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Article

"Empathetic Egoist" and "Obedient Individualist": Clash Between Family Practices and Normative Images of Children

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Abstract

The initial aim of this article is to analyze the clash between everyday family practices and parents' normative images of perfect children. I identified five sets of features and behaviors of the actual child that mirror daily parents–children interactions (including parental socialization strategies) and three sets of features and behaviors that reflect parents' perceptions of a perfect child. The analysis revealed two "dimensions of contradiction": egoism vs. empathy and obedience vs. independence. Investigating how family practices combine with parents' normative images results in insights into parents' ambivalent attitudes toward children. The second aim is to identify the social sources of these clashes. The Polish case appears to be intriguing due to a particularly rapid systemic transformation, resulting in overlapping patterns of everyday practices, divergent social norms, variant meanings, and contradictory discourses. This article's contribution is to illustrate the hypothesis that systemic transformation might have a more immediate effect on changing social norms, meanings, and discourses on parenthood and childhood (and thus change parents' normative images of children), while family practices are transformed with parents' resistance. The concept of family practices developed by David H. Morgan is employed as a theoretical framework and starting point for the study. The analysis draws on qualitative data and in-depth interviews with 24 couples of parents and six single parents.

Keywords

Eastern European families; family practices; parents' normative images of children; Poland; qualitative research

Issue

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1. Introduction

The clash between everyday family practices and parents' normative images of perfect children might seem obvious. However, that does not indicate that this phenomenon is not worth investigating. From a sociological perspective, both the dimensions of the clash and its social sources are most intriguing. The concept of family practices developed by Morgan (1996, 2011a, 2011b; see also Finch, 2007) is employed as a theoretical framework and starting point for analysis. It serves to identify everyday parents–children interactions and reconstruct parental socialization strategies. To analyze the incompatibility between family practices and parents' images of perfect children, the study of practices was supplemented by an investigation of parents' perception, which, I argue, may be shaped by social norms, meanings, and discourses (see, e.g., Duszak & Fairclough, 2008; Fairclough, 1992; Morgan, 2011a; Nicolini, 2012; Shove et al., 2007; Swidler, 2001).

The initial objective of the article is to identify the dimensions of the clash between everyday family practices and parents' images of perfect children. The analysis of empirical data (qualitative in-depth interviews with parents) explores two issues: (a) parents' experience in daily interactions with their actual children, including parental socialization strategies, and (b) parents' normative images of a perfect child. Two oxymorons (see Lüscher & Hoff, 2013), "empathetic egoist" and "obedient individualist," highlight the parents' ambivalence, which is rooted in two contradictions: empathy vs. egoism and obedience vs. independence. The second

objective is to explore the social sources of the clash. The Polish case appears to be intriguing because of a particularly fast sociocultural, political, and economic transformation resulting in overlapping patterns of everyday practices, divergent social norms, variant meanings, and contradictory discourses (see Marody, 2021; Marody et al., 2019; Sawicka & Sikorska, 2020).

The article has been divided into the following parts: To begin with, the key assumptions of the concept of "family practices" (Morgan, 1996, 2011a, 2011b; see also Finch, 2007) are presented to provide context for an analysis of parents-children interactions and parental socialization strategies. This section is concluded by a reflection on the links between practices, social norms (understood as prohibitions and injunctions that define what is or is not socially acceptable), social meanings (defined as neutral, not normative, connotations), and discourses. Then, in the Polish context, basic information is given on the domain of family life before and after the systemic transformation (the social process of political, economic, and sociocultural changes which started in 1989). Next, the data sources and research methods are described. The presentation of the results constitutes the main part of the article. It is divided into two sections: The first section deals with a description of parents' everyday practices with the actual children (including parental socialization strategies); the second concerns parents' normative images of a perfect child. The dimensions of a potential clash between family practices and parents' images are addressed in the discussion section of this article. Finally, in the concluding section, I propose an interpretation of the social sources of "clash" drawing on background information provided in the earlier description of the Polish family life context. The study's limitations and potential future research topics are also discussed.

2. Concept of Family Practices as a Theoretical Framework

The concept of family practices was introduced by British family sociologist David Morgan. Morgan (1996, 2011a, 2011b) notes that a practice approach has been used in family studies for several decades and he only credits himself with attempting to systematize the topic of practices within the context of this scientific field. Morgan's theory is a valuable addition to the more general practice theories (e.g., Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 1996, 2016; Shove et al., 2012), also called "practice-based view," "practice-based approach," or "practice idiom" (Nicolini, 2012).

According to Morgan (2011a, p. 12), "family practices are those practices which are, routinely or less routinely, constituted as such. However, we also need to think of the processes by which the external observer constitutes a set of practices as being 'family' (and not some other) practices." In other words, family practices are daily activities and interactions carried out by family members to contribute to "homemaking." Family practices involve not only family members but also others who observe these activities (e.g., teachers, neighbors, and friends), as well as social institutions whose operations may impinge on the family (e.g., the school, social assistance centers, or, more generally, the law or economic conditions). Most family practices are routine and taken for granted (Morgan used the notion of "practices as habits"). However, individuals as "carriers of a practice" (Reckwitz, 2002) or "hosts of practices" (Shove et al., 2012) have agency, as well as a causal, constructive role in redefining and constructing the meanings of practices (Morgan's term is "practices as action"). To put it another way, in a practice-based approach, individuals both reproduce and reformulate practices.

One premise of the practice approach (including the concept of family practices) is particularly relevant to my study. Practices as performance are "shaped by and constitutive of the complex relations of materials, knowledge, norms, meanings" (Shove et al., 2007, p. 13). From the standpoint of my research, the mutual influence between practices, norms, and meanings, is critical. Similarly, Swidler (2001, p. 75) underlines the significance of the feedback link between practices and discourse, which she defines not as "what anyone says, but [as] the system of meanings that allows them to say anything at all." Nicolini (2012) points out that theories of practice influence discourse at two different levels. One is the surface level of discursive practice (what people say and how), while the other is the deep level of discourse as a source of social meanings or an "external system of meanings." Thus theories of practice contribute to the articulation and reproduction of meanings that individuals can accept and implement or reshape them. Morgan (2011a) combines practices ("families we live with," applying here the term proposed by Gillis, 1996) and discourses ("families we live by") to claim that they are mutually implicated in each other. Mothering (as a practice) and motherhood (as a set of social meanings maintained in discourse), fathering and fatherhood, and parenting and parenthood are examples of this interconnectivity. The researchers focused on discourse analysis (e.g., Duszak & Fairclough, 2008; Fairclough, 1992, 2007; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2009) also examine the relationship between language/discourse and social norms or meanings as well as individuals' activities. Fairclough and Wodak (1997) stress that discourse reproduces society and culture while also being reproduced by society and culture. In other words, discourse is both a limiting structure and a "reservoir" for individuals and social groups to produce social reality. Duszak and Fairclough (2008) emphasize that discourse is a "driving force" in social construction.

To sum up, while Morgan's concept of family practices serves as a theoretical framework and starting point for my study, reflection on the linkage between practices and social norms, meanings, and discourses, and their influences on individuals' perception, completes the

scheme of the analysis. Combining these two perspectives provides unique insights into parents' ambivalent attitudes toward children, as it reveals a clash between everyday family practices and parents' normative images of perfect children.

3. The Specific Context of Poland

The post-communist transformation, which started in Poland in 1989, had an effect on politics (the shift from socialist democracy to a liberal democracy), economics (the shift from a socialist economy to a capitalist economy), and the sphere of norms and habits. Krzyżanowski and Wodak (2009, p. 19) claim that sociocultural, political, and economic changes, "which have taken place elsewhere more slowly and over much longer periods of time," happen in Poland (and in other Central and Eastern European countries) "at a very fast pace." Since the beginning of the transformation, the domain of family life has been an area where traditional family norms and meanings met modernization discourses on parenting and childhood patterned after Western societies.

The norms and meanings embedded in traditional families (Silverstein & Auerbach, 2005) include a patriarchal division of gender roles: The father is the head of the family and breadwinner, while the mother (even if she is employed) is seen as the person primarily responsible for the household, childcare, and socialization. Adamski (1982), defining patterns of family life in the Polish People's Republic (1945–1989), highlights that, despite the constantly increasing rate of female employment, there dominated both social expectations and family practices in which women should work professionally and at the same time take care of their families. Upbringing, according to traditional family norms and meaning, was based on a hierarchical relationship between dominating adults and subordinate children, with parents' authority grounded in their social role (Żarnowska, 2004). The child was perceived as a passive recipient of adults' socializing efforts, as an "object" of socialization (Golus, 2022; Radkowska-Walkowicz & Maciejewska-Mroczek, 2017; Sikorska, 2019). During the communist era, parents listed obedience as one of the most desirable characteristics of children (Bojar, 1991). A dutiful, well-mannered child with good grades at school was a "symbol of prestige" for the family and "evidence" of the parents' success in their parental role (Podgórecki, 1976).

Norms and meanings of traditional family found and continue to find support in the narrative of the Roman Catholic Church, which is still the dominant religion in Poland: 85% of Poles have been baptized (GUS, 2018) and 87% of Poles describe themselves as "believers" or "profound believers" (CBOS, 2021). In Catholic doctrine, a family is "a school of rich humanity," "a community of life and love," and "an instrument of humanization and personalization of society" (quotation from John Paul II, as cited in Sztaba, 2012). According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "filial respect is shown by true docility and obedience" (Catholic Culture, n.d., Chapter: The Duties of Children, para. 2216). Furthermore, "as long as a child lives at home with his parents, the child should obey his parents in all that they ask of him when it is for his good or that of the family" (Catholic Culture, n.d., Chapter: The Duties of Children, para. 2217). Czekaj (2015), summarizing the key aspects of Catholic thought on upbringing, notes that it is regarded as a parent's success when children are "voluntarily obedient." The primary duty of parents is to "form the personality of the young person" (Guzewicz, 2016, p. 42). Again, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children" (Catholic Culture, n.d., Chapter: The Duties of Parents, para. 2223). At the same time, as Szwed (2018) points out, the Catholic Church in Poland, to counter the allegedly detrimental effects of Western influences, develops a narrative of parental disempowerment and refers to sex education in schools as an example of demoralisation. In this context, the Church and conservatives raise the issue of "sexualization" of youngsters during school lessons (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021).

In the aftermath of the systemic transformation, the patriarchal family model has been questioned by the modernization discourses on family and parenting which are rooted in the global process of democratization of family life (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1998), the process of erosion of patriarchal model and the assumptions that the needs of the child are relevant (see Jamieson, 1998), the presumption that children's emotions are essential to the socialization processes (Land, 2004), and diffusion of intensive parenting (Hays, 1996), which "is a child-centered approach that demands great parental time, financial, and emotional investments in childrearing" (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020, p. 199). From this perspective, a child is viewed [by the parents] as a non-passive quasi-partner. Simultaneously, a parent is not supposed to control the child's behavior or emotions, but rather to address the child's needs, facilitate personal growth, and empower the child. Parents' empathy, communication skills, and willingness to cooperate and negotiate with their children are presumed. The modernization discourses on parenthood and childhood are present in Poland in mainstream parenting magazines, popular parenting handbooks, and online portals for parents (Bierca, 2019; Dąbrowska, 2012; Olcoń-Kubicka, 2009).

4. Data and Research Method

For this study, two rounds of in-depth interviews with 24 parent couples and six single parents (a total of 54 respondents) were conducted in 2016 and 2017. Each participating family had at least one child aged up to six years. Thirteen families had two children. The respondents ranged in age from 25 to 45. The average age of the informants was 35. The majority of respondents were

born before 1989, therefore they spent childhood during the communist era and the early years of systemic transformation. It might be assumed—and the narratives of the informants reflect it—that most of them were raised in a family model based on traditional norms.

The sample consisted of 30 families: 15 interviews were held with middle-class families living in Warsaw (the capital of Poland, with approximately two million inhabitants), and the remaining 15 interviews were conducted with working-class families living in a medium-sized town (with approximately 45,000 inhabitants). Quotes from the first group were marked from MC1 to MC15; from the second group: from WC16 to WC30. However, the empirical data analysis did not uncover any substantial or conclusive variations in terms of social class, therefore this aspect is not discussed further in the article. All respondents declared a heterosexual orientation. Adding another sampling criterion (sexual orientation) with a small sample of respondents (30 families) was not methodologically justified. A detailed description of the sample is presented in the Supplementary File.

The interviews were conducted in two waves. The majority of the questions in the first wave were focused on reconstructing parents' reflection on family norms and meanings, while the majority of the questions in the second wave were directed at reconstructing everyday family practices, relationships within families, and child upbringing strategies. Besides the theme described in this article, the following issues were analyzed based on collected material: ways of defining the family (reconstruction of a social and individual definition of family); dimensions of social isolation of families; dimensions of oppressiveness of family life and parenting; the role of the electronic devices as non-human actors in the parents-children relationship; division of roles and responsibilities between mothers and fathers.

The parents' normative images of a perfect child were reconstructed by using questions provoking to specify what a child should be like: that is, what characteristics they should have or how they should behave. Furthermore, the questions were asked about circumstances in which respondents felt proud of, or embarrassed by, their children's behavior. In addition, the projective technique (Keegan, 2008) was used: Parents were to specify what they would or would not like to put into a suitcase for their child to take with them when they left the family home. The answers to this question were read as a child's characteristics and behaviors positively or negatively rated by parents. The parents' everyday relationships with their actual children and the children's daily behaviors were reconstructed through a series of precise and detailed questions about standard weekday and weekend family schedules, joint activities undertaken by children and parents, children's daily responsibilities, situations of conflict, family issues where children have a decisive voice, rewards and penalties applied by parents and they parental strategies.

The study applied an inductive approach (Neuman, 2003). The data were analyzed using qualitative tools (Silverman, 2001), specifically the thematic analysis approach (Guest et al., 2012) with a thematic coding procedure (Gibbs, 2007). The data was coded using ATLAS.ti software (Friese, 2011). The metaphors used to name the models of a *perfect child* and the *actual children* were based either on the literal statements of interviewees or founded on my interpretation. The ethical procedure involved the preservation of the interviewees' anonymity (e.g., all names were changed; the name of a medium-sized city was coded). All interviews were transcribed verbatim. For this article, selected quotes were translated into English.

5. Results

5.1. *The Actual Children: What Children Are Like and How They Behave*

When analyzing how respondents describe their daily family practices and interactions between themselves and their children, I distinguished five sets of features and behaviors of the *actual child*: the child as a *beast*, a *dictator*, a *weakling*, a *cutie*, and a *person*. The first two models appeared in the interviews the most frequently, the last three far less frequently. The analysis did not cover the types of children's characters, personalities, or temperaments but the sets of attributes and behaviors revealed in everyday interactions between parents and children. The parents applied different socialization practices in relation to these types. I assumed that the parental strategies reflect the interpersonal relationship between parents and children (see Sikorska, 2019).

5.1.1. A Child as a *Beast*

Parents' narratives regarding their daily relations in the family often included the motif of children as "danger" evoked by their unpredictable behavior. The child as a *beast* was reported as troublesome for parents especially in a public space insofar as their behavior could be a source of parents' embarrassment. An excellent and often-mentioned illustration of this was a scene in a store where a child demanded sweets, toys, or gadgets and threw a temper tantrum when the parent refused to fulfill those expectations. Almost all the informants had witnessed similar situations, and many of them had this type of experience as parents. The respondents also described situations at home when their children would throw food, "squeal, scream, stomp" (WC23) while demanding sweets, toys, extended screen time, etc. Another aspect of the child being "dangerous" was related to children hitting other children or adults. Magda and Tomek (WC16), parents of a five-year-old son, reported:

> Magda: He [son] beats us in front of other people. That's embarrassing.

> Tomek: He will do it if he gets rebellious. Now, he seems to be doing it less frequently.
>
> Magda: But he still would raise his hand to strike…
>
> Tomek: When he freaks out.

Another feature of the child as a *beast* involved constant demands for sweets, new toys, extended screen time, etc. A child who doggedly insisted on what they wanted slipped out of the parents' control. In the context of demands, the interviewees very often mentioned children's use of electronic devices. The key feature of a child as a *beast* was the desire to satisfy their needs without considering other people's interests or opinions. Thus, the child as a *beast* could be described as someone who is egoistic, selfish, and cares only about themselves.

Parents' socialization practices in the context of children acting like a *beast* involved disciplining them by punishment, which involved prohibitions (most often banning electronics or sweets) and corporal punishment. Physical punishment of children has been illegal in Poland since 2010. However, 34% of respondents in the national survey disagree with the statement "no physical punishment should be used on children"; 25% support the claim "spanking hasn't harmed anyone yet," and 61% agree that "there are situations when a child needs to be spanked" (CBOS, 2019). Some informants believed that light slapping (most of them did not use the words "spanking" and "beating") was a normal way of disciplining children, but others admitted it derived from parents' sense of helplessness. Spanking and even other forms of beating were described as behaviors that respondents had often experienced in their childhood and then—as they reported—it was socially approved. The interviewees who admitted to having been beaten by their parents declared that they did not practice this kind of punishment on their children. Only one couple was an exception here: Robert (WC27), criticizing modernizing parenting discourse, recounted:

> I've never had anything against [spanking children] and, for me, it's a sick thing like some people claim that you can't slap a kid. I understand that you can't do it to a small child because it's a small child, but a child of, like, nine or eight years old is already a child who understands a lot and if he does something wrong, he does it out of spite.

Another socialization practice in the relationship with a child acting as a *beast* was bribery, i.e., promising a reward (sweets, small toys, etc.) on condition that the child behaved as the parents wished.

5.1.2. A Child as a *Dictator*

The key competence of a *dictator* involved managing parents and family life. Some respondents literally declared that they felt manipulated or dominated by children. Parents frequently used the statement that children gained control over them and were "walking all over parents" (MC3, MC4, MC5, MC6, MC7, WC22, WC24, WC26, WC27). Tadeusz (MC5), father of a six-year-old boy, confessed: "We are defending ourselves because Bartek [son] would just walk all over us." Paulina (WC22), the mother of a six-year-old son, said: "Once, a psychologist told me: 'You have a very intelligent child and he knows how to manipulate you.'" Paulina's husband Grzesiek added: "Well, she told you the right thing. She told the truth because he actually can do it." A child acting as a *dictator* determined the rhythm of family practices and parents' activity. The fact that the needs of a child (especially a newborn or a baby) had an important impact on family life seemed obvious. However, in informants' narratives, a child could dominate over the parents leaving them with little scope for decision.

The parents' socialization practices focused on bribery which was at the top of the strategies employed. Some parents recognized the links between bribing applied as a socialization method and the child's getting spoiled. In this regard, Jola (WC25) confessed:

> Nela [daughter] is very spoiled and I have a problem with myself because I can't set limits with her….I still feel guilty that I said something too loud somewhere, that I yelled at her.

5.1.3. A Child as a *Weakling*

When describing their everyday relationship with children, some informants underlined that children were not self-reliant or self-directed. They characterized children as incompetent, clumsy, and weak and, as such, entirely dependent on their parents. The best illustration of the relationship between parents and their child being treated as a *weakling* was the feeding situation when the child refused to eat but adults were deeply convinced that the child was hungry. Marcin (WC25), the father of a two-year-old daughter, reported:

> I am convinced that she [daughter] should eat as much as she wants but my wife thinks she should eat more. And it is often the case that the kiddo just wouldn't eat anything anymore, but my wife goes: "One more spoonful, one more spoonful." I say: "Come on, stop that." And my wife goes: "One more spoonful." And she feeds one more spoonful and…the kiddo pukes.

The parents who treated their child as a *weakling* were afraid that their fragile child could be affected by the "bad influence" of "bad company" (defined as someone who abused drugs or alcohol, or who was indecent) (MC3; MC4; MC6; MC7; MC12; WC22; WC25). The informants were also concerned about their children's use of electronic devices (risk of addiction) as well as other risks

such as pedophiles, kidnappers, or "a bad wife for my son" (MC5). In general, from the parents' perspective, the world seemed to be a dangerous and threatening place for their children. Thus, the most essential duty of parents was to protect and defend them.

The socialization practices were based on the parents' belief that their children needed constant protection because they were dependent and unable to get by. Overprotection as a socialization practice was supported by permanent control. An excellent illustration is the situation described by Robert (WC27), father of six- and eight-year-old sons. The interviewee told his youngest child not to carry a plate of sandwiches from the kitchen to the room lest the food should fall off the plate. The son did not obey, the sandwiches fell on the floor, and the son "didn't get punished for it, but he got reprimanded quite loudly." Iwona, Robert's wife, concluded: "I understand that they [their sons] want to be independent, but there are some things they can't do yet."

5.1.4. A Child as a *Cutie*

Compared to the other four models, this one most commonly occurred in the context of youngest children. The child was described as "sweetheart" and "sweetie" (MC7), "lovely and nice" (WC25), "cuddly toy" (MC5), someone who was innocent and defenseless and therefore still in need of parental care. Moreover, a child as a *cutie* was considered by parents a source of parental pride. Cast in this role, the child should be polite, nice, good-looking, obedient, and—in the case of older children—have good grades at school and be an exemplary pupil.

The socialization practices consisted primarily of constant control and overprotection, which was based on the child being viewed as an innocent and sweet "little one" who needed to be pampered and carried in their parents' arms, and whose needs must be fulfilled immediately. The overprotection strategy was complemented by spoiling because parents found it hard to stop pampering their *cuties*.

5.1.5. A Child as a *Person*

A relatively small group of respondents described their everyday relations with their child as a *person*, as an individual who was independent, autonomous, and empowered to make their own decisions. It is intriguing that quite a few single parents—compared with couples in the sample—reported this type. Maria (MC13), the mother of a five-year-old son, stated:

> It is important to see your child as a little thinking human, not some stupid and still developing person. All kids already have their dignity, ambitions, needs—you just have to notice that, not ignore it. We shouldn't think kids would get the right to make decisions only once they've grown up.

A child as a *person* was a quasi-partner in the relationship with the parent. "Quasi" means that it was the parent who had the decisive voice in setting the rules, but, at the same time, the adult should be ready to "listen to the child" (MC15), to consult the child and understand their motives. Katarzyna's (MC7) statement was a perfect illustration of this approach: "I think my child is my partner. I don't treat my child as an object, and my child may have their own opinions. Sometimes, I can learn something from my kid."

The socialization practices, in this case, included discussing and negotiating. The relationship between parents and children was based on the parents' respect for their child, on mutual trust, and on the assumption that the child was able and entitled to make some decisions, which—as the parents pointed out—gave the child a sense of agency. The socialization strategies, in this case, did not focus on parental control over children.

5.2. A Perfect Child: What a Child Should Be Like

Based on the analysis of data, three sets of features and behaviors of a *perfect child* were identified. The first model (an *empathetic child*) was present in almost all interviews. Two other models (a *well-behaved child* and an *individualist*) were less frequently reported and were mutually competitive. I assumed that the traditional social norms, meanings, and the parental modernization discourse might influence the parents' normative images of a child.

5.2.1. An *Empathetic Child*

The most desired features of a child mentioned by the informants included empathy, sensitivity, "the ability to recognize the needs and feelings of others" (MC1) as well as the ability to communicate and to cooperate. The respondents emphasized that an *empathetic child* did not "contemplate their own navel" (MC8) and did not distance themselves from other people (be it family members or not). On the contrary, an *empathetic child* was involved in relationships with others and was "communicative…indeed, he can talk to anyone about anything" (MC11), "open, not shy at all" (WC22), able to make compromises, and "will admit his mistake and apologize" (MC6). An *empathetic child* was described as someone who "is able to share" (MC5), which was most commonly mentioned in the context of toy sharing, and identified as someone who had "social skills" (MC7), "was socialized" (WC19) in the sense of being embedded in social relationships.

5.2.2. A *Well-Behaved Child*

A large group of respondents (approximately two-thirds) described a *perfect child* as polite and obedient. Andżelika (WC24) said that a child should be able to "carry out parents' commands…not to be against

them," able to follow the rules established by adults and thus "cause no problems." Paulina (MC3) said: "She [her daughter] should do what I ask her to do….Then there is no conflict between parents and child, and there's peace and quiet." A *well-behaved child* would recognize and respect the limits set by the parents, i.e., refrain from overstepping them. Such a child should be well-mannered and should "know what the word 'no' means" (WC27). A *well-behaved child* obeyed their parents and other people whose authority came from their social roles, such as teachers or educators. Another important feature of a *well-behaved child* was "respect for parents" (MC5) and others (e.g., seniors, extended family members, and neighbors). As Paulina and Grzesiek (WC22) said: "Respect means following elementary rules of good behavior, such as saying 'good morning,' 'please,' 'thank you,' 'excuse me,' and so on. *Savoir-vivre.*"

In the case of a *well-behaved child*, some interviewees declared explicitly that their children did not fulfill their expectations. For example, Ewa and Piotr (WC20) complained: "The best thing would be to tell the child once or twice and that's it, he will know. And with us it is just going over and over, and over again." Other sources of parents' disappointment included their child's use of dirty words and impolite behavior.

5.2.3. An *Individualist*

When compared with an *empathetic child* and a *well-behaved child*, this model was mentioned least frequently. In many ways it contradicted the *well-behaved child*. An *individualist* did not "have to be polite" (WC19), had the right to be "unruly" and "not perfect" (MC15). Mateusz (MC2), the father of a six-month-old daughter, said that, when describing a *perfect child*, his first thought was the following: "It's what most people would like—[they should be] polite. And then I thought: No, no, no. A good child doesn't have to be polite. I don't quite like this term."

An *individualist* was described as someone who obeyed their parents but did not always follow their every command. The ability to make decisions was essential in this case. It was also particularly important that a child should be independent, not submissive, with "a strong character, and [unlikely to] give in to all those who want to persuade him to do something" (WC26). Children described as *individualists* were nonconformists and had "the ability to maintain their opinions, their convictions" (WC30), "believe in themselves and their skills" (MC10), and had sufficient self-esteem. They should not be "losers" (MC8; MC10; WC17) or "dorks" (WC23). An *individualist* should respect others but, in this case, respect was not equated with following the rules of conduct or being polite (as in the case of a *well-behaved child*), but having "respect for the whole world, openness" (MC1), being "open to everything, new people, new places, new events" (WC30), and being tolerant.

6. Discussion of the Results

Two oxymorons in the title of the article ("empathetic egoist" and "obedient individualist") indicate two dimensions of the clash between the daily family practices and the parents' normative images. The first dimension is rooted in the continuum between a child who is empathetic, communicative, embedded in social relationships, who is able to communicate, vs. a child who is egoistic and selfish. The second dimension refers to the continuum from an obedient and parent-dependent child to a child who is an independent, autonomous individual (see Figure 1).

Four significant points emerge from an analysis of the two contradictory dimensions. Firstly, in parents' normative images, empathy, openness to others, social skills, and ability to cooperate and share (e.g., toys) are the most desirable qualities of children. Meanwhile, four out of five sets of features and behaviors of the *actual children* (a *beast*, a *dictator*, a *weakling*, and a *cutie*) are focused on attributes such as egoism, self-centeredness, and unwillingness to communicate and cooperate.

Secondly, two models of a perfect child (first of all an *individualist* but also an *empathetic child*) portray a person who is an independent, autonomous decision-maker, capable of coping with daily problems. Meanwhile, the sets of features and behaviors of a child as a *weakling* or a *cutie* focus on obedience, politeness, and being constantly under parental supervision. For a *beast* and a *dictator*, disobedience and naughty behavior are essential elements of the parent-child relationship, and such behavior could be interpreted as a sign of independence. However, parents' socialization practices in relations with a *beast* and a *dictator* (disciplining by punishment or bribing) consist primarily of regaining or keeping control over the children. Summarizing, on the one hand, parents emphasized that a child should be autonomous but, on the other hand, they applied socialization practices (overprotection, control, and penalties, including spanking) that limited children's ability to be independent and take unassisted decisions. Some interviewees emphasize that parental control is particularly important due to a variety of risks (e.g., associated with the Internet and social media) that did not exist when they were children.

Thirdly, two models of a perfect child (an *empathetic child* and an *individualist*) are founded on unrealistic assumptions. To a large extent, they correspond to a list of highly qualified professionals' soft skills (e.g., the ability to cooperate, compromise, be empathetic, etc.). Meanwhile, models of the *actual child* are either grooming and infantilizing (as a *weakling* and a *cutie*), or dehumanizing (as a *beast*). Only a child as a *person* is seen as a partner in the relationship with the parent, and a child as a *dictator* can even dominate such a relationship.

Fourth, only one of the three models of the *actual child* (a child as a *person*) is consistent with the collection of features and behaviors of *a perfect child* (*empathetic child* and *individualist*). Thus, the other four models of

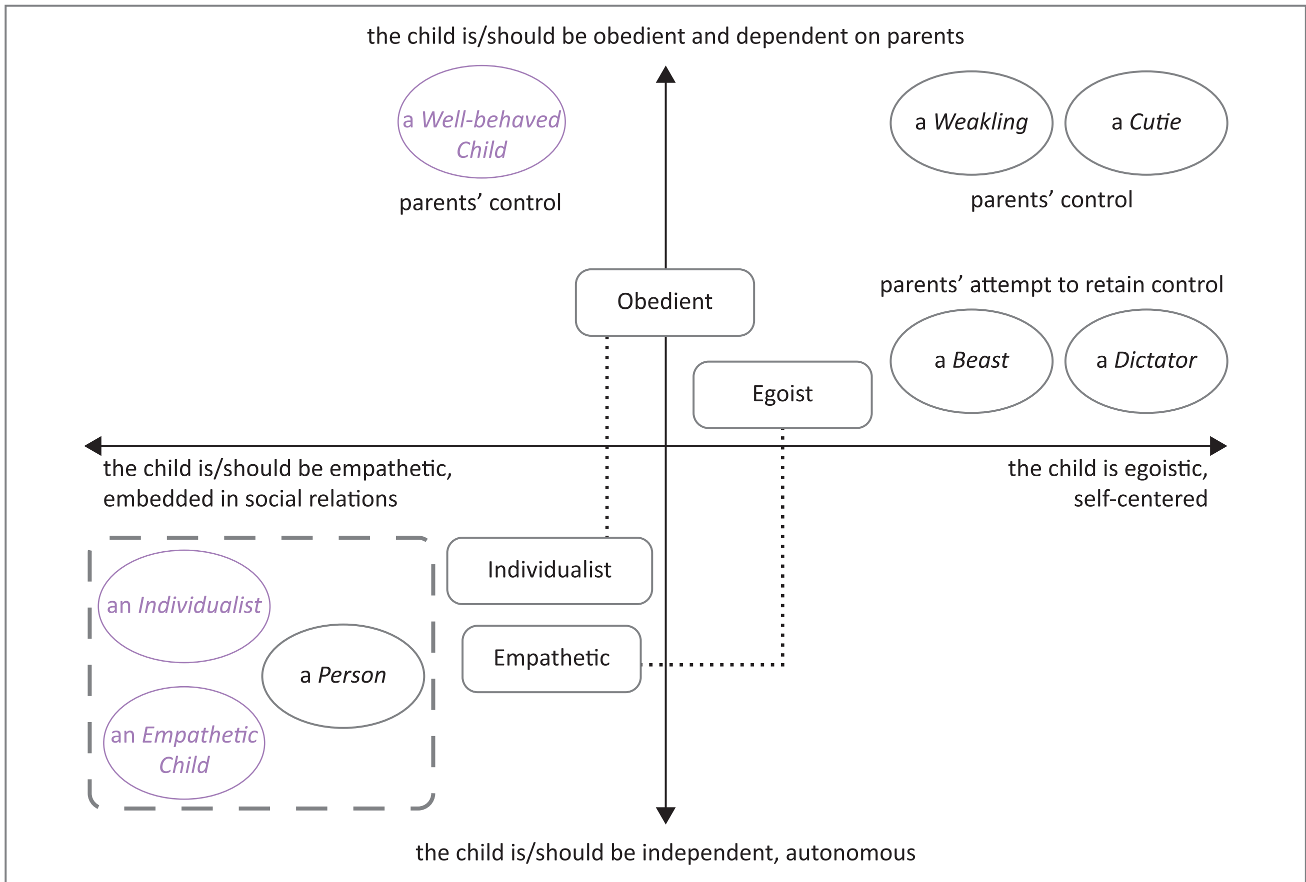

Figure 1. Two dimensions of contradictions between daily family practices with the actual children and parents' normative images of a perfect child.

the *actual children* are not grounded in the normative images of a child that are accepted and desired by parents. In other words, children who have the characteristics of these four models (a *beast*, a *dictator*, a *weakling*, and a *cutie*) behave quite differently from what their parents would desire.

To sum up, two out of the three models of a perfect child have a match in the parenting modernization discourse, while four out of five models of the actual children are rooted in the traditional norms and meanings regarding family and the hierarchical pattern of socialization, based on one-sided (parental) domination. A partner-like relationship and children's autonomy lie at the foundation of the modernization discourse, whereas a hierarchical relationship and obedience are the cornerstones of the traditional family model and socialization based on the lack of a partnership between parents and children. The modernization discourse is organized around children and their needs; the traditional norms, on the contrary, revolve around parents and their prerogatives. In other words, the understanding of the empowered child is inherent in the modernization discourse, while the perception of the child as an "object" is incorporated into the traditional norms and meanings concerning socialization. The child-oriented modernization discourse organized around a child and their needs contrasts with the patriarchal model organized around parents and their prerogatives which still dominates family practices and parenting strategies (see Sawicka & Sikorska, 2020).

7. Closing Remarks

What are the social sources of the clash between family practices and the parents' normative images of children? One possible source might be the uneven impact that the systemic transformation had on family practices and social norms, meanings, and discourses and thus on parental normative images. Fairclough (2007, p. 51), emphasizing that social change is often initiated with new discourses, at the same time claims: "Social fields, institutions, and organizations are 'intransitive' realities that have properties that make them more or less amenable or resistant to particular directions of change." Besides, Fairclough reminds us that systemic transformation involves a mixture of "old" and "new." I want to point out that, in the context of the domain of family life in Poland, "new" modernization discourses influence parents' normative images of a perfect child, but hardly reach "old" family practices and parenting strategies. In other words, parents commonly invoke the key elements of the modernization discourse (in short,

the empowerment of children) when discussing normative images of children, but in daily family relations, in socialization strategies, they rarely rely on the principles upheld by modernization discourse.

The practices are processual in character and are not just configurations of different elements and influencing factors. They endure, reproduce, and change over time. Moreover, practices depend on historical, cultural, and social contexts; they have their own past, present, and future. Although they do shift, every new form of practice contains some old elements (Shove et al., 2012). In other words, due to the entanglement of family practices in historical, cultural, and social contexts, they are changing against stronger parents' resistance than their normative visions of children. In the Polish context, two factors might be thought of as "brakes" on changing family practices and parental strategies. The first one refers to the traditional norms and meanings, which strongly influenced the everyday routines known to modern-day parents from their own childhood. Here, one can see that Morgan's "practices as habits" (i.e., practices that are relatively unreflectively reproduced, including practices familiar to present parents from their childhood) significantly exceed "practices as action" (practices that are redefinable and reframable by individuals by default). The other important factor is the influence of the Roman Catholic Church doctrine supporting the dominant role of parents in the parents-children relationship. In addition, the social norms based on treating children as "objects" and disregarding their opinions are still quite robust (Golus, 2022). Meanwhile, the ideas characteristic of the modernization discourse on family and parenting are a fairly recent addition to the Polish imaginarium. Sawicka and Sikorska (2020, p. 420) claim: "Modernization discourse which penetrated into Poland after the systemic transformation of 1989 brought meanings that were in opposition to those embedded in the traditional models of interpersonal relations." For these reasons, the influence of modernization discourses on everyday parents-children interactions is limited. The clash between parents' normative images of a perfect child and everyday family practices could be interpreted as an illustration of the hypothesis that systemic transformation might have a more immediate effect on changing social meanings and discourses (and thus on parents' normative images) while family practices are transformed with resistance.

The research has some limitations. One of them has to do with the question of whether evaluating practices based on interviews with respondents replicate what they actually do (practices) or just what they claim to do. Four solutions were applied in my study to overcome this problem. Firstly, the scenarios for two waves of interviews comprised a series of specific and detailed questions about parents-children relationships. Secondly, the moderators (the research team consisted of three researchers and me as a principal investigator) were instructed to ask about specific behaviors and, in absence of definite answers, to query. Thirdly, with the exception of six interviews with single parents, the interviews with two parents were performed concurrently, allowing for a cross-conversation of what parents said about practices. Fourthly, all researchers took field notes to capture their fresh impressions and initial findings (Angrosino, 2007) and then confronted and discussed preliminary results. I believe those methods effectively help eliminate the situations in which interviewers' narratives differ significantly from their realities. With this in mind, I believe that conducting in-depth interviews could be an effective method for investigating practices.

Another limitation of the study is the implementation of research with parents of predominantly younger children (however, some of the interviewers were also raising teenagers). I am convinced that future studies of parents' relationships with older children would provide interesting comparative data. Another theme worth investigating further is the differences between single parents and parental couples. As mentioned in the Section 6, single parents discussed their interactions with the *actual children* in the context of children as a *person* more frequently than couples. This issue should be explored with a larger sample of single parents. Furthermore, the use of the concept of ambivalence in parents-children relationships in a future investigation, although conducted from a sociological (see Connidis & McMullin, 2002) rather than a psychological perspective, appears scholarly promising.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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