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# Unawareness and Expertise: Acquiring Knowledge about Sexuality in Postwar Poland

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IN AN INTERVIEW CONDUCTED IN 2018, Elżbieta, a female laboratory technician born in 1961 and living in the large industrial city of Łódź in central Poland, narrated her experience of sex education: “When I was fourteen or fifteen the famous book *Sztuka kochania* [Art of love] was published. And during winter holidays, it so happened that the secondary school pupils did a work placement at a press, and each of us got a copy. So the four of us [who did the placement], two boys, a girl, and myself, had the book, and we lent it out as well. It had influence. Of course, our parents did not know what kind of a book it was. We considered it to be forbidden fruit, because we were still underaged.”<sup>1</sup>

Individual and collective interaction with expert literature was central to Elżbieta’s narrative of how she acquired sexual knowledge. This article examines personal narratives of formal and informal sex education by two generations of Poles, the first coming of age in the immediate aftermath of World War II and the second approximating to their children’s generation. We argue that the state-supported expertization of sexuality and reproduction played an important role in the development of sexual identities among Polish men and women during the second half of the twentieth century. We demonstrate how, from the 1950s onward, knowledge about the sexual body began and continued to be framed as valuable and symptomatic of modernity, as well as necessary for personal and familial happiness. The

The authors would like to thank *JHS*’s reviewers and Joanna Baines. This article is a result of the research project Catholicising Reproduction, Reproducing Catholicism: Activist Practices and Intimate Negotiations in Poland, 1930–Present (principal investigator Agnieszka Kościańska), funded by the National Science Center, Poland (Opus 17 scheme, grant number 2019/33/B/HS3/01068).

<sup>1</sup> DUCIK interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk in Łódź, 10 March 2018. All interview transcripts and recordings are in the possession of Agata Ignaciuk.

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delegation of sex education to experts, especially to expert literature, continued as a preferred form of sexual enlightenment. The growing availability of information about sex, disseminated through both formal and informal channels, was a significant element in the empowerment of girls and women, particularly those with education living in urban areas.

In this article, we follow Lutz Sauerteig and Roger Davidson's broad conceptualization of sex education as an umbrella term to encompass activities relating to the production, dissemination, and acquisition of knowledge about sex in a variety of formal and informal spaces, such as state-sanctioned programs, mass media, peer groups, and the family.<sup>2</sup> Regulated or not, sex education in these spaces can be understood as forms of hierarchically structured dialogue, such as exchanges between sexologists and patients, educators and pupils, parents and children, and even peers with varying levels of knowledge. Our perception of sexual knowledge is broad and includes not only ideas about sexual intercourse but also self-management of reproductive health and the reproductive body, including menstruation, pregnancy, and fertility management. In fact, official sex education programs in Europe have historically tended to focus on this latter aspect of sexuality, framed in terms of risk, while exhibiting an ongoing reluctance to address the erotic and pleasurable side of sexuality.<sup>3</sup>

These programs were responding to two preexisting societal conditions that are the focus of this article: sexual ignorance or unawareness and acquired misconceptions, both key themes of this article. Unawareness (*niewiedziomość*) implies lack of knowledge to be overcome by sexual education (*uświadczenie*). However, as Londa Schiebinger has argued, lack of knowledge should not be viewed as neutral and is "often not merely the absence of knowledge but an outcome of cultural and political struggle."<sup>4</sup> An example of this is the positive redefinition of lack of knowledge as chastity in Catholic sex education materials in many European countries throughout the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> In addition, as Lesley Hall has noted, sex education has not merely been viewed as "a matter of transmitting the 'correct'

<sup>2</sup> Lutz Sauerteig and Roger Davidson, "Shaping the Sexual Knowledge of the Young: Introduction," in *Shaping Sexual Knowledge: A Cultural History of Sex Education in Twentieth Century Europe*, ed. Lutz Sauerteig and Roger Davidson (New York: Routledge, 2009), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Sauerteig and Davidson, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Londa Schiebinger, "Agnostology and Exotic Abortifacients: The Cultural Production of Ignorance in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 149, no. 3 (2005): 320. For other key theoretical contributions on ignorance, see Roy Dilley and Thomas G. Kirsch, eds., *Regimes of Ignorance: Anthropological Perspectives on the Production and Reproduction of Non-knowledge* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015); Matthias Gross and Linsey McGoey, eds., *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies* (London: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Britta McEwen, "Purity Redefined: Catholic Attitudes towards Children's Sex Education in Austria, 1920–36," in Sauerteig and Davidson, *Shaping Sexual Knowledge*, 173; Agnieszka Kościńska, *To See a Moose: The History of Polish Sex Education* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021).

information to the ignorant child, but more about eradicating ideas already gleaned, and re-educating the child with healthy and scientific (according to the standards of the day) knowledge.”<sup>6</sup> This issue has been highlighted when conflicting models of “scientific” knowledge about sex exist, as they did in Poland during the second half of the twentieth century.

Our research engages with the recent historiography that places social discourses about sexuality in dialogue with personal narratives of sexual and reproductive experiences to address the “big unanswered and perhaps unanswerable question” on “the way or ways in which knowledge about sex is acquired” that Hall has situated at the core of the history of sexual education.<sup>7</sup> As Simon Szreter, Robert A. Nye, and Frans van Poppel have noted, an “ethnographic and microcosmic look at a sexual self-representation” can be useful in underscoring the uneasy translations between expert and lay knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Adopting a perspective that is centered around personal narratives, despite the limitations we discuss below, broadens the dynamically developing historiography on sex education in east-central Europe. This historiography has thus far focused on sources of knowledge rather than their reception, specifically, school sex education programs, as well as the status of expert knowledge on sexuality during state socialism and its contribution to the creation and sustainment of sexual norms.<sup>9</sup>

#### SEX EDUCATION AND PERSONAL NARRATIVES

This study is based on two types of personal narrative: written memoirs and oral history interviews. The memoirs discussed below are part of a rich collection of “contest memoirs,” written in response to competitions announced in the press and available at the Archive of Modern Records in

<sup>6</sup> Lesley A. Hall, “In Ignorance and in Knowledge: Reflections on the History of Sex Education in Britain,” in Sauerteig and Davidson, *Shaping Sexual Knowledge*, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Hall, 27. On women’s narratives and experiences of motherhood in England, see Angela Davis, *Modern Motherhood: Women and Family in England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012). On contraceptive practices in twentieth-century Ireland, see Laura Kelly, *Contraception and Modern Ireland: A Social History c. 1922–92* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Simon Szreter, Robert A. Nye, and Frans van Poppel, “Fertility and Contraception during the Demographic Transition: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 34, no. 2 (2003): 148–49, 153.

<sup>9</sup> For the history of sexual science in Czechoslovakia and Poland, see Kateřina Lišková, *Sexual Liberation, Socialist Style: Communist Czechoslovakia and the Science of Desire, 1945–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); and Agnieszka Kościańska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence: The Construction of Expert Knowledge of Sexuality in Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021). For the history of school-based sex education in east-central Europe, see Kateřina Lišková, Natalia Jarska, and Gábor Szegedi, “Sexuality and Gender in School-Based Sex Education in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland in the 1970s and 1980s,” *History of the Family* 25, no. 4 (2019): 550–75. On the history of sex education in Poland in the twentieth century, see Kościańska, *To See a Moose*. On women’s sexuality in Communist countries, see Kristen Ghodsee, *Why Women Have Better Sex under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence* (New York: Random House, 2018).

Warsaw. Rooted in the biographical method developed in Polish sociology during the interwar period, contest memoirs became a popular form of communication between journalists, experts, and ordinary people under state socialism. We have analyzed 490 of these manuscripts, submitted for four contests: *What Are You Like, Family?* (1962), *Young Marriage* (1964), *Husband and Wife* (1965), and *My Marriage* (1974). Slightly over half the authors were women, and most were born between the late 1920s and the late 1940s. While the educated urban population was overrepresented in the first three contests, most responses to the final call originated from rural areas. The authors, most of whom married in the 1950s and 1960s, refer to a variety of topics relating to marital life; references to sexual knowledge and experiences appear in over one hundred of the texts.

The second type of source is the oral history interviews generated by Agata Ignaciuk's doctoral and postdoctoral research projects between 2012 and 2019. Mixed recruitment methods and open-ended, semistructured interviewing strategies were employed to generate fifty-one life stories focusing on themes such as sex education, knowledge about the reproductive body, sexuality and contraception, sexual and reproductive decision-making, and the impact of religiosity on this decision-making. Interviewee birthdates range between 1931 and 1972. The majority married between 1970 and 1989, and the most represented profile was eighteen women with secondary and university education, born in the 1940s or the first half of the 1950s, residing or having resided in large cities.

Both types of personal narrative used in this study have limitations. The picture that emerges from either method is incomplete and fragmentary. Authors of contest memoirs may have shaped their narratives according to the imagined expectations of the experts who would evaluate their submissions, perhaps exaggerating the positive role of expert advice. However, the memoirs do include stories of advice being misleading, deficient, and hard to access. Authors were generally reluctant to speak about knowledge from Catholic sources, perhaps due to the timing of competitions (Catholic marriage preparation courses were only developed from the late 1960s) or because public discourse at that time associated religiosity with "backwardness." Our interview material illustrates formal sex education initiatives and interview partners' interaction with their parents, partly as the interviewers' interest in these areas encouraged such responses. Informal experiences of sex education during childhood, such as exchanges of information with peers, only emerged in a few narratives.

While personal narratives enable qualitative analysis, their utility for measuring the broader impact of particular sources of knowledge is limited. Therefore, we complement our analysis with critical reading of data from contemporary sociological and health research, beginning with the pioneering study of female sexual experiences by Hanna Malewska, conducted between the late 1950s and the early 1960s. The outcomes of these

studies and the personal narratives are compatible, and a combined analysis facilitates a more nuanced depiction of the ways in which Polish men and women accessed sexual knowledge under state socialism. Our narratives and the surveys are placed in dialogue with the available historiography of sex education in Poland, as well as the authors' own analysis of sex education material, particularly books and films.

#### SEX EDUCATION IN POSTWAR POLAND

There was no systematic approach to sex education from either the state or the Catholic Church in Poland during the late 1940s. The public had been able to access a number of publications in the early postwar period, such as Theodor van de Velde's classic *Matężstwo doskonałe* (published in English as *Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique*), initially published in Poland during the 1930s and reedited many times through the 1970s, but these publications were scarce and generally targeted married couples.<sup>10</sup> Continuity with the interwar period was visible in both secular and Catholic titles, with the latter focusing on the religious facets of marriage and providing information on the Ogino-Knaus calendar-based method of determining fertile days.<sup>11</sup> Access to these already limited sources was further restricted under Stalinism (1949–56), when no new publications on sexual life were produced.

The legalization of abortion in Poland in 1956 and the ensuing state-sponsored family planning campaign were landmark moments in the availability of expert knowledge. The state's moderate antinatalism and support for the dissemination of information on birth control and sexuality created an environment that was conducive to the reemergence of sexology and the development of popular advice.<sup>12</sup> The availability of family planning literature improved dramatically with the establishment in 1957 of the Society for Conscious Motherhood (SCM), the state-sponsored family planning association, which launched its first brochure on contraception in 1958, delivered almost nine million free pamphlets, and produced over three million copies of over thirty titles on contraception, childcare, and sexuality

<sup>10</sup> Theodor van de Velde, *Matężstwo doskonałe: Jego fizjologia i technika* [*Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique*] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo J. Przeworskiego, 1948) was the third Polish edition of this popular book. On the history of van de Velde's book, see Lucia Pozzi, *The Catholic Church and Modern Sexual Knowledge, 1850–1950* (Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Natalia Jarska and Sylwia Kuźma-Markowska, "Explaining the Calendar: The Catholic Church and Family Planning in Poland, 1930–1957," *The Historical Journal* (2023): 1–23, doi:10.1017/S0018246X23000018.

<sup>12</sup> Sylwia Kuźma-Markowska and Agata Ignaciuk, "Family Planning Advice in State-Socialist Poland, 1950s–80s: Local and Transnational Exchanges," *Medical History* 64, no. 2 (2020): 240–66; Natalia Jarska, "Modern Marriage and the Culture of Sexuality: Experts between the State and the Church in Poland, 1956–1970," *European History Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (2019): 467–90.

in general over the following decade.<sup>13</sup> State publishing houses produced literature on sexuality for both adults and young people, although advice for the latter was less explicit and minimal. Alongside the promotion of contraception, SCM-related advice underlined the importance of satisfying sex for marital contentment and advocated a knowledge-based, civilized “culture of sexuality.” Premarital sexual activity was rarely addressed, and abortion was presented as an undesirable option. From the 1960s onward, young people could learn about sex from advice columns in magazines supervised by sexologists.<sup>14</sup> In the ensuing decades, published expert sex advice became more comprehensive and explicit.<sup>15</sup>

Direct exchange with experts was available at SCM counseling centers and public lectures, as well as at public gynecological clinics. Opened in 1957, the first SCM clinic was a “correspondence” facility in Warsaw that apparently responded to over twenty thousand letters during the first two years of its existence. During the 1960s, SCM ran two medical clinics and eighteen advice centers across Poland. Contraception counseling was also provided at well-woman clinics, thirteen hundred of which existed by 1971.<sup>16</sup> Around 125,000 women turned to the latter for contraceptive advice in 1962.<sup>17</sup> School-based sex education, strongly advocated by experts, was not introduced until the late 1960s, when it became part of the biological sciences. A new Preparation for Family Life subject was designed for secondary pupils in the mid-1970s but remained noncompulsory for schools through the mid-1980s. While the curriculum approached sexual issues with increasing directness, its impact was limited.<sup>18</sup> A 1978 survey revealed it had only been implemented in 60 percent of *liceums* (general secondary schools) and 17 percent of vocational schools. There was no sex education at all in almost 50 percent of urban and 70 percent of rural primary schools. The survey clearly demonstrated vast class differences in access to sexual knowledge provided by the public school system.<sup>19</sup>

The de-Stalinization process that began in 1956 created new opportunities for the Catholic Church. Relying on expert support from sympathetic

<sup>13</sup> Agata Ignaciuk, “No Man’s Land? Gendering Contraception in Family Planning Advice Literature in State-Socialist Poland (1950s–1980s),” *Social History of Medicine* 33, no. 4 (2020): 1327–49.

<sup>14</sup> Kościńska, *To See a Moose*.

<sup>15</sup> Kościńska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence*.

<sup>16</sup> Kuźma-Markowska and Ignaciuk, “Family Planning Advice,” 247.

<sup>17</sup> Lucyna Grabowiecka, “Analiza poronień oraz działalność placówek położniczo-ginekologicznych w zakresie antykoncepcji w 1962 r.” [Abortion and the work of obstetric and gynecological clinics in the field of contraception in 1962], *Problemy Rodziny* 4, no. 1 (1964): 11.

<sup>18</sup> Lišková, Jarska, and Szegedi, “Sexuality and Gender.”

<sup>19</sup> Mikołaj Kozakiewicz, “Raport w sprawach: Planowania rodziny, poradnictwa przedmałżeńskiego i rodzinnego oraz wychowania seksualnego w Polsce w roku 1978” [Report on family planning, premarital and family counseling, and sex education in Poland in 1978], *Problemy Rodziny* 18, no. 2 (1979): 18–20.



medical doctors, the church launched an antiabortion campaign and developed a framework for counseling. During the 1970s and 1980s, the Polish episcopate introduced premarital preparation courses and considerably expanded the counseling system.<sup>20</sup> While devout Catholics could acquire knowledge from premarital courses and approved publications, Catholic teachings on sexuality invariably rejected any premarital sexual activity, including masturbation, and endorsed the supposed natural methods of family planning within marriage. Both artificial contraception and abortion were seen as sinful and destructive for health and marriage.<sup>21</sup>

#### DISCOVERING UNAWARENESS

In this section, we trace how the postwar generation, coming of age between the 1940s and early 1960s, framed and experienced their lack of sexual and reproductive knowledge. Both personal narratives and surveys show that “unawareness” was perceived as an obstacle to successfully managing one’s sexuality and fertility and was experienced by both men and women, although in different ways. Realizing one’s lack of—subjectively defined—adequate knowledge was the first step to seeking reliable sources of information. The postwar generation experienced “unawareness” as young adults and often acquired theoretical knowledge about sex and reproduction after their initial sexual experiences.

During the late 1950s, experts highlighted a lack of knowledge about sexuality and birth control among the Polish people, a “backwardness” often attributed to the influence of Catholicism.<sup>22</sup> Sexual “unawareness” was also a lived reality for memoir authors, whose narratives reveal a lack of sex education and the effects of this absence on personal lives and relationships. Insufficient or erroneous knowledge was usually blamed on parents and peers. Knowledge that experts deemed necessary and ordinary people wished they possessed included basic facts about menstruation, masturbation, sexual intercourse, and birth control.

According to the 1957–63 study of women’s sex lives by sociologist Hanna Malewska, only 25 percent of 861 patients at eleven public gynecological clinics in Poland, most of them married women, believed they had sufficient knowledge about sex and reproduction; 23 percent declared possession of “detailed” knowledge. Over a quarter stated they had not

<sup>20</sup> Agata Ignaciuk, “Marital Intercourse Means Togetherness and Parenthood: The Biopolitics of Catholic Marriage Preparation in Poland during the 1970s,” in *Biopolitics in Central and Eastern Europe in the 20th Century*, ed. Barbara Klich-Kluczevska, Joachim von Puttkamer, and Immo Rebitschek (London: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>21</sup> Agnieszka Kościańska, “*Humanæ Vitæ*, Birth Control and the Forgotten History of the Catholic Church in Poland,” in *The Schism of ’68: Genders and Sexualities in History*, ed. Alana Harris (Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Kuźma-Markowska and Ignaciuk, “Family Planning Advice.”

<sup>22</sup> Jarska, “Modern Marriage,” 474–75.



been informed about menstruation before the menarche, and 36 percent declared they had “almost no knowledge” about sexual intercourse, with 16 percent learning about sexual intercourse through experience.<sup>23</sup> An early 1960s survey of 260 men and women with university education by Maria Einhorn-Susłowska found that their lack of knowledge had triggered a fear of sexuality.<sup>24</sup> Ninety percent of respondents criticized the standard of sex education they had received, with many blaming this for ill-judged life decisions.<sup>25</sup> First menstruation was often a shock. One of Einhorn-Susłowska’s respondents felt “handicapped and unhappy” and used old newspapers to deal with the situation. Being told by her mother that she was now a mature woman and could have children felt “like an insult,” one she could still remember thirty-eight years later.<sup>26</sup>

Similar narratives emerged in oral history interviews with working-class women born immediately after World War II and married in the mid- to late 1960s. Inka, an interview partner born in 1946, vocationally trained and employed as a cleaner in a small village in northern Poland, had not even the most basic notion of how the female reproductive body functioned, resulting in a traumatic first menstruation, for which she was completely unprepared. On the day she bled for the first time her mother promised they would have a conversation about it when she came home from school: the conversation never took place.<sup>27</sup>

Incomplete or false knowledge about sexuality was as problematic as an absence of information. Around one-tenth of Malewska’s survey respondents reported false information about sexuality and reproduction.<sup>28</sup> Einhorn-Susłowska found that knowledge about sexual intercourse provided by peers often produced a feeling of disgust and fear in both sexes. One twenty-eight-year-old respondent remembered being aroused by stories told by peers and starting to masturbate. As he was unsure whether this was dangerous for his health, he underwent considerable anxiety, a situation he described as his Gehenna. The name derives from a valley near Jerusalem described in the New Testament as a sinful place that will be destroyed by fire. The term “Gehenna” commonly functions in Polish to describe a particularly tortuous experience.<sup>29</sup> While this respondent interpreted his fear as a consequence of uncertainty, it did echo the broadly disseminated

<sup>23</sup> Hanna Malewska, *Kulturowe i psychospołeczne determinanty życia seksualnego* [Cultural and psychosocial determinants of sex life] (Warsaw: Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, 1972), 97–98.

<sup>24</sup> Maria Einhorn-Susłowska, “Uświadczenie seksualne we wspomnieniach i ocenie ludzi dorosłych” [Sex education in adults’ memoirs and opinions], in *Rozwój i wychowanie* [Development and education], ed. Maria Żebrowska (Warsaw: Nasza Księgarnia, 1963), 130–45.

<sup>25</sup> Einhorn-Susłowska, 140.

<sup>26</sup> Einhorn-Susłowska, 136.

<sup>27</sup> RB3K interview, conducted by Agata Chelstowska, Żurawiec, August 2, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Malewska, *Kulturowe i psychospołeczne determinanty*.

<sup>29</sup> Einhorn-Susłowska, “Uświadczenie seksualne,” 137.

argument that masturbation was unhealthy present in both Catholic and secular medical discourses and advice books between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a proliferation of expert opinions on masturbation, which, while not encouraged, was becoming tolerated while considered a primitive form of sexual activity.<sup>30</sup>

Many memoir authors blamed inadequate knowledge on their families maintaining a faith-based silence on sexuality. One author, a woman born in 1926, described her upbringing as “puritanical,” meaning a restrictive attitude to sexuality connected to religiosity.<sup>31</sup> Most of the 90 percent of Einhorn-Susłowska’s study respondents who criticized the sex education they received reported that their parents had entirely avoided talking about sex.

Although both men and women complained about a lack of information, unawareness was gendered. According to the Catholic norm, chastity protects girls, preventing them from becoming easy prey. Malewska observed that religiosity was associated with an unwillingness to educate children and adolescents about sexuality.<sup>32</sup> The narrative of one contest author, a woman born in 1926 and married in 1950, showcases the practical functioning and consequences of “unawareness”:

When I was telling Wacek I liked him, he said, “Give me a proof.” I did not understand what he meant. I was brought up in a harsh and puritanical family. Our mother never spoke about these issues to her daughters. I developed shame and was unaware of basic physiological processes. . . . One evening he kept me at his place until late, and then I experienced an “unwed” night. I was scared, totally psychologically unprepared, and surprised. I experienced a very strong disgust. . . . In November, I noticed the lack of period. Waław told me, “You’re probably pregnant.” . . . I went to a gynecologist. After examination, an old female gynecologist told me I would become a mother. She looked at my hand to see whether I had a ring.<sup>33</sup>

As this and other memoirs demonstrate, a lack of sexual knowledge could complicate early marriage. A female driver, born in 1940 and married in 1963, reported that both she and her husband lacked sexual awareness due

<sup>30</sup> Anna Landau-Czajka, “Przygotowanie do małżeństwa według wybranych poradników z XIX i XX w” [Marriage preparation according to selected nineteenth- and twentieth-century advice books], in *Kobieta i małżeństwo: Społeczno-kulturowe aspekty seksualności; wiek XIX i XX; zbiór studiów* [Women and marriage: Sociocultural aspects of sexuality, nineteenth and twentieth centuries; a selection of studies], ed. Anna Żarnowska et al. (Warsaw: DiG, 2004); Kościńska, *To See a Moose*.

<sup>31</sup> Young Marriage, 10605, Archiwum Akt Nowych (Archive of Modern Records), Collection Towarzystwo Pamiętnikarstwa Polskiego (Society of Polish Memoir). All memoirs are in this collection.

<sup>32</sup> Malewska, *Kulturowe i psychospołeczne determinanty*, 110–12.

<sup>33</sup> Young Marriage, 10605.

to upbringings in which talking about such issues was considered “shameful.” She interpreted their “modest sexual awareness” as an obstacle to successfully establishing a family.<sup>34</sup>

Lack of knowledge could also lead to poor fertility management. A survey by the Public Opinion Research Office in 1958, at the height of the SCM’s family planning public health campaign, identified and perceived unawareness as the cause of unwanted births and high fertility. Many memoir authors shared their experience of unwanted pregnancy either before or during marriage. A female university graduate born in 1920 claimed that despite her “experience” of being married twice before and the husband she married in 1947 not wanting children, “children came one after another.”<sup>35</sup> Memoir authors identified high fertility with a lack of sexual knowledge. A female teacher who was born in 1924, married in 1945, and lived in a small town had seven children, which she attributed to her husband’s “low culture of sexuality” and a lack of contraceptives.<sup>36</sup>

Many of the memoirs testify to a shift in access to knowledge, contraceptives, and gender roles in family planning around the mid-1950s. One woman born in 1930 described her unawareness when she married a doctor at the age of twenty. Despite being a medical student, she did not know how to avoid pregnancy and claimed that “today’s sixteen-year-old girls know better!” Her husband did not want to take any precautionary measures (*środki zabezpieczające*) as there was no longer any “risk of infection,” and spermicides were not available at that time. She became pregnant two months after the wedding.<sup>37</sup> Having divorced her first husband, this memoir author remarried in 1957. This time she was “cleverer,” and the spermicides she used “did not fail for fourteen months.”

This memoir exhibits limits to contraceptive knowledge and methods mediated through the gender imperatives within marital relationships: the woman’s first husband, a doctor, linked contraception to venereal disease and prevented her from controlling her own fertility. In her second marriage, she took control and made use of Z tablets, a domestically manufactured brand of spermicides and one of the key contraceptive methods promoted in Poland during the 1960s.<sup>38</sup>

Late socialist sociological research shows a considerable change in subjective evaluations of sexual knowledge. In a study conducted among workers and students born around 1960, as many as 68 percent declared themselves well-informed, although between 15 and 17 percent were aware of particular limitations. There was a noticeable difference between male and female

<sup>34</sup> Young Marriage, 10604.

<sup>35</sup> Husband and Wife, 10394.

<sup>36</sup> Husband and Wife, 10381.

<sup>37</sup> Young Marriage, 10613.

<sup>38</sup> Agata Ignaciuk, “Innovation and Maladjustment: Contraceptive Technologies in State-Socialist Poland, 1950s–1970s,” *Technology and Culture* 63, no. 1 (2022): 182–208.

workers, with over 12 percent of female workers declaring a low level of knowledge. No such difference was reported in students, and female students were more active in seeking information than their male colleagues.<sup>39</sup> In the following sections, we explore the most common sources of knowledge for generations coming of age between the late 1950s and the 1980s.

#### OVERCOMING UNAWARENESS? INFORMAL SEX EDUCATION

Informal sex education takes place outside an organized context, perhaps in conversations at home, school, or church. This was potentially the most accessible way of acquiring sexual knowledge and was mediated through a number of possible relationships, particularly familial. Historians of sexuality have argued that child-parent dialogue has done little to combat sexual unawareness in twentieth-century Europe, a hypothesis confirmed by our material. Taking Britain as an example, Hall has argued that parents' unwillingness to talk about sex with their offspring and their perceived inability to do so have been persisting themes in the history of sex education from the 1920s to the 2000s. This perceived inadequacy stemmed from and was associated with the increasingly mainstream perception that sexually enlightening children was part of the parental role.<sup>40</sup> In her study of maternal experiences in England, Angela Davis found that communication patterns about sex were highly family-specific but emphasized the coexistence of mother-daughter communication and persisting taboos.<sup>41</sup> As studies in the volume edited by Sauerteig and Davidson have shown, children could be equally uncomfortable discussing sex with their parents and would often turn to their peers.<sup>42</sup> All these themes are prominent in our material. In this section, we examine sources of informal sex education accessed by generations coming of age from the mid-1960s onward and discuss the continuing tabooization of sexual issues and the increasing role of experts in late state-socialist Poland.

An unwillingness by parents to discuss sexuality and reproduction directly with their children appeared cross-generationally in the memoirs and oral history interviews, with interviewees born in the late 1940s and early 1950s from both large and small urban areas stating that sexuality was a taboo topic within their homes. Some interpreted this taboo as a sign of the country's backwardness, while others, such as a female academic lecturer born in Łódź in 1971, virtually welcomed it: "I didn't request these explanations."<sup>43</sup> Many preferred to gain information from other sources, such as popular medical

<sup>39</sup> Krzysztof Czekaj, *Młodzież studencka i robotnicza a modele życia seksualnego: Uwarunkowania społeczno-kulturowe* [Student and working-class youth and models of sex life: Sociocultural determinants] (Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski, 1988), 161–65.

<sup>40</sup> Hall, "In Ignorance," 22–24.

<sup>41</sup> Davis, *Modern Motherhood*.

<sup>42</sup> Sauerteig and Davidson, "Shaping the Sexual Knowledge," 9.

<sup>43</sup> MUD1K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk, Łódź, May 25, 2018.

literature and their peers. Surveys conducted in the 1960s that examined the sex education of people born in the 1940s reveal that these tensions were common. According to a survey of medical university students in the early 1960s published in the professional family planning journal, *Problemy Rodziny*, only 12 percent received information about sexuality from their parents. A contemporary survey published in the same journal reported that the family members of primary school children were often reluctant to answer their questions.<sup>44</sup> Most of the respondents in Einhorn-Susłowska's study placed the blame for their unawareness on parents.

While a lack of sexual information transmission was constant in the memoirs of those born in the 1920s and 1930s, the narratives of those born after World War II reveal that the family taboo on sexual knowledge was easing. At times, family members of the same gender became a valuable source of sexual information. A man born in 1948 remembered his father teaching him a few basics, although this memoir author considered the information to be inadequate.<sup>45</sup> A number of female interview partners born in the mid-1950s, late 1950s, and late 1960s from both large and small urban settings had meaningful and direct conversations about sex with their grandmothers or sisters. One such exchange was narrated by an actress born in Łódź in 1954 who recalled her grandmother providing her with detailed information about traditional contraceptive techniques that existed in the indistinct space between female hygiene and pregnancy prevention, such as postcoital irrigations and the use of tampons dipped in vinegar or lemon juice.<sup>46</sup> These techniques, as Agata Ignaciuk has shown elsewhere, were presented in ambiguous ways in expert discourses on contraception: well into the 1970s they were characterized as both useless and "better than nothing" contraceptive practices.<sup>47</sup>

As surveys conducted between the 1960s and 1980s affirm, sexual knowledge transmission through the female lineage remained relatively common. A survey of highly educated people in Cracow showed that parents were more likely to be a source of knowledge for daughters than sons.<sup>48</sup> The aforementioned study by Malewska revealed that mothers from academic families were more likely to talk to their daughters about sex.<sup>49</sup> A 1980s survey by sociologist Krzysztof Czekaj showed the continuity of this gendered distinction: only a small fraction of men referred to their parents as a source of sexual knowledge, while mothers provided such information to over a third of student and blue-collar women.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Andrzej Jaczewski, "Czy rodzice uświadamiają dzieci?" [Are parents sexually educating the children?], *Problemy Rodziny* 3, no. 3 (1963): 19–21.

<sup>45</sup> My Marriage, 9937.

<sup>46</sup> DUB15K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk, Łódź, August 17, 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Ignaciuk, "Innovation and Maladjustment."

<sup>48</sup> Einhorn-Susłowska, "Uświadczenie seksualne," 134.

<sup>49</sup> Malewska, *Kulturowe i psychospołeczne determinanty*, 99–101.

<sup>50</sup> Czekaj, *Młodzież studencka i robotnicza*.

While not directly discussing sex, the mothers of some of our interviewees, with or without university education, would provide information on physical aspects of reproductive health, such as menstruation and the emotional side of romantic relationships.<sup>51</sup> This emphasis on emotional rather than physical aspects of sexuality could be interpreted as symptomatic of a general framework for sex discussions within the family, focused on what interview partners framed as mutual respect for intimacy rather than on providing explicit details. From the mid-1950s onward, details began to be delegated to experts, with many parents avoiding discussing the “physical” aspects of reproduction and sex by placing literature about the anatomy and physiology of sex in their children’s hands, thereby placing their children in the hands of experts.

Several urban female interviewees born in the late 1940s and early 1950s, including a female academic lecturer born in 1947 and residing in Warsaw, recalled receiving books about adolescent reproductive health from their parents.<sup>52</sup> Another female academic, born in Łódź in 1960, was proud of the knowledge she gained from her mother’s “discreet book recommendation” at what she perceived as the relatively early age of nine. Later, when attending summer camps, she was amazed at the “fairy tales” of misinformation that circulated among the other children.<sup>53</sup>

This narrative illustrates an overcoming of unawareness through parent-mediated expertise, a strategy that many women reproduced with their own children. The geodesy technician born in 1953 in Łódź emphasized how she had educated her own sons in the 1980s by “discreetly offering them suitable literature.” The ongoing emphasis on “discreet” demonstrates the continuing conceptualization of the sexual and reproductive body as an intimate and personal space tinged with shame and an inappropriate topic for direct conversation.<sup>54</sup>

As surveys conducted during the 1960s and 1980s reveal, despite parent-child dialogue becoming increasingly mediated through expert literature for the generation coming of age in Poland during the 1960s and 1970s, peer groups remained a sexual knowledge resource, as they were across the Iron Curtain.<sup>55</sup> The majority of participants in a 1963 survey published in *Problemy Rodziny* cited their peer group as the first source of sexual knowledge.<sup>56</sup> These results were replicated by the male participants in Einhorn-Susłowska’s contemporaneous study.

<sup>51</sup> MUC3K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk (telephone), November 12, 2018; DUD4K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk, Łódź, November 19, 2018; DUB10K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk, Łódź, May 8, 2014; DUB9K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk, Łódź, November 3, 2018.

<sup>52</sup> DUB2K interview, conducted by Agata Chelstowska, Warsaw, March 6, 2018.

<sup>53</sup> DUC4K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk, Łódź, November 27, 2018.

<sup>54</sup> DUB9K interview.

<sup>55</sup> Sauerteig and Davidson, “Shaping the Sexual Knowledge,” 2, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Jaczewski, “Czy rodzice uświadamiają dzieci?”

In our material, reflections on peer sex education were limited to a few younger generation interview partners. Those who spoke about the issue highlighted same-sex peer groups as influential sources of information about sex and reproduction: for some, peers were the only possible source. The female friends of one woman born in 1946 and residing in rural northern Poland were her only help within a context of “complete ignorance.”<sup>57</sup> For others, same-sex peer groups exchanged information gained from experience. A Warsaw-based male conservation officer born in 1963 also cited his peer group as the main source of information about sex, initially when some male friends claimed they were having sex at the age of fifteen.<sup>58</sup> A female administrative worker born in Łódź in 1952 and trained as an engineer had three teenage peers she could talk with about “these issues.”<sup>59</sup> Referring to herself as “backward” in this respect, she learned a great deal listening to the conversations of her sexually active friends. A German-language teacher born in 1958 in a mid-sized town in southern Poland recalled that conversations about menstruation created a special bond between girls “whose bodies were changing.”<sup>60</sup> A number of interview partners emphasized the value of continuing to discuss sexual matters with same-sex friends beyond adolescence. The intensity and explicitness of these conversations ranged from almost nothing (a married couple who were geodesy technicians, both born in 1953 and residing in a small town in central Poland) through “just bits, as I was not interested in sex that much at all” (a teacher born in 1948 and resident in a small town in central Poland) to the extensive and detailed conversations an actress born in Łódź in 1954 recalled having with her theater colleagues.<sup>61</sup>

#### FORMAL SEX EDUCATION: READING THE “UNAWARENESS” AWAY

As suggested in the previous section, formal sex education, particularly through printed material, was increasingly prominent in young people’s attainment of sexual knowledge in postwar Poland, being supplementary to or even a substitute for informal exchanges between parents or peers. Surveys conducted in Poland and East Germany during the 1960s testify to the importance of printed material, with 20 percent of young people in both countries identifying books and parents as their main source of

<sup>57</sup> RB3K interview.

<sup>58</sup> MUC2M interview, conducted by Agata Chelstowska, Warsaw, May 24, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> DUB13K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk in a residential area near Łódź, September 16, 2013.

<sup>60</sup> MUC3K interview.

<sup>61</sup> MUB2K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk, Piotrków Trybunalski, June 22, 2018; MUB3K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk, Skotniki near Ozorków, September 23, 2018; MUB1K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk, Łódź, March 5, 2018; DUB15K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk, Łódź, August 17, 2014.



sexual information.<sup>62</sup> Einhorn-Susłowska's survey revealed that books were important in this respect for 40 percent of male and 50 percent of female interviewees, and people of both sexes were introduced to such books by peers.<sup>63</sup> Among the titles cited in the survey was the aforementioned *Matężństwo doskonałe* by van de Velde. Most of the younger generation of female interviewees, both university educated and vocationally trained, cited this work, together with Michalina Wisłocka's best-selling *Sztuka kochania* (Art of love).<sup>64</sup> The latter was a key reference for interview partners born between the late 1940s and early 1970s, most of whom found it interesting and beneficial for marital relations. Born in Germany in 1945 to a Polish *Zivilarbeiter* (forced laborer) couple, one female interview partner resided most of her adult life in Łódź, initially training as a cook but later securing a high school degree and becoming a qualified postal clerk.<sup>65</sup> She particularly appreciated the emphasis on female pleasure in *Sztuka kochania*. Another interview partner, a housewife and entrepreneur born in Łódź in 1959 who had not finished her university degree, shared this gratitude that the book discussed the "joy of sex." Thus, the book appealed to women across social classes and generations.<sup>66</sup> While the book only made it through censorship due to its marketing for married couples, as Agnieszka Kościańska has highlighted, the author was well aware of its popularity among younger readers.<sup>67</sup> Our material shows that *Sztuka kochania* continued to hold significant influence on young people into the final years of state socialism in Poland: younger interview partners, such as a lawyer from Łódź born in 1972, also related gaining insights from this book in their teenage years. Descriptions of sexual pleasure and techniques were perhaps the key elements that distinguished books aimed at adults and those written for young readers. For example, *Zanim staniecie się kobietami* (Before you become women), first published in 1970 by the major Polish sex educator, Mikołaj Kozakiewicz, focused on love-related etiquette, marriage, and adolescent health advice, apparently deeming contraception and sexual technique to only be of interest later in life.<sup>68</sup>

An important generational continuity in the narratives analyzed here is framing the quest for sex education literature as a legitimate endeavor for young people building a romantic relationship. Overcoming "unawareness" thus became a joint enterprise, as a female author married in 1952 described. The "wildness" of her upbringing and her extreme shyness combined with

<sup>62</sup> Mark Fenemore, "The Growing Pains of Sex Education in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), 1945–69," in Sauerteig and Davidson, *Shaping Sexual Knowledge*, 71–90.

<sup>63</sup> Einhorn-Susłowska, "Uświadomienie seksualne," 137.

<sup>64</sup> Michalina Wisłocka, *Sztuka kochania* (Warsaw: Iskry, 1978).

<sup>65</sup> DPB2K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk, Romanów, June 16, 2019.

<sup>66</sup> DUC2K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk, Łódź, November 6, 2018.

<sup>67</sup> DUD4K interview. On *Sztuka kochania*, see Kościańska, *Gender, Pleasure, and Violence*.

<sup>68</sup> Mikołaj Kozakiewicz, *Zanim staniecie się kobietami* (Warsaw: Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, 1970). The second edition was published in 1973.

her husband's lack of knowledge meant that "a year after marriage a new citizen was born." The couple decided to combat their "unawareness," and he, "the more courageous," bought *Rytm małżeński* (Marital [fertility] rhythm), which they read "cover to cover."<sup>69</sup>

Here we see how seeking knowledge on contraception was perceived as abandoning the uncivilized state of "wildness." In this case, the couple relied on a 1938 Catholic book by American priest John O'Brien that was published in Polish in 1949. It focused on the rhythm method and provided no sexual instruction.<sup>70</sup> Actively seeking knowledge about such an intimate issue could produce a feeling of shame. As Malewska's study demonstrated, this was particularly the case for deeply religious women who perceived seeking knowledge as not only shameful but also a sin.

In subsequent decades, access to sex education literature, particularly to material promoting contraception, significantly increased. Family planning brochures, the outcome and key product of the family planning campaign during the late 1950s and 1960s, were targeted at married readers, were heavily focused on contraception, and paid little attention to sexual pleasure. However, many memoir authors from the postwar generation made use of titles such as *A Marriage Manual*, by American authors Hannah and Abraham Stone and translated into Polish by SCM doctor Jan Lesiński (1936, 1962), and *Co każde małżeństwo wiedzieć powinno* (What every marriage should know), a contraception brochure by Dr. Tadeusz Majle published annually between 1958 and 1963.<sup>71</sup> Contraception brochures were an important resource in the absence of local counseling and advice facilities. One female memoir author born in a rural area in 1940 had her first and only child three months into her marriage. She and her husband hoped they could both return to work as soon as possible and decided they "had enough children for the moment." In the absence of any nearby "conscious motherhood clinic," they started to educate themselves with contraceptive brochures.<sup>72</sup> The female driver mentioned above emphasized marital cooperation in the quest for information. She went to a bookstore in Warsaw and bought the Polish version of *A Marriage Manual*, *Sex Education* (probably the book by Cyril Bibby published in Polish in 1961),

<sup>69</sup> Young Marriage, 10606.

<sup>70</sup> John O'Brien, *Rytm małżeński* (Warsaw: M. Fuksiewicz i Ska Księgarnia Techniczno-Naukowa, 1949); John A. O'Brien, *Natural Birth Control without Contraceptives, According to Nature's Law in Harmony with Catholic Morality* (Champaign, IL: Newman Company, 1938).

<sup>71</sup> Hannah Stone and Abraham Stone, *Podręcznik małżeństwa* (Warszawa: Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, 1962); first English edition, Hannah M. Stone and Abraham Stone, *A Marriage Manual: A Practical Guide-Book to Sex and Marriage* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1936); Tadeusz Majle, *Co każde małżeństwo wiedzieć powinno* (Warsaw: Państwowy Zakład Wydawnictw Lekarskich, 1958). For an analysis of popular family planning literature from a gender perspective, see Ignaciuk, "No Man's Land."

<sup>72</sup> Young Marriage, 10624.

and the aforementioned *Co każde małżeństwo wiedzieć powinno*.<sup>73</sup> She and her husband read the books together. This memoir author even believed that the happiness of their marriage might be due to their continued use of this advice on sex in marriage and preventing pregnancy.<sup>74</sup> Here again, clear links were established between marital sexual education, communication, and happiness. These associations have frequently been detected in sexual and reproductive narratives produced in other temporal and geographic contexts, such as among the middle and working classes in Britain before World War II and the Soviet Ukraine during the second half of the 1950s and the 1960s.<sup>75</sup>

In addition to professional advice literature, magazine advice columns proved a useful source of information, particularly for urban interview partners born between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s. *Przyjaciółka*, the most widely circulated women's magazine, *Filipinka*, a popular magazine for teenage girls, and *ITD*, a youth culture magazine in which the prominent sexologist Zbigniew Lew-Starowicz ran a regular column from the end of the 1960s, were often referred to by interviewees.<sup>76</sup> A teacher born in 1965 in a midsized town in northern Poland recalled this column being particularly professional and cited it as her main source of information about the cycle-observation birth control she practiced as a young girl and during marriage.<sup>77</sup>

Films also appear in the narratives as specific sources of knowledge. The aforementioned postal clerk born in 1945 vividly recalled French productions such as Michel Boisrond's *Faibles femmes*, starring Alain Delon (1959). She was so impressed by how the older male protagonist "taught the young girl life, led her, taught her about sex [*jak współżyć*]" that she went to see it twice. A younger female interview partner who was born in 1960 in Łódź and who was a student of economy in the 1980s and later in film production remembered *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) as an early visual acquaintance with what she described as "hard scenes." She snuck into an almost empty Sunday morning screening of this over-eighteen-certified movie with her high school girlfriends and deemed it "a cool way to educate

<sup>73</sup> Cyril Bibby, *Wychowanie seksualne* (Warsaw: PZWL, 1961); Bibby, *Sex Education: A Guide for Parents, Teachers and Youth Leaders* (London: Macmillan, 1945).

<sup>74</sup> Young Marriage, 10604.

<sup>75</sup> Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex and Marriage in Britain, 1918–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Yuliya Hilevych, "Generations and Contexts in the Study of Continuity and Change: The Example of Fertility Declines," in *Building Bridges: Scholars, History and Historical Demography; A Festschrift in Honor of Professor Theo Engelen*, ed. Paul Puschmann and Tim Riswick (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, 2018); Yuliya Hilevych, "Abortion and Gender Relationships in Ukraine, 1955–1970," *History of the Family* 20, no. 1 (2015): 86–105.

<sup>76</sup> Agnieszka Kościńska and Wiesław Sokoluk, *Instruktaż nadmierny: Historia pewnej przygody seksualnej* [Excessive instruction: A history of a sexual adventure] (Wołowiec: Czarne, 2018), 125.

<sup>77</sup> MUC1K interview, conducted by Agata Chelstowska, Warsaw, April 27, 2018.

oneself.” This narrative, which did not provide any further reflection on the sexual violence and toxic masculinity represented in Bernardo Bertolucci’s film, illuminates the complexities of mapping sex education sources, and what individuals considered their sex education sources, beyond officially produced sex education material and the at times indistinct line between formal and informal sex education.<sup>78</sup>

Explicitly developed sex education films could, however, also be powerful resources. One prominent example was the West German production *Helga: Vom Werden des menschlichen Lebens* (1967), directed by Erich F. Bender as part of a ground-breaking and taboo-free sex education campaign initiated by the Federal Ministry of Health.<sup>79</sup> Showings of the film in cinemas in Łódź during the mid-1970s were attended by many local schools. The film’s notoriously explicit childbirth scene left the audience “in shock, the cinema went silent, everybody froze.”<sup>80</sup>

Even before a sex education program began to be implemented in Poland during the mid-1970s, school was—at least in parents’ eyes—the recognized site for formal sex education. A 1964 survey by the public research agency OBOP revealed that nearly 70 percent of parents believed schools were responsible for adolescent sex education.<sup>81</sup> Einhorn-Susłowska, who interviewed members of the older generation under analysis here, found that their teachers were largely silent on the subject of sex. A military officer born in the early 1930s complained that his biology teachers spoke “a lot about all sorts of living organisms, but on the development of humans they talked little and with embarrassment.”<sup>82</sup> In our material, sex education was largely absent from schools, even in the narratives of the younger generation coming to age in Łódź, a large industrial city in central Poland where experimental school sex education programs initiated in the early 1960s preceded nationwide institutionalization by over a decade. Many of the interviewees schooled in Łódź during the late 1960s and 1970s recalled little or no systematic or effective sex education. The situation appears to have depended on the initiative and capacity of individual teachers, often of biology or physical education. The narrative of a lawyer born in 1972 in Łódź, one of the youngest interview partners, described her experiences during the last years of socialism and how subjects such as biology could be a cause of excitement and anticipation. She and her classmates in the fourth and fifth grades of primary school, aged ten to eleven years old,

<sup>78</sup> DPB2K interview; DUC5K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk, Łódź, January 30, 2019.

<sup>79</sup> Anita Winkler, “Biology, Morality and Gender: East and West German Sex Education in Films, 1945–70” (PhD diss., Durham University, 2014), 138; Anja Laukötter, *Sex—richtig! Körperpolitik und Gefühlserziehung im Kino des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2021).

<sup>80</sup> DUC4K interview.

<sup>81</sup> Malewska, *Kulturowe i psychospołeczne determinanty*, 65.

<sup>82</sup> Einhorn-Susłowska, “Uświadomienie seksualne,” 140.

eagerly awaited learning about human reproduction and the reproductive body in eighth-grade biology lessons and speculated about whether there would be props or models.<sup>83</sup>

Despite such enthusiasm, children's needs were often not met. To the disapproval of some interview partners, specific sex education content, such as talks and films, often took place in gender-separate classes.<sup>84</sup> The female German-language teacher, having undergone sex education classes in a mid-sized town in southern Poland during the early 1970s, understood that mixed classes were inappropriate, as boys that age were "silly," but wondered why girls could not watch films about male sexual development. Having only a sister as a sibling and a father who worked a great deal, she was curious about how boys developed but "could not learn this at school."<sup>85</sup> Several narratives reveal rebellion against this imposed gender segregation: the Warsaw academic teacher born in 1947, for instance, furtively inspected the gender-specific sex education brochure given to her brother.<sup>86</sup>

For most of the period under analysis (1961–90), religious education was excluded from public schools. Thus, local Catholic parishes organized classes, including, from the 1970s, marriage preparation for betrothed couples. Such courses were also offered by other religious orders, especially the Dominicans and Jesuits, as well as by dedicated chaplaincies attached to a local archdiocese. As Kościańska has shown, the 1970s witnessed an increased mobilization of science in support of Catholic sex education implemented through religious classes and premarital courses.<sup>87</sup> The key medical authorities behind these programs included Wanda Półtawska, a Catholic psychiatrist and close friend of Pope John Paul II, and Włodzimierz Fijałkowski, a gynecologist and major popularizer of childbirth preparation and natural family planning in Poland.<sup>88</sup> Neither religious classes nor marital preparation courses appear as a source of knowledge in the narratives of our older generation, with explicitly Catholic content being largely transmitted through independent reading. Some narratives by younger generation interview partners indicate religious classes as a valuable source of information about sex. An urban engineer from central Poland born in 1953, currently a practicing Catholic, identified the religious classes she attended at primary school age as the source of her early understanding about sex.<sup>89</sup> From the same generation, the female administrative worker with a university education from Łódź praised the "nonfanatical" priest from whom she received

<sup>83</sup> DUD4K interview.

<sup>84</sup> DUC4K interview.

<sup>85</sup> MUC3K interview.

<sup>86</sup> DUB2K interview.

<sup>87</sup> Kościańska, *To See a Moose*.

<sup>88</sup> Agata Ignaciuk and Agnieszka Kościańska, "Regendering Childbirth: Catholicism, Medical Activism and Birth Preparation in Post-War Poland," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 20 (2023): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhmas/jrad020>.

<sup>89</sup> DUB7K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk, Łódź, November 17, 2018.

religious education at high school age.<sup>90</sup> He had not rigidly followed the official Catholic hierarchy line and discussed more than the rhythm method, the main topic of premarital and religious education attended by women in the same generation, class, and urban context.<sup>91</sup> This particular priest had also discussed condoms, a flexibility our interview partner appreciated, citing him as the main source of her early knowledge about sexuality.<sup>92</sup>

Catholic marriage preparation courses were of little use for the majority of interview partners from the younger generation who were already sexually active despite the church's mandate on virginity. The German-language teacher had attended such a course in the small town of Sosnowiec during the early 1980s and considered the content both amusingly inaccurate and boring. Her theoretical sex education from *Sztuka kochania* by Michalina Wisłocka and practical experience with her fiancé were more advanced than the instruction she received.<sup>93</sup> For the medical technician from Łódź, however, attending a premarital course in the mid-1980s provided her and her future husband with training in natural family planning and improved their marriage. The priest who led the course "was a normal person, with whom you could talk about anything."<sup>94</sup> Again, the human and didactic qualities of an educator, whether secular or religious, were fundamental.

School or religious sex education programs evoked expert authority, but opportunities for direct interaction with experts were rare. Such interaction occurred more frequently in other contexts, namely, secular and Catholic family planning centers and medical practices. The 1980s study by Czekaj that we discussed in the previous section revealed that only around 10 percent of the surveyed population visited these institutions.<sup>95</sup> In narratives by members of the older generation raised in urban settings, family planning and gynecological clinics were presented as important assets but in the context of sex education following rather than preceding sexual activity, often within marriage.<sup>96</sup> In many cases, a visit to a family planning clinic or gynecological surgery followed an unplanned first pregnancy, which either directly caused a young marriage or occurred too early in it. Together with her husband, a female lawyer born in 1937 and married in 1957 had planned to have a child five years after their wedding, when they had finished their studies and established careers. However, "life played a trick" on the couple when a "stork brought us a baby for Christmas." She was given brochures and contraceptives by "a nice female doctor" at the Conscious Motherhood Clinic (Poradnia Świadomego Macierzyństwa) "to

<sup>90</sup> DUB13K interview.

<sup>91</sup> DUC6K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk, Łódź, May 16, 2013.

<sup>92</sup> DUB13K interview.

<sup>93</sup> MUC3K interview.

<sup>94</sup> DUC1K interview.

<sup>95</sup> Czekaj, *Młodzież studencka i robotnicza*, 156–57.

<sup>96</sup> Young Marriage, 10606.



prevent any further accidents.”<sup>97</sup> Similarly, a male memoir author, a technician born in 1934 and married in 1958, praised a female gynecologist who had taught his wife the “temperature-based natural regulation method,” with which they could now “plan every conception.”<sup>98</sup>

In these narratives, as in many others, the presence of an empathetic professional whose ideas and values resonated with the couple’s own was the key factor in whether a sex educational interaction was perceived as useful. Positive experiences at medical practices and family planning clinics are rare in the memoir narratives of younger generations, those born in the late 1940s and early 1950s, especially in terms of advice for the unmarried. The limited role of health professionals in educating teenagers about sexuality, reproduction, and contraception and the circumscribed usefulness of any advice that was provided are common themes, even in urban areas such as Warsaw ca. 1960, where a number of such clinics existed. For instance, the academic lecturer born in 1947 described a visit to a gynecology practice made by girls in their final year of primary school when age thirteen and fourteen.<sup>99</sup> These visits, which were intended to familiarize the girls with the surgery’s appearance and the instruments used and which at times included an educational talk, were continued until the 1990s in some large cities such as Łódź, where Agata Ignaciuk underwent a visit during the final year of primary school, ca. 1998. In the case of our interview partner, the male gynecologist used veiled language, describing menstruation as “blood on the underwear.” She found the experience completely useless and, already menstruating, failed to link his description with her own experience.<sup>100</sup>

Initiative for arranging a first gynecological visit could also come from parents choosing to delegate sex education to a one-to-one encounter with a medical professional. An academic lecturer born in Łódź in 1955 recalled her mother taking her to see a gynecologist before her wedding in 1978. The only contraceptive method the doctor described was the rhythm method, which amused our interview partner, as she was already—under her own initiative—on the pill. In order to avoid repeating her mother’s mistake, she took her own daughter to a gynecologist as soon as she started menstruating. Although unable to “influence the way the doctor educated [*uświadomił*] her,” she wanted the appointment to be “as early as possible.”<sup>101</sup> While the timing and perhaps the choice of a doctor who would recommend contraception beyond the rhythm method had changed, the key element of delegating sex education spanned the generations.

Family planning tended to disappear from gynecological practice for sexually active married women in the 1970s. A female computer science

<sup>97</sup> Young Marriage, 10605.

<sup>98</sup> Young Marriage, 10617.

<sup>99</sup> DUB2K interview.

<sup>100</sup> DUB2K interview.

<sup>101</sup> DUB3K interview.



technician born in Łódź in 1954 and married in the mid-1970s emphasized the general lack of initiative among doctors “with regard to healthy people,” a perception shared by Polish family planning activists throughout the state-socialist period.<sup>102</sup> The exception was postabortion contraceptive advice, the provision of which was highly inconsistent, despite becoming mandatory for professionals authorizing terminations. The female post office clerk born in 1945 and residing in Łódź learned about the rhythm method in the private surgery where her second pregnancy was terminated in 1968, and a female blue-collar worker with vocational training born in Łódź in 1954 was prescribed the pill in 1979 during her postabortion checkup in a public gynecological office.<sup>103</sup> Conversely, the academic lecturer from Warsaw who terminated three pregnancies between 1968 and 1970, one in a small provincial hospital and two in a private surgery in the capital, was never offered any contraceptive counseling.<sup>104</sup>

Despite changes in the availability and quality of diverse forms of expertise-based sex education in the postwar period, both sociological surveys and personal narratives reveal the domination of advice literature as a reliable source of knowledge for both generations, although the availability of this literature was far greater for the younger generation. Direct conversations with experts such as doctors, teachers, and priests were far less comprehensive and, for the younger generation in particular, highly unsatisfactory.

### CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis has focused on the meanings and consequences of “unawareness” for Polish men and women, especially for the generation that came of age in the decades after the Second World War, as well as the process of overcoming this lack of comprehension through interactions with expert knowledge. As memoirs and oral history interviews have revealed, living with unawareness had far-reaching consequences for many people and generated fear, regrettable decisions, and unwelcome pregnancies. Sexual ignorance, subjectively defined, was attributed to a conservative upbringing and, being more prevalent in women, was a gendered phenomenon. These personal narratives also reveal the agency of men and women in overcoming sexual ignorance through their pursuit of knowledge. This study has, therefore, highlighted the significance of ignorance as a crucial and widespread experience and an individual and collective impetus to actively seek sexual education.

<sup>102</sup> DUB4K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk, Łódź, June 7, 2018; Kuźma-Markowska and Ignaciuk, “Family Planning Advice.”

<sup>103</sup> DPB2K interview and DBP3K interview, conducted by Agata Ignaciuk, Łódź, August 8, 2014.

<sup>104</sup> DUB2K interview.

The expertization of sex education in Poland, experienced and shaped by postwar generations, underwent a twofold process: as the acquisition of knowledge about sex and reproduction became increasingly important to the Polish people, the role of expertise as a source of knowledge was expanded and consolidated. A recognition of sexual ignorance or unawareness is inextricably connected to an acceptance of both expert authority and self-responsibility in the realm of sex and reproduction. As our material shows, the older generation experienced unawareness as young adults, while expertization created possibilities of acquiring knowledge at earlier stages and of better quality for the younger generation.

Despite the development of formal channels for sex education, which promoted an increasingly egalitarian access to sexual knowledge regardless of gender and class, informal sources of knowledge about sex, particularly parents and peers, persisted throughout the period under analysis. So did the gendered nature of knowledge transmission, with a tradition of mother-daughter communication, and the greater popularity of peer conversations about sex among boys. Knowledge transmission from parents to children was habitually limited to conversations about the emotional side of sexuality, with “technical” details systematically delegated to experts. This delegation testified to the persisting notions of shame, taboo, and sin that surrounded sexual knowledge transmission and were practiced—and reproduced—by Polish parents across social classes, geographical backgrounds, and generations. However, the general process of expertization did impact the knowledge transmitted by parents and peers.

Between the mid-1950s and late 1960s, as the state-sponsored family planning project provided increasing amounts of family planning advice, possessing knowledge about sexuality and reproduction began to be perceived as a necessary component of the modern self. Among the diverse forms of formal sex education developed within this project, advice books proved to be the most popular and appreciated method. Catholic sex education also evolved and underwent a process of expertization, becoming yet another source of knowledge for the younger generation. As shown by the narratives we have explored in this article, both the secular and the religious sex education projects played a part in combating the ignorance of the Polish people.

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