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## Memories of Adults Regarding Relations with Parents in Childhood

### Abstract

Research into memory in adults reminiscing about childhood memories is not well-established. Some people seem to have vivid memories from very early ages, while others remember events beginning around age four or five. The aim of this article is to present memories of adults regarding relationships with their parents in childhood based on two surveys. First research was undertaken by the Public Opinion Research Centre (in Polish: *Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej*). Second one, qualitative research of childhood relations was conducted by the author of this article among students of family studies from *The Cardinal Wyszyński University in Warsaw*. On the basis of quantitative and qualitative research on Poles with regard to their childhood memories, several conclusions may be drawn. First of all, the surveyed Poles have positive childhood memories with regard to relations with parents and the process of upbringing. A larger proportion stresses a better bond with their mother. Only in some of the quoted recollections of students, there appears greater significance of relations with father, who gave them a sense of security, pointed out values and established a model of masculinity. A large number of the polled adults declared that parents were close to them and cared for their social, moral and religious education.

### Keywords

Poles, childhood memories, relations with parents, upbringing.

Childhood is a special and very important period in the development of a person. Despite having their own potentiality, the development of which they pursue

in their own way, a child, however, needs support from closest adults for a long time. A child is not self-sufficient but parents, members of the closest family, grandparents or caregivers need to care to satisfy the basic needs of the child.<sup>1</sup> Appropriate attitudes of adults greatly affect the kind of childhood memories a child will have. Whether they are memories filled with love, joy, warmth, or rather, memories associated with suffering, sorrow and obligation.

The understanding of childhood varied in different periods of history, from being a period of absolute submission to the will of parents, to a period of innocence, freedom and joyfulness. Diverse perceptions of childhood also influenced how adults understood it. Thus, in their memories, there are references to childhood as a time of work on a farm or in a workshop, as well as references to a time of games, carefreeness and joy. It is worth bearing in mind that the perception of an adult's childhood is more problematic since the childhood memories are of a fragmentary nature and do not reflect the experienced reality accurately.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Adults' memories of relations with parents

The difficult task of analysing childhood memories of adult Poles was undertaken by the Public Opinion Research Centre (in Polish: *Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej* or *CBOS*)<sup>3</sup> in the period of 9–15 May 2013, from a representative sample of residents of Poland (1101 persons). The first question was: What was your relationship with your parents like? How strongly attached did you feel to your mother/father?

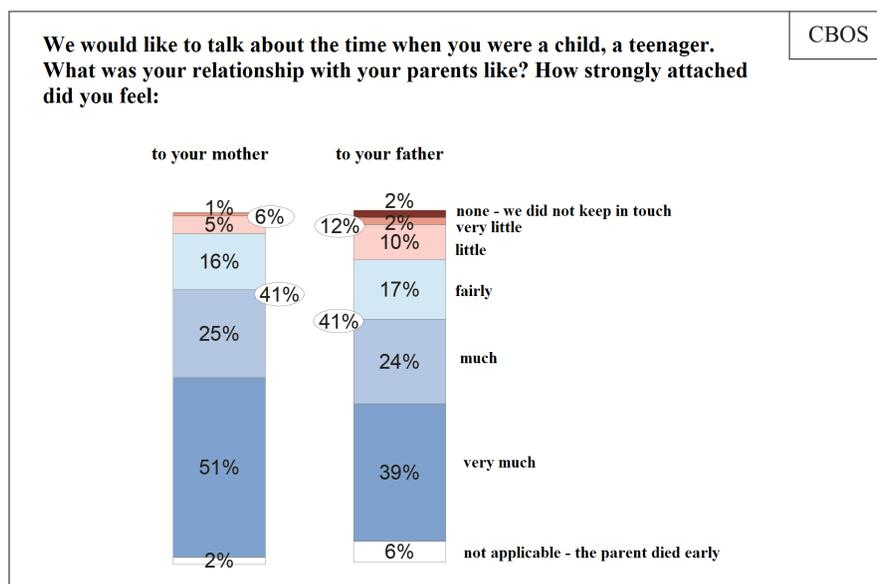
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<sup>1</sup> Cf. E. Osewska, *Wspólnota rodzinna w służbie wychowania*, "Family Forum" 4 (2014), pp. 125–139; *Rodzina. Bezcenny dar i zadanie*, (eds.) J. Stala, E. Osewska, Radom 2006; *Nauki o rodzinie w służbie rodziny*, ed. J. Stala, Kraków 2014; *The Contemporary Family: Local and European Perspectives*, (eds.) E. Osewska, J. Stala, Kraków 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. Wilk, R. Bieleń, *Pedagogika rodziny. Zagadnienia wybrane*, in: *Rodzina. Bezcenny dar i zadanie*, (eds.) J. Stala, E. Osewska, Radom 2006, pp. 456–457.

<sup>3</sup> Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej (CBOS), *O mamie i tacie – kilka wspomnień z dzieciństwa*. Komunikat z badań, Warszawa, maj 2013, BS/69/2013, [http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2013/K\\_069\\_13.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2013/K_069_13.PDF) (22.08.2016), pp. 1–7.

Fig. 1 Attachment to mother and father



The respondents' responses indicate that the majority of Poles remember strong ties with the mother and father, 92% of respondents remember a strong bond with their mother and 80% indicate a strong bond with their father. However, when indicating a very strong bond with a parent, 51% of respondents stressed the ties with their mother and 39% with their father. In memories of respondents with regard to the relationship with their mother, the category 'we did not keep in touch', did not emerge, but 2% of respondents chose it in their relation to their father. Only a small percentage of respondents (6%) indicated their attachment to the mother as 'little or very little', whereas the percentage of respondents describing the bond with their father as 'little or very little' had been twice as large (12%). Only a small proportion of the polled adults could not answer this question, owing to the fact that their parent died early – 2% of respondents lost their mother early, whereas, for father, the figure was 6%.

77% of the polled adults declared that in their childhood and teenage years they had strong ties and very close relationships with both parents. 10% of respondents indicated strong attachment to the mother, but weak to the father. Only 2% stated that their bond with the father had been strong, but weak in

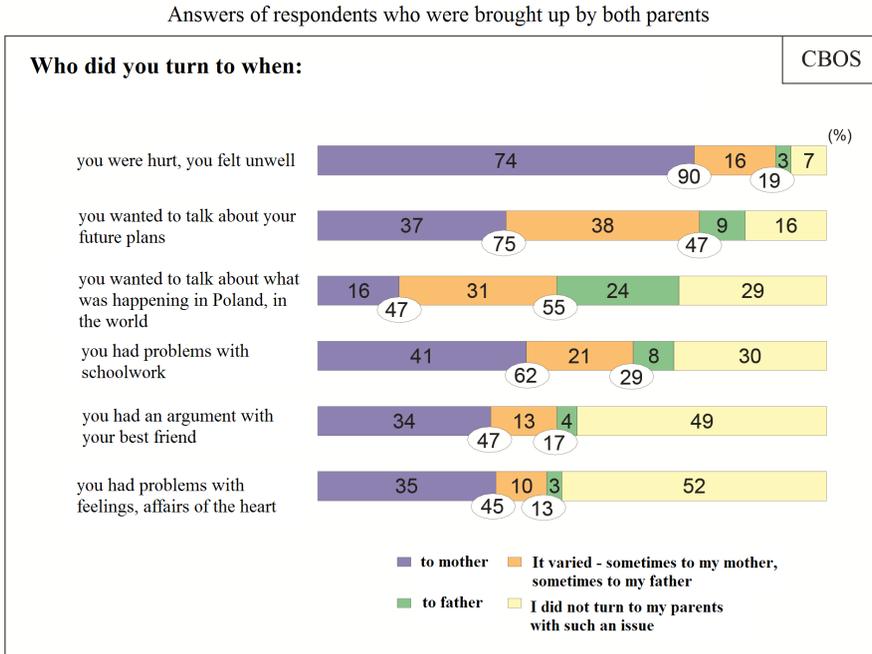
the case of the mother. However, 4% indicated a weak relationship with both parents. Seven per cent of the polled adults were not able to provide an answer with regard to this issue due to the fact that at least one of parents died early. Memories and assessment of the relationship with parents correlate with each other. Poles declaring strong ties with the mother, also assess their relationship with the father more positively and vice versa – those assessing their relationship with the father favourably, also tend to describe their relationship with the mother in a more positive light. It does not, however, entail the same warmth of memories. The relationship with mother is remembered as warmer than in the case of the relationship with the father. It may be a consequence of mothers' longer presence at home, which, in turn, resulted in stronger bonds with children and more affectionate atmosphere.

## **2. Parent as a child's confidant**

A child or teenager need to stay in constant contact with persons who are significant – parents, caregivers, grandparents – in order to talk to them about their emotions, problems and challenges. It was for this reason that respondents were asked who they turned to in various situations.

When Poles recollected their childhood memories, they referred to stronger ties with their mothers much more frequently, which may be connected with mothers' much longer presence in children's lives. In all cases, with the exception of conversations about the current affairs in the country and abroad, the respondents indicated more contact with their mothers than fathers. Ninety percent of adults surveyed chose the mother as a person to whom they turned if they were hurt, suffered or needed some emotional contact, and only 19% indicated the father in this role. However, only 3% of the respondents sought assistance only from their fathers. When recollecting childhood memories, 75% of respondents remembered talking about their future plans to their mothers and 47% to their fathers. Furthermore, according to memories of the polled adults, various children, schoolwork issues had involved the mothers (62%) more than it had been the case for the fathers (29%). What is interesting is that half of the respondents did not talk about their quarrels with friends and emotional problems to their parents. However, if they actually took the decision to confide in their parents, they still chose their mother over the father more frequently. It is slightly surprising that 30% of the respondents remember not

Fig. 2 Contact with parents in difficult situations



seeking parents' help when dealing with schoolwork problems. Unfortunately, we are not in possession of data to confirm whether the polled adults solved the problems independently, or turned to somebody else for assistance.

### 3. Personal memories of childhood

It is worth complementing the quantitative research of childhood relations, particularly relationships with their parents, which was conducted by the Public Opinion Research Centre, with personal memories of recollected contacts with parents. Personal memories, despite their selective and fragmentary nature, are directly associated with the family history of a particular person and may constitute a valuable complement to the quantitative research.

In search of childhood memories, the author of this article asked students of family studies from The Cardinal Wyszyński University in Warsaw to share their personal recollections of family relations and the family in which they

had been raised. With the students' permission, a large number of these texts were presented in the book "In the Family Circle. Practitioners' reflections"<sup>4</sup>. When reminiscing about their childhood, students often mentioned not only their relationship with parents, but also stressed the value of the marital relationship between the parents, which was of great influence on building the family atmosphere and their upbringing. Mutual love, respect, making little gestures of kindness, attitude of openness and mutual acceptance observed in parents, built a child's sense of security and self-esteem. Anna recalled it in the following way: "Everything must start with joy. It is the real introduction to parenthood. Its first signal is confirming the conception. At that time, as my parents mentioned in a conversation with me, they had looked after me and after each other. By mutual respect and love, my parents fulfilled their parental role and built the proper home and atmosphere for me and my siblings (elder brother and sister). During these most important months in a child's life, the decisive factor is the atmosphere that gives the sense of security, stability of feelings and warmth. In that period, thanks to the family atmosphere at home as well as my parents' behaviour, I was introduced into the specific rhythm of the community and my place in the family. Their love, approval and respect were important to me. When I began to speak, they introduced certain limitations into my behaviour by means of the words, "this is not allowed". They introduced me into these limitations with great tact and love, each time explaining "why". For my good conduct, I could always count on praise in the form of a kind word, smile or a hug etc."<sup>5</sup>

In their recollections of childhood, students often stressed the involvement of both parents in the process of upbringing. Statements by parents that were particularly interesting or provided positive feedback are often engraved in children's memories. As Marta recalled: "My mum spared no effort and care for my religious education and preparation for a life according to moral principles. She was always there for me when I needed her because she stayed at home with us. We talked a lot about topics relating to religion. Our father used to tell us various bedtime stories (unless he was tired after work). Often, they were sad stories with happy endings... My parents adopted a very good strategy for my moral-religious education. I remember that as a small child I would be given

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<sup>4</sup> *W kręgu rodziny. Refleksje praktyków*, (eds.) E. Osewska, J. Stala, Poznań 2003.

<sup>5</sup> A. Kowalik, *Moje życie religijne zaczęło się na kolanach mamy*, in: *W kręgu rodziny. Refleksje praktyków*, (eds.) E. Osewska, J. Stala, Poznań 2003, pp. 128–129.

certain tasks to be completed. They were always the kind of tasks that would give me a lot of pleasure but required a certain degree of discipline and sacrifice e.g. a drawing as a token of gratitude. In addition, during preparation periods for holidays I was involved in all kinds of supporting activities e.g. decorating the flat for Christmas. It was devoting my free time to God. I really enjoyed these activities; they allowed me to express my emotions and feelings”<sup>6</sup>

Parents express their love to their child in a number of ways, depending on their personal maturity, upbringing and the age of the child. Being aware of the need to raise the youngest generation well, parents attempt to set a good example. These resonated in the recollection of the memories of some people, e.g. Andrzej stressed that: “My parents always set a good example. They reprimanded me for lying, bad conduct or cursing. They always taught the importance of hard work and they would never slack on the job. That is why I know the meaning of laziness... The effort my parents put to show me who is most important in my life paid off. I am ready to say it today that I am very grateful to them for showing God in my life. I am very thankful for each sleepless night, for teaching me my first words, for showing me how to walk my first steps. I thank them for my life, for the very fact I am here today and that I can live.”<sup>7</sup>

When parents are bound by a strong bond of marriage, a child finds in them the psychological support he or she needs and builds their trust not only in their parents but also in other people around. Interestingly enough, in students’ recollections, there were references not only to relations with the mother but also with the father. Probably due to socio-political transformations, mothers decided to take up professional work, which greatly affected the process of upbringing in the family. This is characterised by a greater involvement of fathers, grandparents and, sometimes, even other relatives and persons from the closest environment. In students’ memories, the father brings not only authority, a sense of justice and security, but also sets the first example of masculinity and participates in the process of religious education. When reminiscing about her childhood, Barbara states: “When I was a little girl, I loved spending time with my father. He was somebody special and almighty. He was able to build a shelter from a few seemingly useless branches. We played a game in which I was an

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<sup>6</sup> B. Obórko, *Świadectwo życia moich rodziców*, in: *W kręgu rodziny. Refleksje praktyków*, (eds.) E. Osewska, J. Stala, Poznań 2003, p. 124.

<sup>7</sup> A. Simiński, *Kto w życiu jest najważniejszy*, in: *W kręgu rodziny. Refleksje praktyków*, (eds.) E. Osewska, J. Stala, Poznań 2003, p. 169.

Indian princess who was captured. He was my saviour then. We used to go for a walk together and he would show me the beauty of nature, he would sculpt princesses for me in a grey soap and read fairy tales in the evening. I loved being with him. That was a beautiful and carefree time. I felt that nothing bad could happen to me when he was around because his large hands would always protect me. At that time, he seemed all-knowing to me. The same, great man would kneel beside me for our prayers in the evening and would also talk about the other Father, who lives in Heaven – something inconceivable then! He would talk about His love, presence, kindness and that He is the ‘the most wonderful among all fathers’. He could not comprehend then that there could be somebody greater than my father”<sup>8</sup>

A proof of the involvement of fathers in the process of religious education of a child is the account of Justyna, who presented it in the following way: “During my earliest years (including what I actually remember and what I have been told by my parents), my father looked after my religious education. The first element that he taught me was the Sign of the Cross, made at home but also in the Church. By mimicking my parents, I made the sign mainly before meals and prayers. Another important aspect of my religious education was teaching me one prayer – “Our Father”. We would always learn it in the evening when nothing would distract me. We repeated the words of the prayer until I had it fully memorised. When our dad decided that we knew one prayer, he would “recite” another (to me and my brother). Each following, newly-learnt prayer I regarded as something which can bring me closer to God about whom we talked so much in our family”<sup>9</sup>

In the memories of young adults, there are also references to family conversations/dialogues. Students remember that in different difficult situations, they approached their parents and asked for help, which corresponds to the CBOS research findings according to which children turned to their parents in problematic situations. Katarzyna looked back on her conversations with parents and presented it in the following way: “The talks we had were never just dull lectures on the doctrine of the Church and their own deliberations and experiences. They were more of situational dialogues. My parents, sensing that

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<sup>8</sup> B. Woźniak, *Mój Ojciec w niebie*, in: *W kręgu rodziny. Refleksje praktyków*, (eds.) E. Osewska, J. Stala, Poznań 2003, p. 155.

<sup>9</sup> J. Wawer, *Proces wychowania religijnego w mojej rodzinie*, in: *W kręgu rodziny. Refleksje praktyków*, (eds.) E. Osewska, J. Stala, Poznań 2003, p. 133.

something significant was about to happen in my life, very delicately tried to learn more about the details in order to refer to the topic of God and His place in a given situation in my life. While doing so, they demonstrated utmost subtlety, which contributed to a sense of security and openness to dialogue. I believe that, thanks to this attitude, they saved me from making many irreversible mistakes and they still do it now. Until today, they offer their valuable advice on how to channel my life for it to be fruitful and lead towards God.<sup>10</sup>

Not all recollections were very positive. In the statements of students, there also emerged situations in which parents urged children to participate in religious practices even though they did not take part in them themselves. The missing role model of parents caused disruptions in the process of upbringing, in particular in religious education. Magdalena presented it in the following way: "When looking back on my past dialogue meetings with God in my family, I must admit, with a heavy heart, that there are none. It is a sad truth. I have vivid memories of the time when my parents forced me to go to church but they themselves did not go. As a six, seven or an eight-year-old I attended the mass on Sunday, mainly because my parents were authority and significant figures."<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. Summary

On the basis of quantitative and qualitative research on Poles with regard to their childhood memories, several conclusions may be drawn. The majority of adult Poles, when reminiscing about their childhood, indicate good relationships with their parents and appreciate the efforts put into their upbringing. A larger proportion stresses a better bond with their mother (strong and very strong ties) and also designates her as a confidant. Only a small percentage of respondents declared weak or very weak ties with the mother. Poles declaring a strong bond with mother, also have a more positive assessment of their contact with the father and vice versa – those evaluating their contact with father well also tend to give a more positive assessment of their attachment to mother. In some of the quoted recollections of students, there appears greater significance of

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<sup>10</sup> K. Krzykowska, *Katecheza w rodzinie*, in: *W kręgu rodziny. Refleksje praktyków*, (eds.) E. Osewska, J. Stala, Poznań 2003, p. 174.

<sup>11</sup> M. Zbrzeźniak, *Droga do Boga nie zawsze prowadzi przez własną rodzinę*, in: *W kręgu rodziny. Refleksje praktyków*, (eds.) E. Osewska, J. Stala, Poznań 2003, p. 186.

relations with father, who gave them a sense of security, pointed out values and established a model of masculinity. A large number of the polled adults declared that parents were close to them and cared for their social, moral and religious education. Many individuals recollected particular childhood situations, which indicated a strong bond between parents and children. A strong family bond is deeply rooted in the personal bond, based on love, respect and acceptance, which everyone deserves. Marriage and family are not only institutions and a system of authorities, but also personal relations comprising the community of persons. The collected childhood memories of adults are to be treated with due respect, but also with caution, since time distorts some elements of the past. It should be, however, stressed that a vast majority of the surveyed Poles have positive childhood memories with regard to relations with parents and the process of upbringing.

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