
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*PIOTR BINDER**Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences***THE SOCIAL EXPERIMENT OF REMOTE WORK FORCED BY THE
PANDEMIC FROM A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE****INTRODUCTION**

The phenomenon of remote work has been the subject of reflection in the social sciences for almost half a century. For most of this time, it has been given the label of “work of the future” (Nilles et al. 1976; Toffler 1980; Messenger 2019). In actual fact, apart from such exceptions as the Netherlands or Sweden, up until the arrival of the pandemic it had only been practised to a small degree in Europe, even in those occupations where such work was possible (cf. Sostero et al. 2020). The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic forced a proliferation of diverse kinds of remote forms of work. This development generated a kind of experiment on a national (and also global) scale, during which whether or not a remote mode of performing work is effective is being verified. It also constitutes a gauge as to how employees are finding their feet in this mode of work.

Two key goals were set for this study. The first was to take a look at the issue of remote work from the perspective of studies to date in the social sciences. Selected aspects of the particularly voluminous English-language literature were taken into account (within the limits imposed by the character of this publication), comparing them with the very few studies elaborated in Polish.

The second was a discussion regarding the findings of qualitative research conducted in spring 2020, the participants of which were 49 people working remotely. One of the fundamental conclusions drawn from the research is that not only can a significant portion of office and administrative work (but not only such) be carried out remotely, but that the respondents—who became the objects of a social experiment during the lockdown—are openminded about continuing with various forms of remote work. Broadening the boundary theory (Ashforth, Kreiner, Fugate 2000), a classic approach for this issue, to embrace the lifestyle perspective (Giddens 1991; Siciński 2002) and stages in the respondents' lives, known as the life-cycle effect (Ammons, Markham 2004), proved very helpful in understanding the experiences of those facing the challenge of remote work.

Heightened interest in remote work is an important development and one worth the attention of researchers, among other things due to the fact that it is connected to the creation of a number of new social practices closely tied to non-occupational contexts and cultural transformations in the broad sense. This article constitutes the first publication based on an extensive longitudinal study that is to be continued.

THE EVOLUTION OF REMOTE WORK

Functioning remotely, which is possible using information and communications technology (ICT), has become one of the symbols of the COVID-19 pandemic and temporary restrictions and regulations introduced in relation to it, the culmination of which was the condition popularly referred to as lockdown. And one of the key elements of living life remotely is remote work. Although it has been the subject of academic reflection for almost half a century, before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic there was very little interest in this phenomenon in the Polish social sciences. This is explained only partly by the fact that it accounted for a meagre share of the labour market in Poland—at only 1%—when the first surveys measuring it were carried out (Kotnarowski 2006). According to Eurostat data, in 2019 the percentage of people working remotely was as high as 8%, and although only 1% comprised persons “usually” working remotely, while the rest worked in such a manner only “sometimes”, it would be hard to describe the phenomenon as marginal (cf. Sostero et al. 2020: 14). These figures place Poland at the forefront of the entire region of Central and Eastern Europe, and close to the EU average, although at the same time leave it far behind such countries

as Sweden or Holland, where the total share of those working remotely “sometimes” and “usually” is over 30%.

Presenting a systematic review of the literature is not this paper’s goal. There are many such works from various periods in source literature (Shin et al. 2000; Bailey, Kurland 2002; Ellison 1999; Messenger 2019; Mokhtarian, Salomon, Choo 2005). However, a few fundamental issues do need to be laid out.

For a start, the literature dealing with remote work is very extensive. Interest was first shown in this topic in the latter half of the 1970s, and although for the first two decades such writings did not generate particularly significant interest, that began to intensify distinctly and steadily in the second half of the 1990s. Over the last decade, the number of annual publications on the subject of remote work, and indexed in such databases as Web of Science, has reached the thousands. These are works in various fields of science, yet the social sciences are playing a major role.

Secondly, the studies on remote work are highly varied. The extensive English-language literature is based on projects conducted using a whole variety of methodological conventions. They included numerous qualitative studies (e.g. B. Steward 2000; Felstead, Jewson 2000; Ammons, Markham 2004), small unrepresentative surveys (frequently conducted among employees of selected institutions and enterprises), as well as large panel-based studies (e.g. Felstead et al. 2001). Alongside studies limited to specific domestic contexts, there are also the substantial resources of international comparative studies on the subject of remote work, both academic (Jackson, Wielen 2002; *inter alios* Felstead, Jewson 2000; Mokhtarian, Sato 1994) and those backed by such international organisations as the International Labour Organization (e.g. Messenger 2019), or the European Commission (e.g. Sostero et al. 2020). It is also easy to find attempts in subject literature at integrating and reanalysing available research findings (e.g. Mokhtarian, Salomon, Choo 2005) or meta-analyses of existing studies (e.g. Gajendran, Harrison 2007).

Various perspectives and levels of interest are distinctly taking shape in the field of research covering remote work: individual, institutional, and social (Ellison 1999: 338). Although a specific research trend and how the topic was conceptualised usually determined what aspects of remote work were tackled by the researchers, one can distinguish themes that regularly reoccur. These include: (1) definitions, measurement and scope of remote work; (2) the management of employees working remotely; (3) how teleworking is reducing commuting; (4) organisational culture and remote workers’ sense of isolation; (5) the boundaries between

“work” and “home”; (6) the impact that teleworking has on the individual concerned and their family (cf. Ellison 1999: 339).

A third issue is the question of terminology. One of the consequences of the rich resources, varied methodology and multi-thematic nature of the research and analyses into remote work has been the flourishing of terminology applied in English-language literature. This matter also has not escaped the attention of researchers, who are systematising their observations on this subject (Felstead, Jewson 2000; Messenger 2019; Mokhtarian, Salomon, Choo 2005). The starting point here was the term *telecommuting* proposed by Jack M. Nilles (1976). Because one of the central elements of his deliberations was the search for alternatives to the regular mass-scale commuting among Americans, even then he proposed combining the terms *telecommunications*, *computers* and *commuting*. A few years later, another term posited by the same author, *telework(ing)*, began being applied more broadly; its author treated it as broader, and embracing any degree whatsoever of elimination of commuting thanks to the usage of information and communication technology (ICT).

Over twenty years later, in a very thorough review of reflection over remote work, Nicole Ellison (1999) maintained the validity of clearly distinguishing remote work understood in broad terms, as work performed outside of an institution’s main premises, but carried out in shared office space (*telework*) and work done at the employee’s home (*work at home*) using various means of communication (Ellison 1999: 338). However, work was evolving so fast that the conceptualisation of remote work became more complicated, as was reflected in the web of terms used. Apart from those mentioned above, one would also come across the usage of terms such as *remote work*, *working from home*, *home-based-work*, and also *mobile work*, *work from anywhere*, *working at a distance* or *flexible workplace*, and numerous others (cf. Watson Fritz, Narasimhan 1995; Felstead et al. 2001).

This growth in terminology has not been limited solely to a poetic level. On the one hand the nuances have reflected the efforts taken by researchers to keep up with the labour market’s transformations. On the other, the significant reconfigurations of the phenomenon have led some researchers to the conclusion that determining a common definition of remote work is no longer possible, and the findings of all studies depend on what questions were posed and what reference framework was adopted (Mokhtarian, Salomon, Choo 2005: 447–48).

A fourth matter is that of Polish studies and literature on the topic of remote work. Prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, remote work was a niche subject in the Polish social sciences. However, this

does not provide grounds for drawing conclusions regarding the social scale of the phenomenon, which—as mentioned above—has not strayed significantly from the average for European Union countries for over a decade now (Sostero et al. 2020: 14).

There have been few Polish papers in the social sciences dedicated to teleworking, and apart from its conceptualisation and matters related to its definition they have focused on telework from the point of view of employers or its social perception, the economic side, and the effectiveness of the staff management process. In particular these were studies in the economic and management sciences. In sociological thought this was tied to a generally diminished interest in the sociology of work from the start of the 1990s, when attention shifted to entrepreneurs and the middle class as the pillars of the market economy (Mrozowicki 2019).

Original studies into remote work in Poland (Gądecki, Żadkowska 2016; Gądecki, Jewdokimow, Żadkowska 2017; Spytek-Bandurska 2015; Kotnarowski 2006) constituted a true rarity. What most of them had in common was that they tended to focus on the limitations and dangers connected to it, and were within the current of critical reflection on remote work as one of the flexible forms of work (concentrating on one dimension of elasticity, the flexibility of the job contract) and accentuated the “perspective of the negative pole/extreme of consequences from performing work remotely” (Jeran 2016: 50).

The monograph by Spytek-Bandurska (2015), who attempted to integrate study findings then available, combining them with a non-representative questionnaire-based study conducted in the years 2013–2014 on a sample of employees and employers, was of a different character. The author defined remote work as something about which much remained unknown, as something rare, modern and untypical, while focusing in her analyses in the questions of the pluses and minuses of such an arrangement, the legal context of the practice, and the prospects for its development (a solution for the future).

As far as I am aware, the only hitherto in-depth study into the experiences of remote workers was conducted by a team led by Jacek Gądecki (2016, 2017), which focused on a very narrow subgroup of remote workers (mainly self-employed individuals or freelancers, working only remotely, in their middle age, and who had already long been carrying out their work at their place of residence).

A consequence of the small number of Polish studies investigating teleworking is the absence of debate on the subject, along with static conceptualisations and terminology that is distinctly less extensive. Terms

encountered in such publications are therefore above all the Polish “telepraca” [telework], “telepracownik” [teleworker] (and sometimes the English equivalent, “teleworker”), used interchangeably with “praca zdalna” [remote work, remote working].

The fifth issue is connected to the experiencing of the pandemic, an unexpected occurrence of enormous scale and consequences, which may undoubtedly be considered in categories of black swan theory (Taleb 2007). The nationwide experiment with this form of performing work, on an unprecedented scale, accompanied by the creation of a new legal and institutional context, has become a part of it. One may therefore assume that, in all likelihood, many findings and assumptions regarding remote work will undergo verification, while knowledge on the subject will—at least in part—become obsolete. Remote work has not only been applied widely in areas where it had already been present for decades, albeit in a very narrow scope; what is new is how it has crossed barriers and acquired a presence in contexts previously reserved for physical presence (the best example of which is that of “tele-appointments” with a doctor).

A consequence of this process will be the need to once again face questions now part of classic thought regarding remote work, but also to formulate new questions. As such, they will be questions both about what type of work may be performed in this manner (cf. Hamblin 1995: 494), and about the degree to which work of a particular profile is feasible for performing remotely, meaning its *teleworkability* (Sostero et al. 2020). Questions regarding the role of computers and the internet in constructing social networks within the work environment are unlikely to lose their topicality (cf. Wellman et al. 1996). The distinct presence of this form of employment on the labour market will also provoke questions about its accessibility in categories of workers’ rights (cf. Mergener 2020: 529–31). Questions regarding the long-term consequences of choosing a remote mode of work on family-work relations, and on one’s own mental health, including in regard to gender (Kim et al. 2020) will also undoubtedly regularly resurface. Finally, it will also certainly provide an impulse for continuing critical reflection regarding remote work, highlighting the weak position of the employee and their exposure to being taken advantage of by their employer, as well as self-exploitation (Huws 2003, 2014).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

There were three sources of inspiration behind the study’s theoretical framework. Because a key role in the analyses was taken by the

respondents' point of view, by how they cope in potentially contradictory social roles in the difficult conditions of remote work forced on them by the epidemic situation and the intermingling of the seemingly separate domains of home and work, boundary theory was adopted as the overall theoretical framework (Ashforth, Kreiner, Fugate 2000; Ammons, Markham 2004; Delanoëje, Verbruggen, Germeys 2019). Pursuant to its assumptions, the effective management of work at home requires constant negotiations for the purpose of maintaining boundaries between roles. It is accepted that the scope of possible solutions fits between two ideal types, meaning total segmentation of home and work (segmentation theory) and their full integration (spillover theory) (Ammons, Markham 2004; Felstead et al. 2001; Ashforth, Kreiner, Fugate 2000). In order to achieve a better understanding of the experiences of remote workers, the above framework was supplemented with a lifestyle perspective (Giddens 1991; Siciński 2002). This was connected to the importance ascribed not only to existing social practices, but also to the process of choosing them and, above all, creating new configurations. The final element was the taking into account at the study design stage of the importance held by the life-cycle effect (Ammons, Markham 2004) in one's experiencing of remote work. This was connected to the assumption that the respondents' life stage held crucial significance for the extent to which the remote work was compatible with their needs. In other words, it was accepted that taking this aspect into account would enable a better understanding of the extent to which remote work may constitute a friendly solution at a given life stage.

A total of 150 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted during the study, lasting approximately one hour on average.¹ They were carried out by a ten-person team of fieldwork researchers from April to June 2020, embracing a period from total lockdown to the lifting of most restrictions. Due to the serious epidemic threat, it was decided that the main technique used for conducting the interviews would be conversation via videoconference, using the online platforms and instant messengers available (cf. Archibald et al. 2019), at the same time allowing for

¹ The interviews were conducted within the project "Uwarunkowania zmiany postaw społecznych i stylu życia w kontekście aktualnych wyzwań związanych ze zmianami klimatu na przykładzie pandemii COVID-19 w Polsce" [*Determinants of change in social attitudes and lifestyle in the context of current challenges related to climate change, taking the COVID-19 pandemic in Poland as an example*] at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, by the team of Piotr Binder, Hanna Bojar and Dariusz Wojakowski, commissioned by the Institute of Environmental Protection—National Research Institute (Contract no. PZ. 022.19.2020.CC-CD).

interview by telephone in the case of technical difficulties or a respondent lacking suitable digital infrastructure. The selection of participants was purposive quota-based, and took into account such attributes as sex, place of residence (regional capital, smaller city, rural), type of life situation (young, independent adults up to 35 years old, parents living with their children, and senior citizens aged 65 and above). Due to the longitudinal character of the study, all participants were asked for their consent to be contacted again in the future. The material gathered was precisely transcribed and then analysed using MAXQDA 2020 software.

REMOTE WORK: WHO

Because the participants were recruited systematically, applying the criteria indicated above, we can precisely define who the persons working remotely were in this study. Of the 150 respondents, almost one in three (49 people) chose the category “I (mostly) work at home” when defining their work situation at the moment of the interview. Including those respondents partly carrying out their work outside of their place of employment in the category of persons working remotely is consistent both with earlier studies on the subject (which have been cited above) and with current such studies (cf. Messenger 2019; Sostero et al. 2020).

Using the terminology for classifying occupations and specialisations, one could say that those working remotely were above all specialists (39 people in total). They represented very diverse sectors, and the term “specialist” often constituted a component of the name of their job position. It has to be pointed out that they were above all lower-level specialists, and that they represented both the private and public sectors. The most numerous group in the study, a group quite varied, comprised specialists in economic matters and management (including specialists in marketing, finances, tenders, human resource management, credit monitoring, risk assessment, export, a project coordinator and a presentation designer). Specialists in information and communications technology (and above all IT specialists and software developers) constituted a distinct and relatively homogeneous subgroup. Apart from them, work was carried out remotely by teachers of different levels and specialisations (school and academic teachers, coaches), specialists in law, social fields and culture (e.g. lawyers, a journalist, a translator), specialists in the technical sciences (e.g. a mechanical engineer, an architect) and specialists in health (e.g. psychotherapists). Groups of respondents doing their work (mostly) remotely, separate from the

specialists, comprised medium and lower-level officials in state and local government administration (3 people) and office staff (also 3). Finally, 4 participants not belonging to the above groups were placed in the conventional category of “others”; they were a joint-owner of a business, an employee in a non-governmental organisation, a physiotherapist, and a professional soldier.

The remote workers were evenly split in terms of sex, with slightly more women (26) than men (23). A clear majority (28 people) worked in one of the nine regional capitals taken into account in the study, while half as many were in smaller urban localities, and only 6 of the remote workers lived rurally. Distinct disproportions in the subgroup were also noted in terms of situation in life. Well over half were young, independent adults, up to 35 years old (28 people). Significantly fewer, 18, belonged to the category of parents, while 3 belonged to the category of seniors. In regard to level of education, the vast majority were persons with higher education (43 people), while 6 had secondary education. None of the respondents working remotely had vocational or primary education.

At the end of this section of remarks, it needs to be emphasised that the possibility of having a direct conversation, together with the technique used (that of in-depth interviewing), unveiled an enormous wealth of occupational scenarios among the respondents, their families, and their loved ones. They frequently revealed a hybrid nature in the solutions applied, where remote work was just one of the components, but also highlighted quite how significant a part of everyday life remote functioning had become.

SOCIAL PERCEPTION OF REMOTE WORK

The accounts given by study participants enabled a kind of reconstruction of the image that remote work had prior to the pandemic. Because of the diverse nature of their experiences, this was not a coherent picture. From the very beginnings of studies into remote work (cf. Nilles et al. 1976; Mirchandani 1999; Ellison 1999) one of the key issues was supervision over and control of work performed outside of the workplace. For decades, managerial staff proved the greatest source of resistance to remote work becoming more widespread, due to their distrust towards the practice — which was also experienced by the participants of this study: *“In general my company was not very positive about it”* (LK_50²). The

² All remarks quoted in this paper are marked with an individual interview code.

most frequent reason was lack of belief in the productivity of work devoid of direct supervision or institutional framework.

A second reoccurring theme in the respondents' accounts was how remote work was treated as a privilege, as a prestigious solution only available to a few employees. Before the pandemic, remote work was in many cases treated as a rare good. Access to it could highlight the prestige and independence of an employee, their high position in the hierarchy. Remote work could also constitute a kind of resource to which one could acquire access by knowing the right people, by being in good relations with management: *"I had the opportunity, although when I could do something like that it was usually treated as a favour for me"* (OD_122). Thus portrayed, remote work—despite being a solution rarely put into practice—was simultaneously well-recognised by employees. The treatment of teleworking as a privilege, in turn, was coupled with the practice being viewed distrustfully, and this is not specific solely to Poland (cf. Mergener 2020).

A third perception, also distinctly accentuated in the material gathered, was one of a disparaging attitude towards remote work. Unlike the findings of the research conducted by Gądecki and his team (Gądecki, Jewdokimow, Żadkowska 2017), this study revealed a clear mechanism of self-deprecation on the part of the respondents, on whom the remote work was imposed by the circumstances, and who from the moment of switching to remote working described their work at least to some extent as substandard. In this view, work could be split into real work (which involved going to the office) and that part of one's work that boiled down to "sitting at home": *"The first month was such that I had to; I went into work for a bit, and I was at home with my child for a bit"* (AND_1). How this experience was appraised frequently changed as time passed.

The themes outlined here were frequently like associations, occasionally stereotypes, which constituted a starting point for assessing the experience of working remotely, which involved the entirety of experiences related to it.

THE BEGINNINGS: WORK IN EXTREME CONDITIONS

The thing that fundamentally distinguishes previous studies into remote work from analyses conducted during the pandemic is the fact that the switch to this form of work was, in most cases, not a matter of choice for the respondents. Although most study participants who switched to remote working had had previous experience with it, until then it had usually been only sporadic. The main difference was therefore the scale

of this experience: *“Yes, so I have worked remotely before, but not as intensively as now. Today the remote work is much more intense, but I did have such incidents beforehand as well. I guess that’s how I’d describe it”* (JT_36). Even in the case of businesses where the option of remote work was a permanent part of their system of organising employment, it only accounted for a small portion (e.g. four days a month, KC_18), and in most cases was not made full use of. The exceptions here were respondents with a great deal of experience working remotely, or working in sectors where recent years have seen a trend where face-to-face contact with customers has been shrinking (e.g. interior architect, KZ_92).

The combination of the imposition of such work with its intensity, and in most cases with no advance warning, meant that many of the respondents were clearly overwhelmed by the remote work in its initial phase. In addition, those living with minors at home had their situation complicated further by the necessity to look after their children and organise their education due to creches, nurseries, and schools being closed. The scale of these changes, along with the manner in which they were introduced, resulted in the experiencing of remote work frequently evoking powerful and sometimes extreme emotional responses. They were triggered by such seemingly prosaic matters as not having a table to work at, or being unable isolate oneself from loved ones and concentrate on one’s work, and so a lack of the basic conditions required for working effectively. The unsuitability of conditions at home for working remotely was felt particularly keenly in families with children of pre-school age and in their early years of primary school, since they required much more of their parents’ attention.³

Starting remote work also opened up a profusion of related concerns in many of the respondents’ lives. These applied to very diverse areas, from the need to acquire new skills (including digital), and the stress connected to being unable to contact and consult colleagues face to face, to (paradoxically) greater transparency and monitoring of work efficiency when performing one’s job using digital communications.

The switch to a remote mode of working was treated as easier where respondents had already experienced such work, and it was common for them to perceive the change as evolution in the right direction.

³ Only occasionally was the matter of limited access to computer hardware emphasised in the material collected. Worries related to spending too much time at the computer, both by those doing their work in this way, and by school-aged children participating in online school lessons, were expressed much more distinctly.

Nevertheless, in the case of many occupations and job positions, the remote work experiment proved a test of the scope to which their work could be performed effectively remotely. This was an important aspect, since in the overall appraisal of the remote work experience it constituted a starting point for reflection as to how the process could be optimised.

NEW RITUALS, A NEW ORDER, AND SETTING BOUNDARIES

Even in the early stages of research into remote work, researchers were indicating that persons working remotely wanted to set clear boundaries between home responsibilities and work-related activity (cf. inter alia Mirchandani 1998: 175 et seq.). The participants in the survey analysed here were in an exceptional situation, since most had been forced to switch to remote work by circumstances. As such, they had to face a new situation that they had not consciously chosen. Their practices related to performing their work at home were subjected to dynamics similar to the practices among those who worked in such a way by choice. Following an initial period of uncertainty and even shock, the respondents progressed to the phases of adaptation and acclimatisation. And, gradually, they created a new order.

In many cases this was related to having to adjust to time frames defined by their employers. This could mean, for example, having to perform their work within set hours, entailing an obligation to log in to the relevant system, program or instant messenger, in order to demonstrate that they were active and available.

The new situation triggered a broad spectrum of approaches to working from home. At one extreme were those starting work on their laptop barely moments after waking. And at the other were respondents who emphasised how they were “at work” by donning formal attire: *“As for my day, well I strive to get up early and get ready as normal for work; I’m working remotely, entirely remotely, yet despite that I work... I get up earlier, do my usual preparations for work, I don’t know, shirt, breakfast, no pyjamas in bed, just working as normal in my job position”* (PB_66).

When talking about their few, or sometimes even a dozen or so weeks of remote experience, some respondents indicated a certain evolution in their practices, moving towards a more distinct emphasising of boundaries, both physical and mental (concentration), which enabled a reduction of the stress connected to fulfilling varied and conflicting roles (e.g. that of a partner or spouse and that of an employee, or as a worker and as a parent).

This aspiration to maintain a kind of work hygiene clearly reflected their need to feel that their efforts were meaningful. Striving to split time and space between “home” and “office”, and creating the atmosphere of work, was provoked by the most common source of discomfort noted among the respondents: that of work and home life merging, and the feeling that by spending work time at home, paradoxically “*you’re a little bit at work the whole time*” (JZ_127).

This is related to issues of role conflicts and the blurring of boundaries, classic in research into remote work (Woerness 1978; Mirchandani 1998; Gądecki, Jewdokimow, Żadkowska 2017; Ellison 1999).⁴ In regard to the order which, for most of the respondents, was only just being developed, one could sometimes speak of a certain aspiration for establishing a new order and testing out various options, such as shifting one’s work to a time of day after one’s home duties: “*to begin with we’d sit down a lot in the evenings, simply working*” (PB_63).

The tightening of boundaries coupled with a more distinct separation into “work” and “home” was, in turn, frequently a process that bore an emotional cost reflected later in home life or professional activity (cf. Delanoëje, Verbruggen, Germeys 2019). The experiences of our survey’s participants indicate that the scale of the consequences, in particular those of a negative hue, depended on a number of factors—an important role in which was played by the type of the respondents’ situation in life, the place in their life cycle, which in turn had a major impact on their lifestyle.

NEW RHYTHM IN THE CONTEXT OF LIFESTYLE

Issues discussed to date, starting from people’s perception of remote work, through the initial stage of feeling overwhelmed with working from home, to new rituals and the desire to establish boundaries, varying in strength, have resulted in many of the respondents having similar experiences. The main thing distinguishing them from one another was the type of life situation and the associated different structures of opportunities and constraints (cf. Javornik, Kurowska 2017; Suwada 2021), above all as young adults or parents living with their children.⁵

⁴ Against this background, there is a distinctly evolving problem of the impact that gender has on ability to reconcile home chores with work responsibilities (cf. Woerness 1978), which is the subject of a separate paper (Binder, 2021—in progress).

⁵ Three seniors carrying out work remotely were excluded from the above considerations due to the fact that all had reached retirement age, and their transition to retirement had been upset by the coronavirus pandemic.

The criteria for recruiting young adults for participation in the study, alongside the criterion of age (up to 35 years old), included being financially independent of their parents and not having children of their own. For this respondent group, the transition to a remote mode of working involved greater control over their work environment and a much larger time budget. They could allocate time saved on commuting above all to themselves, for satisfying their own (individual) needs, such as sleep, physical exercise, personal development or entertainment. Likewise, the majority of people working remotely crossed the fluid boundaries between “work” and “home chores”, doing “other things” during work time, such as the laundry, coffee, or preparing meals. At the same time, only respondents in the younger group complained about having no access to such services as their company’s catering, which had previously resolved the matter of preparing at least some of their meals: *“When I’m at work I use the company’s catering service, but when working in this remote system I’m forced to cook”* (KC_23).

However, a larger time budget among the young adults did not mean that it was used “effectively”. Above all, the young people worked in their pyjamas, as mentioned above. They also recalled how in a situation where they found it difficult to mobilise, they interweaved their work with pleasures (such as computer games, or television serials, etc.), which resulted in their actual work shifting to the late evening, which they sometimes found bothersome and tiring. Regardless of this, many of the study’s young participants admitted that such a solution was, in various aspects, *“simply more convenient”* for them (KZ_93).

An evident drawback of work at home coupled with the lockdown was the harmful impact of this combination on social life, which constitutes an important part of their lifestyle, including in a professional context. Young people in particular missed such interaction. It was also almost exclusively the young respondents who complained about having no access to cultural institutions. When considering these issues, they also emphasised the importance of the specificity of their disposition, pointing out that remote work is not a good solution *“for going-out types of people”* (JZ_110).

The situation among the respondents in the category of parents was fundamentally different. The dominating theme in most of their accounts was that of difficulties resulting from having to simultaneously do their job from home and look after their children, while having no access to nurseries or schools (as was the case between March and May 2020). Their accounts were largely saturated with remarks testifying to the urgent problem of role conflict and the far-reaching difficulties of keeping parental duties and home chores separate from their work performed

remotely from home: *“There’s do denying it, it’s very hard for me to reconcile all those functions, with school, creche and work all in one place”* (JT_33).

Unlike the young and independent adults, the parents did not gain greater control over their working space and conditions. A problem in their homes, frequently small flats, was finding available room at a table where they could sit down with their laptop, not to mention a comfortable desk. They also had to cope with the fact that during the day, doing any work whatsoever at the computer in conditions of quiet and concentration was frequently simply impossible. The clash of these two factors meant that the parents also—although for different reasons—frequently worked in the evenings and at night: *“We have a young child who takes up so much time that sometimes it’s hard to sit down and work for an hour during the day”* (KC_19).

The parents’ remarks testified not only to them suffering significant deficiencies in their time budget, but also to changes in how this budget was organised and experienced. The restriction on mobility combined with frequently spending time at home resulted, in many cases, in the rhythm of life slowing down, including a later start to the day, as well as an intensification of family bonds: *“I can also see that this family needs it, I mean I know there was a lot before the epidemic, that we all had lots of various extra activities, and it seemed that it was time we were spending together, but it wasn’t, in fact there was no such time when we were truly together, when we were truly—I don’t know—like we are now, sitting together on the sofa, having the time to muck around or play those board games. I’d even call that invaluable. And I don’t know if we really needed an epidemic to notice that”* (PB_71).

This aspect was most often something the respondents accepted with satisfaction, and was not without impact on their overall reflections regarding their experiences.

APPRAISAL OF THE EXPERIENCE AND PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

As long as quarter a century ago, Heather Hamblin indicated when analysing her research conducted among office staff that the same arguments could be treated as speaking both “for” and “against” performing one’s work remotely (Hamblin 1995: 488 et seq.). This dependency has also been reflected in this study’s material. Flexible working time may be perceived both as an advantage, raising one’s sense of having control over time, and as a drawback due to the demotivating character of no direct control over the employee. Then the fact of having small children could be treated as excluding the option of remote work due to the powerful conflict between the roles of parent and employee,

or on the contrary, as the only solution enabling the two to be better reconciled. There were many more such examples, and they included such diverse matters as the possibility of face-to-face interaction with colleagues (or this being impossible), the greater transparency of work performed using online communication, or the employee's disposition as mentioned above.

An important observation from the first round of these studies was the fact that only two of those who performed their work (mostly) at home stated categorically that, in the long-term, they would not like to work remotely. The vast majority of the participants in the study, who had been forced by circumstances to begin working remotely, gave a neutral or quite positive overall appraisal of their experience: *"It would be hard to say, as on the one hand it has a few strong advantages, although it also has a few strong drawbacks, so it's hard for me to say which direction prevails"* (KZ_95); *"Although I have no reservations regarding the mode of remote working in itself, there are certain limitations"* (KC_23).

Questions regarding the overall appraisal of their experience frequently triggered long, multi-themed answers from the respondents, in which they frequently provided a detailed summary of their own experiences. An analysis of these answers led to one more conclusion. The respondents claimed that they would be much more satisfied with their remote work if it were counterbalanced by a portion of their work being performed elsewhere than at home: *"We thought about that once, that three days of remote work and two days in the office, that would be OK. Or at least turning up at the office once a week, to have a chat"* (JZ_120).

Reflection over the optimal proportions of work performed at home and outside of the home was a frequent reaction, one that seems to an even greater degree to emphasise the study participants' openness towards this mode of work. At the same time this had been a type of reaction indicated by researchers at relatively early stages of reflection on remote work (Cross, Raizman 1986; Hamblin 1995; Huws, Korte, Robinson 1992). The question about the durability of such opinions remains a separate issue. We know from source literature that in the initial period employees who have opted for remote work tend to focus on its positive aspects, which was described using the term "honeymoon effect" (Ellison 1999: 350). Verification of this issue will only be possible during further studies.

Finally, the experiencing of remote work inclined the respondents to conduct a more general reflection regarding their working lives. A reoccurring observation was that the remote mode of working was the future of many occupations. The reactions of some employers,

probing their employees' openness towards such options in the immediate future right from the initial phase of the pandemic, reinforced the respondents' reasoning. The interesting thing is that their thoughts extended beyond the confines of office or administrative work, or the IT sector. Some respondents, going by their own experiences, concocted plans overstepping the traditional borders of what is generally perceived as feasible when working remotely: *"Of course massage means a more physical interaction, although I have strived to make sure of having online practice of a kind of self-massage, meaning massage using some kind of appliance. [In the future—P.B.] I would like to leave small online activities, save them"* (OD_133). Although there were few such examples, they corresponded well with the *teleworkability* concept already mentioned (cf. Sostero et al. 2020), that is, reflection on the degree to which a particular kind of work can be performed remotely.

The period of lockdown and remote work also enabled the respondents to better perceive the number of possibilities already available for sorting things out remotely, and encouraged them to make use of them. Thanks to tele-appointments with a doctor, or tele-visits to public offices, the respondents could formulate expectations concerning the further expansion of the range of matters resolvable via digital means. It would seem that this could constitute an impulse for the reorganisation of certain aspects of the life of society, such as the labour market, but also broader changes furthering modernisation.

CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken the foundations of society as a whole, affecting all of its different aspects. This also applies to the job market, with remote working—previously an atypical, niche solution—taking on an unprecedented scale. The epidemic threat led to restrictions to mobility being imposed on society, and then performing work remotely was frequently the only way to continue employment.

Despite remote work being the subject of reflection in the social sciences for almost half a century, it has generated little interest before now in Poland. This is reflected unambiguously in the scant publications and the rare research studies concerning remote work in sociology. Against this background, there was already a distinct disproportion in the pre-pandemic reality between the scale of this practice on the job market (including in Poland) and the interest shown in it by researchers.

The empirical portion of this paper is based on the findings of the first round of qualitative research into the social consequences of the

COVID-19 pandemic. Boundary theory, a classic approach in research into remote work, provided the overall theoretical framework, and right from the study design stage was supplemented with a lifestyle perspective, with reflection on the significance of the respondents' current life stage (the life-cycle effect). This rendered it possible to take people practising very diverse occupations into account in the study, persons simultaneously sharing social and demographic characteristics strongly connected to their preferred lifestyles. Such an approach proved helpful in broadening the spectrum of phenomena being analysed, while taking into account not only those working solely remotely, but also those combining remote work with work performed intramurally, also proved justified.

Such an approach seems to provide an opportunity for breaking the mould in thought regarding remote work. It allows for a shift from questions about who does remote work (especially on a full-time basis) and about the consequences of remote work for the actual employees (due to the persona and social costs they bear) towards questions regarding the scope in which particular occupations can be practised remotely (their teleworkability) and the life-cycle phases when work can be carried out remotely without exposing one to the costs mentioned above. The significance of these questions steps far beyond issues related to the organisation of the labour market, since a greater presence of working life in the home (which can be expected) will bear fruit in the development of new social practices, practices that will remain closely connected to the dynamic cultural changes taking place.

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Abstract

This paper has two principal goals. The first is reflection over the available source literature, indicating the scant interest in it in the Polish social sciences, and in sociology in particular. The second goal is to present the findings from the first round of qualitative research conducted during lockdown, focusing on the experiences of people working remotely. The analyses of the material accumulated focused on how remote work was imagined prior to the pandemic, on the shock of transition to working remotely, on how a new rhythm took shape in the context of lifestyles, and on a comprehensive appraisal of the remote work experience, including prospects for the future. The findings indicate that despite the dramatic circumstances behind the imposition of remote working and the enormous difficulties experienced by the respondents, they are openminded regarding various options for continuing work in a remote mode. At the same time it proved pertinent to supplement boundary theory as the theoretical interpretative framework with a perspective of the respondents' lifestyles and current place in life (the *life-cycle effect*), allowing for a better understanding of the respondents' experiences and outlining prospects for rewording the schematic representations of this social phenomenon.

key words: remote work, teleworkability, COVID-19, boundary theory, videoconferencing, CAQDAS

SPOŁECZNY EKSPERYMENT PRACY ZDALNEJ WYMUSZONEJ PANDEMIĄ W PERSPEKTYWIE BADAŃ JAKOŚCIOWYCH

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Abstrakt

Artykuł ma dwa zasadnicze cele. Pierwszym jest refleksja nad dostępną literaturą przedmiotu na temat pracy zdalnej ze wskazaniem na niewielkie zainteresowanie nią w polskich naukach społecznych, zwłaszcza na gruncie socjologii. Cel

drugi to prezentacja wniosków płynących z pierwszej rundy badania jakościowego zrealizowanego w czasie lockdownu, skoncentrowana na doświadczeniach osób pracujących zdalnie. W analizach zgromadzonego materiału skupiono się na wyobrażeniach na temat pracy zdalnej przed pandemią, szoku przejścia na tryb pracy zdalnej, kształtowaniu się nowego rytmu w perspektywie stylów życia oraz całościowej ocenie doświadczenia pracy zdalnej, w tym perspektywach na przyszłość. Wyniki wskazują, że pomimo dramatycznych okoliczności narzucenia pracy zdalnej i ogromnych trudności doświadczanych przez badanych są oni otwarci na różne warianty kontynuacji pracy w trybie zdalnym. Jednocześnie zasadne okazało się uzupełnienie teorii granic jako teoretycznej ramy interpretacyjnej o perspektywę stylów życia oraz miejsca badanych w biografii (*life-cycle effect*), co pozwala na lepsze zrozumienie doświadczeń badanych i zarysowuje perspektywę przeformułowania schematycznych ujęć tego zjawiska społecznego.

słowa kluczowe: praca zdalna, *teleworkability*, COVID-19, teoria granic, wideokonferencje, CAQDAS