Childlessness – between Fate and Choice

Abstract

Childlessness in marriage is still socially defined as otherness. It is a deviation from the current cultural standard and – as a consequence – it requires explanation and legitimization, especially when the otherness is deliberate. The aim of the conducted qualitative research was to establish personal definitions of the situation of childlessness in marriage applied by persons aged 50 and older. The study focused on cultural patterns of experiencing and validating this non-standard lifestyle. 21 interviews centered on this issue were conducted. The analysis of the obtained data showed that the most important variables determining the model of experiencing childlessness in marriage by the subjects were the causes of childlessness and the significance of having children in their individual hierarchy of values. In each individual case, the way of experiencing childlessness results from the configuration of the recognized order of motivation and evaluation. It also seems that the order of evaluation is significant to the entire functioning of these persons. It is relatively independent from the objective cause of childlessness.

Keywords: childlessness, infertility, qualitative research, understanding, legitimation

Introduction

Depending on the cause, the literature assumes a basic division into two types of childlessness. One is the childlessness conditioned by medical factors (involuntary childlessness) and the second is the lack of children as an effect of a conscious choice of lifestyle – the so-called voluntary childlessness (Kalus, 2002). Data collected by the World Health Organization suggest that around 10–15% of women at