

# The New Happiness



**JOANNA MIZIELIŃSKA**  
Institute of Psychology  
Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw  
jmizielinska@psych.pan.pl

**Dr. Mizielińska is an assistant professor at the PAS Institute of Psychology and leader of the “Families of Choice” project. We talk to her about non-heterosexual relationships and happiness**

**Academia:** You are studying the lives of non-heterosexual families in Poland. What's the concept behind the research?

**Joanna Mizielińska:** Similar studies have been conducted in the West for many years, but this is the first time we are doing this in Poland. Until now, we have had problems obtaining quantitative data. For example, non-heterosexual households aren't included in the census for a range of reasons. We decided to challenge this and conduct some research ourselves. I applied for an “Ideas” grant from the EU, although unfortunately I fell 0.2 points short of the target. Eventually, in 2013 we received an “Ideas Plus” grant, set up by Prof. Barbara Kudrycka, then minister of science and higher education, as a kind of “consolation prize” for projects which were rated highly by the European Research Council (ERC). The money has allowed me to study non-heterosexual families in Poland, using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The project runs for three years, finishing at the end of 2015. We have conducted a discourse analysis, quantitative studies, 53 biographical interviews, an ethnographic study with ethnographers spending a month living with or near 21 participating families, and 21 focus group interviews with different respondents: non-heterosexual parents, siblings and parents of non-heterosexual persons, children brought up in same-sex relationships and lastly an older group (55+) of non-heterosexual persons who are in same-sex relationships. The quantitative

analysis, conducted last year, involved 3038 participants in non-heterosexual relationships, with or without children. We published a report based on this part of the study, available on [www.familiesofchoice.pl](http://www.familiesofchoice.pl). For comparison, we also interviewed around 2000 non-heterosexual individuals living alone. The questionnaires are currently being evaluated.

**And what have you found these relationships to be like?**

Despite stereotypical perceptions, they are happy relationships. We asked three questions regarding happiness, one repeated from the “Social Diagnosis” study concerning overall levels of happiness. There were also questions concerning various aspects of the relationship and its impact on the participants' happiness. The picture we obtained is a very positive one. We found the couples to be happy, satisfied with their relationships which they see as very successful, and pleased with their various aspects.

**Where does this sense of satisfaction come from?**

Non-heterosexual relationships tend to be far more egalitarian than heterosexual ones in terms of division of chores, expectations of what partners want to do together or separately, and general everyday negotiations. There is also satisfaction with the division of finances. The couples also support each other and satisfy their emotional needs, which is especially important for non-heterosexual individuals, since they are routinely excluded by public institutions and often even shunned by their own families. One of the questions we asked was, “Who supports you when you need help and who do you turn to in difficult situations?” It turns out that in all cases, our respondents turn to their partner – be it when they need emotional or financial support, or when they are sick. In 97% of cases they regard their partner as family, and of course if we define families by their function, partners generally meet this definition 100%.



**Are there differences between men's and women's relationships?**

*There are clear gender differences. Relationships between women are slightly happier and the couples are slightly more satisfied with their sex life. In terms of division of chores, women's relationships tend to be more egalitarian. They focus more on harmony and ongoing negotiation of expectations; they talk about what they want to do together or separately. Women also tend to be more satisfied with the division of finances, and they value togetherness. For example, lesbian couples are more likely to have a joint bank account. There is also a difference in terms of monogamy: women are monogamous in over 95% of cases, while the figure is much lower at 68% for men.*

**How did you find participants? Did you rely on the snowball effect, or did you reach them via friends of friends?**

*Each voivodship (province) was assigned two pollsters - a man and a woman, for obvious reasons. Non-heterosexual people as a group are difficult to access, and there are even more inaccessible subgroups such as the elderly or people living in rural areas. The researchers were set quotas to meet in each region. Since we didn't know who to interview in advance, we relied on the pollsters to find participants using snowball sampling combined with respondent-driven sampling. They used all techniques at their disposal, which meant visiting nongovernmental organizations as well as*

## Non-heterosexual families in Poland

using snowball sampling to give them as many starting points as possible. As a result, they were able to reach several respondents who were elderly, had a low level of education, or lived in small towns and villages, although unfortunately their numbers remain low in our sample.

### Did they make any surprising findings?

Perhaps that, contrary to stereotypes, non-heterosexual relationships are frequently very long-lasting. In individual in-depth interviews we talked to 53 people and many have been in their current relationship for around 20 years. One of the couples we interviewed has been together for 42 years in spite of not receiving any institutional support and not having children, which are frequently additional ties in heterosexual relationships. There are also none of the further factors which often make heterosexual relationships more enduring, such as joint credit or the prospect of divorce costs. The partners stay together purely because they choose to.

### You conducted your study in an environment which is frequently unsympathetic to such relationships; did you encounter much hostility?

Before I answer, I'd like to comment on how the stereotypes relate to reality. Many of the couples have children – it's not the case that non-heterosexual people will only have children when society allows them to adopt. They are not infertile; many have kids from previous, heterosexual relationships, and in 8% of cases, they have children from their current relationship, for example conceived in vitro. We have families in which partners bring children from previous relationships and go on to have children with the new partner – as often happens in heterosexual families. In this context, it's important to stress that there are such kids in Poland and to discuss the fact that their new stepparents have no legal rights. Children spend a lot of time being cared for by a stepparent who is of the same gender as their biological parent (this mainly applies to women) and form close bonds with them; stepmothers also contribute financially – in fact, according to our study, this contribution tends to be higher than that of the other biological parent – in this case the father. And yet if something happens to their biological mother, the children simply

lose their stepmother and closest care-giver, because they are frequently placed with their biological mother's parents, who often don't accept her partner. Non-heterosexual stepparents have no rights at all to the kids, and the kids have no right to inherit from them.

### Are kids in non-heterosexual families happy?

In the quantitative part we didn't interview children, but parents were asked about their wellbeing, and we have followed their opinions in the next stages of the research. Of course the subject of children comes up in in-depth interviews, and analysis allows us to establish how kids are being brought up and what values the family has. Quantitative analysis reveals that children understand the kind of families they live in, and that they are fine with it. Subsequent stages of analysis (for instance focus group interviews with children) show that they find it entirely natural, and only get a sense that there is something unusual or wrong with their families from wider society. Non-heterosexual families would prefer to be open about their lives, but they tend to conceal their orientation for the sake of the kids – this choice to hide is an active decision to protect children from outsiders' hostility. In 14% of cases, respondents with children told us that no one around them knew about their situation, and school and kindergarten teachers were aware in just 23.8% of cases. This shows that the families are very close and kids have contact with people of all genders



Joanna Mizielińska (DSc)

and have a broad outlook, but parents tend to conceal their orientation from outsiders.

**Let's talk about some of the difficulties faced by families of choice.**

*We asked an open question about the kinds of problems non-heterosexual people deal with because their relationships are not legally recognized. Unsurprisingly, the most important issues involve healthcare and matters relating to death, and the attitude of the health service. Frequently, even though the partner is registered as next of kin, or the person being admitted to hospital is conscious and specifically requests that their partner should be kept informed, this is simply ignored and partners aren't even allowed to visit. In such cases, very much depends on the patient's biological family, since they are the ones kept informed. We have this strange situation when a patient's parents don't know the details of their child's health problems, so they need to discuss them with the partner, while the partner is only able to find out the patient's condition from the parents. They aren't able to make any decisions, even though they are usually the ones who know how their partner wishes to be treated, resuscitated, or even buried. There are also myriad problems regarding finance, inheritance, and other official matters.*

**People living in non-heterosexual relationships are also frequently rejected by their relatives, who don't invite them for family occasions like Christmas, Easter, weddings, or christenings. Do they also face open criticism or attacks?**

*They generally come up with all kinds of strategies to cope with a hostile environment. They tend to be very cautious and make sure they know someone very well before they come out. This makes attacks less likely, although they do still happen. One of our respondents was beaten up as he was leaving work. But we also heard positive stories. We interviewed a gay couple who have been living together for over 20 years in a small village in southern Poland. Their families and neighbors all know; they even set them as an example, because many heterosexual marriages have broken up while the couple have stayed together. The grandmother asked them to live with her and has stood up for them when people have expressed disapproval. It's hard to see this in the wider population, but ethnographic studies and in-*

*depth interviews show that it is possible for non-heterosexual couples in Poland to live openly.*

**Could the results of your research translate into specific actions, for example the appointment of an ombudsman for equality or the foundation of dedicated institutions?**

*I think our research is important if we are to effect change in society's attitude. We need to gain a better understanding of non-heterosexual relationships, which is why we conducted the quantitative study. We are talking about fairly large numbers, and numbers cannot be ignored. We mustn't sweep these issues under the carpet, even though this is what has been happening until now with public opinion polls and even the census. We need to be aware how many such families live in Poland, otherwise they will continue being ignored and seen as marginal, trivial, and not worth bothering with.*

**Are attitudes changing towards people living in non-heterosexual relationships in Poland, or towards civil partnerships?**

*We analyzed the most recent parliamentary debate on civil partnerships. It actually comes across as more aggressive than the previous one from 2004 in terms of arguments and the use of hate speech. We looked at media reports, discourse in the Church, and online comments, and not only did we find no progress, but the situation actually appears to have worsened. However, when we look at it on a societal level, at results of opinion polls, it turns out that acceptance has improved greatly, more than doubling between 2006 and 2013. Childless relationships between people of the same gender were accepted or regarded as families by 6% of respondents in 2005 and 13% in 2013, while same-sex couples bringing up children were accepted by 11% and 23% respectively. A recent poll by the Centre for Public Opinion Research shows that over 50% of respondents have no problem with non-heterosexual couples. This begs the question: who do the politicians indulging in hate speech against same-sex couples think they are representing? ■*

Interview by Anna Zawadzka

**Further reading:**

<http://www.familiesofchoice.pl/>