Physical, psychical, sexual and economic violence or negligence are the most frequent forms of domestic violence to make the victims dependent from the violator, lose the opportunities for making independent decisions and force unconditional obedience and humiliate [Pospiszyl 1999, p. 16].

Bruised and exhausted children are brought to hospitals, often sexually abused in their families, experiencing psychical violence and neglected by parents. Violence, which is understood to mean intentional and repeated activity, affects the personal rights and goods of the entity, preventing from self-defence, causing physical and psychical damages, and often limiting the self-esteem [Czajkowska 2009, p. 241]. The frequent phenomenon in contemporary families is emotional orphanhood, lack of feeling of acceptance by parents or indifference or negligence of the child's needs [Gawęcka 2001, p. 405]. Another unfavourable phenomenon that affects many Polish families is parent's leaving Poland to earn money, termed Euro-orphanhood.

### Transitions and threats to family from the standpoint of people in their thirties

The aim of this study was to collect the opinions of the thirty-year old people about transitions and threats to functions of contemporary families. The survey was carried out among 216 people living in formal and informal relationships and people who have not started their families yet (65% of women and 35% of men). The most of the people (70%) had higher education level, followed by those with secondary or vocational education levels. The questions “Does the contemporary family differ from the traditional family, i.e. family of your parents or grandparents?” (see Tab. 1) was answered positively by 173 respondents (around 85%). Ten people (5%) have not observed any changes and 10% did not have any views.

**Tab. 1. Differences in the structure and functions of traditional family (of parents or grandparents) compared to contemporary families in the opinions of the 30-year-old respondents, N=216**

No.	Differences		Respondents:	
	Traditional family:	Contemporary family:	N	%
1.	Large multi-generation families living together	Parents and children living separately	178	82
2.	Higher number of children, no birth control	Lower number of children, birth control	166	74
3.	Men being the primary breadwinner	Professional work of women, common financial contribution	132	61
4.	Women raising children	More contribution of men in caring and raising children (paternity leaves)	120	55
5.	Important decisions made by man	Partnership in relationships concerning division of duties, important decisions made together	96	44
6.	Greater financial stability of the family	Greater financial problems, lack of financial stability and housing problems	81	37
7.	Lower number of divorces, greater stability of the family	More single parent families due to greater number of divorces and separations, singlehood	58	22
8.	Leisure time rarely spent with children	Leisure time frequently spent with children	42	20
9.	No differences		10	5
10.	I have no opinion		20	10

Source: author's own elaboration.

As shown in the Table 1, young people see many differences in the structure and functioning of families of their parents or grandparents. The respondents

emphasized the family size (82%) and lower number of children in contemporary families and birth control (74%). The characteristic feature of the contemporary families is professional work of women who contribute to their families financially, often more than their male partners (55%). The respondents emphasized that a partnership-based division of duties and making important decisions together is predominant today (55%). They note that contemporary families are facing more financial and housing problems (37%) and insufficient financial stability. They emphasized single parenthood caused by a growing number of divorces, separations and deliberate singlehood (22%).

Starting families and maintaining their stability (see Tab. 2) was the most important for 66% of people, similar to living in a relationships based on loving each other (51%). 49% of the respondents would like to improve the standard of living of their family and achieve financial stabilization, whereas 27% of them would like to make a career. Maintaining the independence (17%) and enjoying life (12%), education of children (14%), improving the level of education and establishment of strong professional position (13%) is important to the thirty-year-old people studied.

**Tab. 2. Life plans of the 30-year old people studied (multiple choice)**

No.	Life plans	Respondents:	
		N	%
1.	Starting families and maintaining their stability	143	66
2.	Living in a relationship based on loving each other	110	51
3.	Improving living standard in family, financial stability	105	49
4.	Making professional career	58	27
5.	Maintaining independence	36	17
6.	Education of children	31	14
7.	Improving education and strengthening of professional position	29	13
8.	Enjoying the life, entertainment and travelling	27	12
9.	I have no opinion	8	4

Source: author's own elaboration.

The study also surveyed the views of the respondents to concubinage as a contemporary form of family life. 42% of the respondents expressed their positive opinion on this form of family life, 20% of them was of the opposite opinion while others argued that this is neutral and does not affect the function of family.

Another question concerned having children by parents. 60% of the people found that spouses have right not to have children, 15% disapproved of such attitudes, with the rest having difficulties in expressing their views unequivocally. Half of the study participants did not see any threat to family due to conscious decision on not having children and expressed positive attitudes towards birth



control and using contraceptives while 30% considered it as a threat to family stability.

Among the threats that cause dysfunctionality of families, 30-year-old people emphasized (multiple choice) unemployment (80%), financial deficiency (62%), addiction to alcohol (57%), aggression and domestic violence (43%), addiction to drugs and other psychoactive substances (38%), addiction to computer, television and gambling (17%).

**Tab. 3. Threats to family in the opinion of young people in their thirties**

No.	Type of threat	Respondents	
		N	%
1.	Unemployment	172	80
2.	Financial deficiency	133	62
3.	Alcohol addiction	123	57
4.	Aggression and domestic violence	93	43
5.	Addiction to drugs and other psychoactive substances	82	38
6.	Addiction to computers, television or gambling	37	17
7.	Parents leaving Poland to earn money	32	15

Source: author's own elaboration.

With regard to their attitudes towards adoption of children by homosexual couples, the majority of the respondents (85%) expressed their objection, 10% considered it as a positive phenomenon and others did not have any views.

In conclusion, it can be found that 30-year old people realize the transformations of the contemporary family, see the differences between traditional families of their parents and grandparents and their own families. Among the life plans, the most important expectation is to start a family and maintain its stability. Among the determinants of proper function of the family, the first place was taken by emotional ties between the members of the family, good material situation that guarantees meeting existence needs, respect and tolerance.

### Conclusions

The substantial changes are being observed in social awareness concerning family life. In the system of values of young Poles, family remains to be at the top position, although the tolerance for atypical couples (common-law marriage, divorced or single parents) has increased. However, in the beginning of the 20th century, a number of factors contribute to disintegration and decay of the family. The number of "problematic", threatened and dysfunctional families is on the increase, with negative phenomena occurring in these family and having the effect on all the family members, especially threatening proper development of children and young people. Financial, cultural and spiritual poverty, marital

conflicts, addictions and the related violence cause disintegration and decay of the family, which is reflected by the growing number of divorces and separations.

The survey carried out among 30-year-old respondents demonstrated that the family represents the obvious value to the most of them, with emotional ties representing the basis for maintaining its stability. Young people realize the threats causing destabilization of families and emphasize individualism which consists in occurrence of different models of behaviour, lifestyles and career paths. Children are not a unique good for the part of parents, who are able to replace them with other goods. Young Polish families are relatively varied and there is a lack of uniform model of family life, with standards and values inside the families being contradictory. An increase in social tolerance concerning divorces, separations, single parenthood, patchwork families (children from different marriages living together with new partners of their parents) should also be emphasized.

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