
THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A R T I C L E S A N D E S S A Y S

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**A WIN FOR THE MIDDLE CLASS?
A QUALITATIVE STUDY MAPPING “BENEFITS”
FROM THE NATIONAL QUARANTINE***

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is a kind of realisation of the risk society (Beck 1992) of late modernity, in which individuals were suddenly confronted with a transition from the phase Ulrich Beck described as a state of “residual social risk” to the new situation of “drifting in the sea of global risks”. The pandemic therefore bears the hallmarks of an “unsettling event” (cf. e.g. Kilkey, Ryan 2020) and denotes a situation in which individuals may be forced to redefine their life paths in response to structural changes. Changes at a macro level (in politics and the economy) are already known to be unavoidable, particularly since COVID-19 is accentuating and deepening social inequalities (v. e.g. Bowleg 2020; Ahmed et al. 2020; Furceri et al. 2020). Although to begin with people emphasised that “the virus doesn’t choose”, that nobody can feel safe and we have to act in

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solidarity, such narratives were quickly rebutted as delusive due to the fact that they omitted the significant role played by social status and other similar variables as determinants of individuals' situations in a time of transformation (cf. Bolin, Kurtz 2018). As past studies into epidemics and public health crises go to show—for example one tackling the flu of 1918 (Bengtsson et al. 2018), and recently a study into HIV/AIDS (Pellowski et al. 2013)—individuals experience disease differently, and relate to it depending on the scope of the social support they receive, their access to health care, and also their class position, that is their level of education, position on the job market, income level and prestige (v. e.g. Domański 2000; Gdula, Sadura 2012).

Based on qualitative data collected since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the introduction of restrictions (the so-called lockdown) in Poland, we show in this paper that social status determines how representatives of the middle class, men and women, have the feeling of being “winners” in the current crisis. We refer to narratives in Polish sociological reflection recalling the discourse regarding polarisation after the transformation of 1989 (e.g. Krzemiński 2011), splitting society into winners and those who were unable to cope in the new system and experienced failure in life.

The purpose of this paper is to carry out a qualitative analysis of the pandemic-related experiences of individuals representing Poland's middle class. We pose a research question about the areas in which the middle class has made gains from the national quarantine, and in response we map out the four main areas of benefits, connected to time, relationships, work, and reflection. The article comprises four main sections. Apart from this introduction, it embraces a brief review of the state of research into relations between public health and class (social status), taking particular account of COVID-19. This is followed by a presentation of the study's methodology, and then the findings organised around the four main areas of gains indicated above. The conclusions are given at the end.

STATE OF RESEARCH: “WE'RE NOT ALL IN THIS TOGETHER”

In July 2020 a lot of publicity was generated by Lisa Bowleg's commentary in the prestigious *American Journal of Public Health*, in which she argued that talking about universalism in the global pandemic gave a highly distorted picture. Taking Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (1990) into account, Bowleg pointed out that the collective “we” or “all” concealed the hard-to-swallow truth about the injustice and social

inequalities that existed before the pandemic, but which are now only intensifying in relation to the position or social status of individuals and groups in society. For a start, her criticism of the slogan “*We’re all in this together*” posed a crucial question about the status quo and how various groups were experiencing the epidemiological situation in 2020. Secondly, she encouraged reflection over the question as to what come next, meaning to what degree slogans of solidarity might actually be born—including among representatives of the upper social strata—as a long-term effect of the pandemic.

Let us recall that, as a conglomerate of the interactions of structure and its interpretations by individuals, social status is a key organising element in regard to social stratification and power (Turner 2000). Social status—as negative and positive class-based privileges (economic and educational) as well as lifestyle (cf. Major, Machin 2018; Sadura 2017)—defines the individual’s access to prestige and resources, and in more recent depictions also focuses also on economic security, stability, and the individual’s autonomy in the context of earning an income (Savage et al. 2013; Savage 2015). Although “variety of lifestyles does not coincide perfectly with social diversity” (Palska 2002: 18), we treat social status and class membership in broad terms here, keeping in mind that the middle class has always featured the lowest degree of consistency and uniformisation (e.g. Fulcher, Scott 1999; Domański 2009). In our operationalisation we refer to possession (of economic capital, sector and type of employment, job position, professional qualifications) as well as lifestyle. In particular we indicate the cultural practices and class-based patterns of thinking acquired through socialising processes that shape people’s conduct (Gdula, Sadura 2012: 9). Various categories of attributes give the middle class the appropriate safeguard for the unpredictability and dangers currently connected to the pandemic not to affect their situation or sense of wellbeing too vehemently. Learned resourcefulness and the firm belief that one has to rely on oneself is of major importance here, as too is how one’s life strategy is subservient to plans and goals, achieving success, and autonomy (Domański 2009).

Existing studies confirm a strong dependence between socio-economic status and state of health (Link, Phelan 1995), especially in societies featuring highly stratified income and the related inequalities in access to support (Wilkinson 1999). It is stressed that a low/high social position can predestine individuals for a shorter/longer life, while also differentiating mortality indices and incidence of various diseases (e.g. Mirowski, Ross 2005; Raciborski 2012). Although epidemiological data in

Poland rarely take socio-demographic variables into account, Ostrowska (2009) has shown that less affluent persons rate their state of health, both mental and physical, worse than those who are well off. Health psychologists focus here mainly on sociobiological translation (Tarlov 1996: 84), indicating the mutual influence of phenomenal components that are simultaneously socialised and physical (e.g. stress).

The current research into public health in the time of COVID-19 is in line with the above findings regarding class-related disadvantage in the face of the virus. For example, Chen and Krieger (2020) confirmed the “unequal treatment” of members of different social strata by the coronavirus in the United States, indicating that incidence, diagnosis and mortality reflected income statistics, racial-ethnic hierarchy, and household overcrowding in different counties. In a large quantitative study, Dragano et al. (2020) demonstrated a dependence between the percentage of hospitalisations and deaths caused by COVID-19 and level of unemployment in Germany. What makes the current health crisis different to previous ones is the specificity of the demand for social distancing. Unlike other disasters and cataclysms, epidemics make it impossible to draw practical support from the closeness of relations and social bonds (Kirschenbaum 2006). In this area, Weill et al. (2020) emphasise the significance of the variable of income in attempts to understand individuals’ attitudes towards the policy of social distancing. By measuring spatial mobility (through the quantitative research of data from mobile telephones), the researchers confirmed that staying at home was much more common among the residents of well-off areas than those in disfavoured districts, thereby reversing the pre-pandemic model of everyday spatial mobility.

Destabilisation at a country level, which in Poland has meant, among other things, restrictions in regard to spatial mobility, possibilities for earning an income, and access to services (cf. Popyk, Pustułka 2021; Buler, Pustułka, in reviews), is significantly connected to social status. This is reflected in attitude to *social distancing*, embracing both slogans such as “stay at home” and adherence to sanitary rules by keeping distance from others in public spaces (cf. Marroquin et al. 2020). Such behaviour varies by age and social class (cf. e.g. YouGov 2020). As with earlier epidemics, for example SARS 2003 or H1N1 2009 (cf. Pfefferbaum et al. 2012; Cava et al. 2005), COVID-19 has caused a deterioration in the state of mental health, although a differentiating status-related factor here is access to technology, which to a certain degree eliminates the negative impact of social isolation in the middle class (Marroquin et al. 2020).

Polish studies suggest that having access to resources makes it easier to counterbalance the social consequences of the pandemic; making use of free time requires the appropriate space, the desynchronisation of occupational and family responsibilities generates additional burdens (particularly for women, experiencing a reset of equal rights), the resourcefulness of a household depends strictly on the flexibility of earning a living and the household's organisation, while re-traditionalisation focuses attention on self-sufficiency (Drozdowski et al. 2020). The types of capital that the middle class has at its disposal allow it to choose to immerse itself in the therapeutic culture of consciously experiencing difficulties and challenges (Kościńska et al. 2020). There may also be a kind of "Pollyanna syndrome" at work here (Goodhart 1985), according to which the search for positive aspects of stress really does make it possible to minimise how it is felt. It is in this sense that the study refers to the classic Latack and Dozier (1986) model, outlining transitional strategies of the middle class when facing unemployment. The authors indicated that professionals have a strong need for "crisis management", and therefore even in a situation of forced passivity they take steps aimed at remaining active and for self-development.

Referring to the above-mentioned Bowleg (2020), "COVID-19 reveals disproportionate risk and impact based on structured inequality", including in regard to the privileging of representatives of the majority (ethnic or religious, for example), of those holding higher positions in the class structure, and those in certain occupations. Unlike the prevailing current of research dedicated to the negative consequences of the pandemic, and particularly in the lower classes, in this paper we ponder over the extent to which the middle class may—pursuant to the Latack and Dozier (1986) model—utilise the resources in its possession, and gain from the "national quarantine", at least in the first period of the pandemic.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on an empirical study, "Solidarność w koronie: postrzeganie i/lub doświadczanie przejawów (nie)solidarności w okresie pandemii COVID-19" [lit.: Corona-solidarity: the perceptions and/or experiences of (non-)solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic], the goal of which is to grasp the attitudes, narratives and social practices of Polish men and women during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are assuming that the pandemic may accelerate the transition forecast by Beck (1992: 49)

from the “solidarity of need to solidarity motivated by anxiety”, and so its investigation is an attempt towards understanding and giving new meanings to social solidarity in destabilised societies (cf. Crow 2002: 113).

The project’s methodology is based on grounded theory approach. The study has been underway since the beginning of the quarantine (the project commenced on 13 March 2020), and is being conducted as Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) in a format proposed and elaborated by Bren Neale (v. e.g. Neale 2019). The research technique applied in the study comprises individual in-depth interviews conducted online in a dual form, i.e. synchronous (the researcher talking to participants using GoogleMeet and similar tools) and asynchronous (incidents and opinions recorded in diaries, plus email correspondence). The study consists of three waves, the first two of which have already been carried out, while the third is planned for 2021, in response to the evolving epidemiological situation.

The persons taking part in the study were recruited through an invitation posted in social media. Respondents were informed of the interview goals and the data storage rules, and signed the appropriate consent forms for taking part. 25 people are taking part in the study, 20 of them women and 5 men, aged from 28 to 73 years old, from different parts of Poland, and mostly urban residents. All respondents apart from one woman have higher education. Their identification as representatives of the middle class is connected to economic capital (eight persons are owners or joint owners of small businesses; six hold medium or higher managerial positions), and professional qualifications (two people are in science, two are consultants, and one is a sales representative in the pharmaceutical sector). The others are representatives of public administration (2 persons), an office worker, a nurse, and a psychotherapist. The respondents’ lifestyle reflects the habitus of the middle and upper class: freedom from economic necessities, the practising of values acknowledged and followed in society, the celebration of autotelic pleasures (Gdula, Sadura 2012), and also high social competencies.

For the requirements of this paper, material was selected from the first wave of interviews conducted in March 2020. Due to the character of the thematic analyses focusing on “first reactions” and activities in the face of the lockdown, the paper presents narratives at a defined point of time (cf. Neale 2019). The data—in the form of interview transcriptions and recordings of asynchronous data—were coded using the program MAXQDA, where the coding tree was concentrated around such topics

as values, taking particular account of solidarity, practices, competencies, social networks, social capital, emotions, and personal situation. Open thematic coding was applied (cf. Saldana 2009); the article is based on such codes as: benefits and opportunities, problems and threats, personal situation, financial and occupational situation, attitude, actions and decisions.

“SOMEHOW I DON’T FEEL AT ALL UNCOMFORTABLE IN THIS SITUATION”, OR IN OTHER WORDS THE FINDINGS

The presentation of the findings opens by quoting the respondent Gaja (40 years old, manager), who despite reports of the threats resulting from the virus has on the whole not experienced a deterioration in her situation. As anticipated, the respondents—members of the middle class—did not feel the consequences of the restrictions at the start of the pandemic, while the fundamental guarantor of this situation was their sense of stability in life, mainly economic stability (cf. Major, Machin 2018; Domański 2009; Savage et al. 2015). Their accumulated capital, continuity in their employment and income makes it possible to perceive the lockdown as an opportunity rather than a threat. Marcelina stated during quarantine:

I’m sitting at home of course. I have some savings, so I’m not afraid of—I don’t know—not being able to buy something. I have a job contract, so I’m on an L4, which means I’m getting paid. I have internet, have a pile of books, I have games, so it’s not some kind of situation impossible for me to get through. It’s different, it’s strange, but I don’t believe that it’s wasted time, or that it’s some kind of really, really tough time for me, not in the day of the internet and access to everything (Marcelina, 30, sales representative).

The lifestyle of the middle class (and particularly the upper middle class) shows intersectional correlation not only with strictly financial benefits (higher salaries, savings, and investments), but also with the privileged consumption of intellectual goods and access to technology (v. also Marroquin et al 2020). The combination of these spheres of social dominance means that the respondents have no reason to fear quarantine, and neither—at this stage of the lockdown—are financial consequences making themselves felt. Although the class perspective shows why the respondents may be expected to experience benefits, in this paper we focus on mapping and presenting the various areas in which they gain. We have identified the following: (1) more time and psychophysical regeneration; (2) gains in relationships; (3) professional and skills benefits; and (4) reflection and global thinking. These areas

frequently penetrate one another, but we discuss them here in the structure adopted above.

“I HAVE TIME, HONESTLY, THE WHOLE TIME FOR MYSELF...”

The gain from the national quarantine appearing by far the most often in the respondents' narratives is their sense of unexpectedly having time “for oneself” at hand. In the day of social acceleration (Rosa 2003), when the middle class is particularly overworked and dedicates a great deal of its time to occupational activity (e.g. Chatzitheochari, Arber 2009; Kubisiak et al. 2017), the forced subjective “slowing down” of time (cf. Adam 1990) gives rise to questions about how to make use of this special period. On the whole, the respondents look upon the lockdown positively (cf. Goodhart 1985; Latack, Dozier, 1986): Ziemowit (29 years old, scientist) asks the rhetorical question: *People seem not to understand that it will be a very interesting period. Do people think they're going to get bored?*, while Szczepan indicates benefits drawing from the global standstill:

I feel that such a standstill for the whole world is globally a good thing, that globally it's good for all those people who were forced to come to a halt, that somebody has suddenly stopped the merry-go-round they've been spinning on till now (Szczepan, 45, entrepreneur).

Many of the comments show a reflection upon time, and the recommendation to stay at home has meant that the excuse “I don't have the time” has ceased to bear meaning. The respondents have to take responsibility for managing their own time by themselves:

It suddenly turns out that we have the time that we've never had. There was always that explanation, that I can't do it because I don't have the time. And now we suddenly do have it. So for me that's a kind of opportunity I guess, you know, a kind of coming to a stop, looking at where we're standing, where we are. I'm looking at myself like that, you know, I'm thinking about where I am, what interests me, what I could develop by myself, what I've neglected (Klara, 38, manager).

However, the time gained is not made use of randomly, but rather it confirms the retention of cultural domination by the middle class, in regard to tastes and preferences (Gdula, Sadura 2012), which we can see in the narrative below regarding the choice of “suitable” reading material, the development of skills, or jobs in the home focusing on interior aesthetics:

I've started to read Dostoyevsky, because I decided that since I'm being forced to read, then I'll read something that's sort of higher, I always read such books that don't really make me delve into what's inside, or think about what I'm reading. And since I now

have Dostoyevsky, and I have Fitzgerald ready, then I'm attempting to devote a little time to that higher culture [...] I've gone back to learning Spanish at home, which is something else I haven't had time for. I painted some shelves today. And I'm simply striving to make use of that time, time there's never really been enough of at home (Marcelina, 30, sales representative).

For respondents from the upper middle class, the national quarantine almost held a dimension of *catharsis*, since they frequently spoke of its positive impact on spirituality, soothing nerves and setting emotions in order. The universal standstill provided a lot more calm than a holiday, because when nobody can do anything, one's own non-productivity is a necessity and not a whim. The data show processes of remembering about forgotten passions, of perceiving the quarantine as a moment for dealing with the smothering of creativity by occupational and life responsibilities:

It's definitely a great moment for a reevaluation of certain things, and for halting in this rush, for catching up, and I guess that means in spiritual terms too. Spiritual, intellectual, I don't know... to do some reading. I've started painting again, and that's something I've really neglected. But I set up my easel 3 days ago, and I'm simply painting away on it [...] I can see that I have a kind of need to express myself on canvas, but I also perceive that as a positive change, I think it's great that I was able to stop, to put out my easel and remember about it (Klara, 38, manager).

Apart from what one could call typical behaviours for this social stratum, Tamara indicates other time-consuming hobbies and interests among the upper middle class:

We're doing things that perhaps beforehand we would set aside, such as playing games, board games that take 20 hours, there was never the time for it, but now we can easily set it out for 5 days and get going in a more engaging game. So those are pluses, or an attempt at making good use of the time (Tamara, 36, manager).

An area directly connected to time is rest and relaxation, where COVID-19 is gifting the middle class metaphorically and paradoxically with a "ticket" for mental health:

[The situation is] great, because I really do work! Since I was at high school, I've had the impression that I'm working the whole time, without a break. I guess this is the longest holiday I've had since I turned 17. So for now I'm still enjoying it and relaxing, and it seems to me that my body sort of needed this rest (Marcelina, 30, sales representative).

In this respect the findings tie in with studies by Weill et al. (2020) and Chen and Krieger (2020), according to which the virus not only treats social strata differently in terms of physical health, but also has decidedly

varied consequences for mental health (less perceptible). During the first lockdown, the middle class has been characterised by the “Pollyanna syndrome” (Goodhart 1985). This allows for the effective management of stress and fear, paradoxically achieved through identification of positive aspects of the situation that has arisen.

“IT WILL SHOW PEOPLE WHAT WE’VE RECENTLY FORGOTTEN ABOUT:
THAT WE SHOULD BE TOGETHER WITH EACH OTHER”

Another area in which the respondents see “gains from the pandemic” is that of social relations, which are strengthened; this applies to families and among relatives, as well as friends of a closer or more distant nature. Interestingly, the intensified time with the people one lives with is perceived quite positively:

The relationship we have is doing really well, it’s excellent. We [my wife and I] find various activities for ourselves, sometimes we sit apart, each doing our own thing, and certain things we do together, something works, and we manage [...] we’re incredibly connected as a family with our children and grandchildren, so it’s exceptionally difficult for them and for us. That’s why we have different kinds of session every day, you know, touching on multiple topics, involving play—for example I play poker with my grandson, or we play on the guitar (Jan, 73, manager).

We make use of the time that’s been given us to sort of simply enjoy ourselves well as the possibilities allow (Tola, 38, manager).

The sphere of relationships is described by members of the middle class through the perspective of the quality of the bonds and voluntary family practices aimed at generating a sense of closeness (cf. Sikorska 2019). Narratives of this type have only been strengthened by the pandemic:

It seems to me that the benefits are really big. I mean, let’s start with the fact that we’re together day in day out [...] and it seems to me that we’re simply moving closer together, we’re spending time together, having fun, getting to know each other. It seems to me and my husband that such conscious being together is doing us good (Tola, 38, manager).

It’s definitely contributing to us appreciating more that we have one another, I think we’re trying hard to be nicer for one another and in general, I don’t know, not to provoke any unnecessary quarrels, because it’s bad enough as it is outside. So here in the home we’re striving to make sure it’s pleasant, that things are all right, so as not to argue, to hug the kids (Bogna, 40, office worker).

Closeness and attention are tied to the narrative of care in the family, as important in the context of Poland (cf. Grotowska-Leder, Roszak

2016). Readiness to help loved ones is the paramount rule organising relationships:

Regardless of how the situation looks, it's like every one of us is prepared to help somebody else in our family. That's something that struck me, and it was quite important for me (Wiktorja, 30, therapist).

In addition, reflection regarding the gains in relationships applied quite frequently to previously being caught up in one's work. In relation to the previous area of managing time, the current situation is giving the respondents space for repairing damaged relations between work and home (the work-life balance), above all by increasing the time dedicated to partners and children:

I'm trying hard above all to spend as much time as I can with my child. Because some 2 months ago I was thinking that because of my job and the time he was spending at nursery, we were spending relatively little time together. And now there's been this sort of gift from fate, we're together non-stop. So I'm trying to spend as much time as I can and do such things that require more involvement, such as artwork of some kind or other things that there was never usually enough time for (Tamara, 36, manager).

Despite limited opportunities for getting together face-to-face, the middle class seems to be making use of the time provided by the pandemic for catching up in social life and relations, using technology:

It's a matter of catching up in our socialising, meaning phoning people I'd always thought I'd meet up with for a coffee, but now we can't, so I call them, so that's also a kind of plus (Tamara, 36, manager).

Only isolated respondents experienced some kind of worries concerning relations during the pandemic, which was connected to their previous experience with work-related meetings conducted using new technologies, and with remote working. The respondents believe that contacts and events can be effectively navigated during the pandemic:

I have this big need to write that if somebody wants they can call me, we can chat, I don't know, we can hear each other out. For example I did a kind of brief joint meditation for the team, which one person turned up for. So it's like we have the need somewhere, and I have it too, and I feel it as something like that (Kacper, 28, consultant).

For me perhaps it's also OK for the reason that I'm not missing that constant interaction with people, because I have that on a daily basis. I'm also constantly going myself for various kinds of training, and now that I'm taking a little break from that I'm not suffering, I'm feeling good, so I'm OK (Olga, 60, entrepreneur).

As was shown, the middle class invested their additional time and energy above all in relationships. Social networks function along two lines: they offer the necessary support, but also they immediately make up for the need for being active, they fill the gaps in the tasks to be done, and reinforce one's feeling of agency in a situation of expected passiveness (cf. Latack, Dozier 1986).

“NOW WE ALL HAVE TO GO ONLINE, THERE'S NO WAY OUT”

The occupational and skills benefits described by the respondents are situated within two areas of personal gains and positive consequences for the job market. Comments regarding work in the day of COVID-19 are tied to a feeling of a certain appreciation of the mode of work (or functioning on broader terms) “in front of the computer”. However, there is a significant dichotomy between those respondents who on the whole felt no negative consequences of the pandemic in terms of level of income, and those experiencing a certain destabilisation. Starting with the former, their reflections tend to involve a reevaluation of certain processes on the job market, for example remote working:

I think it might change people's approach to work a little, for example my husband is in IT and he was unable to work from home before now, yet now he can, I mean he even has to, right? [...] It could prove a kind of test, also as if it were imposed from above—but as a model that works, and perhaps it'll open the door for many people to be able to work remotely, from home (Tola, 38, manager).

Additional pluses in this situation are also perceived by Gaja, although her comment refers to the relations between social acceleration (Rosa 2003) and the current deceleration and technological mediation:

It's a kind of revolution, yes, I'm really interested in what we'll be left with, and have the feeling that we might be left with something good, and altogether the discovery that the world doesn't come to an end when we suddenly don't go to work, the world doesn't come to an end when suddenly we're not rushing with everything, and the world doesn't come to an end when suddenly instead of flying to London for a half-hour meeting we simply make a call, and so on (Gaja, 40, manager).

Likewise Sylwia, who succeeded in transferring operations in a sector previously rejecting new technologies to the web, holds much hope in the pandemic finally forcing certain circles or sectors to admit that there are plenty of goals that can be achieved in the virtual world:

To be honest, it's a great time, meaning that it's my time [...] a chance for me, because I've long been saying it in my doula community, in my counselling; why are we resisting

the online, why don't we want to do online consulting, why don't we want to do online courses as much as possible? (Sylwia, 31, specialist).

As in other studies into professionals' behaviour (cf. Latack, Dozier 1986), representatives of the middle class are not ceasing to be active players on the labour market, even when the destabilisation is affecting their activities. On the contrary, they are seeking new paths or solutions that may ultimately improve how occupations function. Olga also speaks of this:

There still seems to me to be a fair-sized group of employees in education in general, in school and in higher places of learning, who are afraid of this form of teaching. But now, when they're getting to know the tools and becoming familiar with it all, it seems to me that it's going to be more widespread, and perhaps there'll be some change in the regulations (Olga, 60, entrepreneur).

Moreover, the remarks made reveal new perspectives related to work and study that are possible thanks to us gaining time for reflecting on a potential change in career or workplace (v. also Latack, Dozier 1986):

You get stuck in the company, in the sense that you have greater potential and could do something else, go abroad or something, but here the company sort of results in you putting down roots [...] You survive, and when you survive then there's not really anything holding you there, and when there's nothing holding you then you can do something else. I reckon the way I think about my business, and about everything around it, is going to change a lot (Sandra, 37, entrepreneur).

Although not indicated in the remarks quoted above, the middle class is also experiencing a number of occupational challenges, especially in a prolonged situation of restrictions. At the start of the pandemic few respondents spoke of a recession or real consequences of the destabilisation in their own personal lives; however, there were concerns related to preventing unfavourable effects caused by developments on the job market, for example: *in general I'm also starting to worry, you know, about finances simply (Klara, 38, manager).*

In particular contract work, both among freelancers and those employed on the basis of a civil-law contract, involves less stability and less predictability:

Truth to tell, I'm now in a freelance situation, so it's as though I have no security at this moment, which also means that I don't know where it's going. There are a couple of things that are unfolding, but to be honest it's an unknown (Kacper, 28, consultant).

For entrepreneurs the situation is even more acute; their self-employment is not providing a sense of security:

It's nerve-racking because this sector—and I'm talking about training—has experienced a total crash. Quite simply all the companies we've been talking to have simply decided [...] to shut down their training activities (Natalia, 54, micro-entrepreneur).

My situation is really, really precarious, and depends on how things move forward from here. [...] In an economic and business sense, then for myself I'm afraid of going bankrupt, simply, that for months I'm not going to be able to make a living. [...] I thought simply that I'd change my lifestyle, [...] that my status in general would change, my standard of living. And, well, I had a pretty good standard, so there is that uncertainty somewhere (Celina, 40, micro-entrepreneur).

COVID-19 is not only clearly showing the absence of coherent characteristics of the middle class (Fulcher, Scott 1999), but has even put up an internal border within the Polish middle class (cf. Domański 2009), between persons with safe, full-time employment, and the rest—particularly those who are self-employed. Financial (in)stability and the economic prospects for the immediate future have suddenly, from one day to the next, created distance between people previously living at a similar standard. Some respondents immediately perceived a chance for change, despite having decisions forced upon them, but many carried out a financial analysis resulting in a change in lifestyle. We are therefore seeing a certain dichotomy between “protected” full-time employees, benefiting from capital they built up beforehand, and even multiplying this capital (by developing skills and creativity), and entrepreneurs who are at risk of downward class mobility.

“IT’S REALLY GOOD TRAINING FOR MANKIND AS A WHOLE, AND
A WAKE-UP CALL BEFORE SOMETHING THAT COULD BE EVEN WORSE”

The last and probably most complex area is the meta-category of reflexivity; although it can be seen as a cross-sectional element of the preceding sections, it is grasped here as possessing not only an individual dimension (deeper reflection regarding one’s own life) but also as important for the collective:

I can see an enormous plus and an enormous change in global awareness and perception, [...] a reorientation of values to be honest, of what's important in life. [...] critical situation that is shaking many people out of their ruts, [...]. Such a situation could be, I don't know, a death in the family, an accident, something that places us somewhat on the border of functioning. And I believe that the current situation connected to the coronavirus is such an element, and that's good (Szczepan, 45, entrepreneur).

The coronavirus is, above all, a kind of borderline experience, waking one from one's comfortable and unreflective life dominated by work, career and consumption. According to the respondents, the current situation is drawing attention to fundamental values, relations and the spiritual sphere.

We're adapting to certain unpleasant things, and striving to draw what's best from them (Ziemowit, 29, scientist).

The pandemic can be a lesson to be learned, providing that there is openness and a certain level of trust in the world and the future, which in the case of the middle class is part of their perception and system of values. Its consequence is a distinct search for the good aspects and "added value" from adapting to the crisis (cf. Latack, Dozier 1986), suggesting the "Pollyanna syndrome" already mentioned above (Goodhart 1985).

I can see certain positive effects of this pandemic, that perhaps we'll lose out as people, but spiritually society will gain somewhere [...] sometimes, in your first impression, something seems really bad, but later it turns out to have been quite simply necessary, for you to think things over, realise things (Gloria, 31, office worker).

Representatives of the middle class also seek benefits and opportunities on a global level. They hope that the pandemic will allow certain behaviours and habits to change, with a positive impact on the climate, on ecology, with sustainable development and a less consumptionist approach to life:

I also thought about the materialistic side, about shopping, about wandering around those shopping centres, and whether we'll come to the conclusion that it's all unnecessary, that there are more important things such as health, being with one another (Klara, 38, manager).

The declaration of flexibility in the respondents' narratives is linked to putting one's own system of values, one's own lifestyle, to the test—to the test of the crisis—while hoping for optimisation and a new beginning.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings lead one to state that the way the middle class has in general found its feet in the COVID-19 pandemic, and the sense of comfort despite uncertainties and risk, is linked to the economic resources, level of education, and social competences of Poles belonging to this class (cf. Drozdowski 2020 et al.; Kościńska et al. 2020).

The pandemic is a paradoxical but powerful impulse for bringing oneself up-to-date on numerous different levels. On the one hand, the

middle class—just like everybody else—has to cope with uncertainty (v. also Beck 1992; Crow 2002), which is particularly difficult for them due to the “organised” nature of their lives at normal times. On the other hand, the respondents are searching for space for innovation in their private lives, at work, and in their social participation. The protestant ethic and spirit of capitalism (Weber 2011) is invariably vibrant in the narratives: the fact that their previous experience of being deeply involved in work and in accumulating resources has been brought to a halt from above does not mean—in the case of the middle class—that activity has ceased. On the contrary, in keeping with the model of Latack and Dozier (1986), active persons suddenly forced to be passive do not give in, and they search for ways to manage the omnipresent change in a way that is effective and brings benefits (v. also Major, Machin 2018).

Even if recovering time “for oneself” during the lockdown leads to a certain revision of the consequences of the pace of life and neoliberal pursuit of material goods (v. also Rosa 2003), on the whole the respondents are not “standing still”. Probably the most surprising finding was the overwhelmingly positive and optimistic resonance in the narratives accumulated, which illustrates the fruitfulness of the “Pollyanna syndrome” (Goodhart 1985) as an effective way of coping with pandemic stress. While analyses to date of the social consequences of the pandemic say a great deal about the “forced reflexivity” (Drozdowski et al. 2020; Kościńska et al. 2020), in the case of the representatives of the middle class taking part in the study one should speak of extremely favourable conditions for reflection. Even if the middle class previously had a predisposition for self-awareness, in the day of social acceleration (Rosa 2003) and the career rat race, they were frequently in a hurry in their approach to it, sometimes feeling guilty that they could be using their resources for something more productive. However, when everybody and everything comes to a halt, it is then a necessity and not a whim.

On a social level, attitude towards the pandemic is expressed in everyday practices and aspirations connected to one’s own image, of a person managing their own mental health well and coping with the crisis (v. also Weill et al. 2020; Chen, Krieger 2020; Latack, Dozier 1986). Class-related implementation of narratives about self-development and “putting the time to good use” during the social closure have been identified. During lockdown, members of the middle class are investing in new areas of skills, including occupational, they are developing their passions, and—above all—are mending and improving social bonds. Not only loved ones (partners, children and parents), but also frequently

neglected friends and parents are “accompanying” the middle class in their experiencing of the pandemic (mediated by technology) within their network or the community (cf. Marroquin et al. 2020).

In a relational and reflexive sense, the respondents’ higher social status meant that the national quarantine became more of an opportunity than a threat. The respondents are not so much taking advantage of the situation as making use of the resources and capital accumulated beforehand (cf. Domański 2009; Fulcher, Scott 1999; Major, Machin 2018). Narratives of advantage apply more to what distinguishes their situation, and what causes them concern when thinking about the situation among members of lower classes. Just like in studies into earlier “winners and losers” in a crisis (Krzemiński 2010), the long-term consequences of the pandemic for members of the middle class are not yet known. Preliminary conclusions show a growing significance of forms of employment privileging those with full-time jobs, and which for the self-employed could entail a drop in class level. The findings presented here apply to a particular temporal moment, i.e. the first phase of the pandemic, although the methodological construction of the longitudinal study will allow us to continue monitoring reflection in the middle class during the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland. Attitudes and opinions are bound to undergo change as the social status of the respondents changes.

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Abstract

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the life situation in groups of different social status is affected to a dissimilar degree by the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on data collected through online individual in-depth interviews conducted in March 2020 as the first wave of a broader qualitative longitudinal research project, we present certain unobvious benefits of the spring quarantine noticed by members of the Polish middle class. These gains were mapped across four spheres: more time and regeneration; attention to relationships; professional and skills development; and space for reflection with a global perspective. It has been demonstrated that, despite a sense of destabilisation and uncertainty brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the middle class is making use of various kinds of capital for leverage, striving to manage the change and not passively succumb to it. Perception of the situation as serious, paired with concern for the health of loved ones, is not upsetting their general sense of comfort and appreciation of their personal, family, occupational and financial situation. Worries related to experiencing risk are balanced out by the requirement to self-regulate and be proactive.

key words: COVID-19, social class, social status, middle class, qualitative research

WYGRANA KLASY ŚREDNIEJ? MAPOWANIE "KORZYŚCI" Z NARODOWEJ KWARANTANNY W BADANIU JAKOŚCIOWYM

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Abstrakt

Coraz częściej podkreśla się, że pandemia COVID-19 — tak jak wcześniejsze kryzysy zdrowia publicznego — w różnym stopniu wpływa na sytuację życiową grup o odmiennych statusach społecznych. Na podstawie danych z pierwszej fali jakościowego badania podłużnego (marzec 2020), zgromadzonych techniką indywidualnych wywiadów pogłębionych prowadzonych online, autorki przedstawiają

nieoczywiste korzyści z wiosennej kwarantanny, dostrzeżone przez przedstawicieli polskiej klasy średniej. Zyski zmapowano w czterech obszarach: zysk czasu i regeneracja, troska o relacje, rozwój kompetencyjny i zawodowy, przestrzeń na refleksję uwzględniającą globalną perspektywę. Wykazano, że mimo poczucia destabilizacji i niepewności klasa średnia w czasie pandemii COVID-19 dzięki swoim kapitałom korzysta ze zmiany i stara się nią zarządzać, a nie biernie się jej poddawać. Percepcja sytuacji jako poważnej i troska o zdrowie najbliższych nie zaburza ogólnego poczucia komfortu i doceniania sytuacji osobistej, rodzinnej i zawodowo-finansowej. Obawy związane z doświadczeniem ryzyka są równoważone wy-
mogiem samoregulacji i proaktywności.

słowa kluczowe: COVID-19, klasa społeczna, status społeczny, klasa średnia, badanie jakościowe