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Working Lives During the Pandemic.
Qualitative Evidence on Coping among Young and Older Workers in Poland

Abstract: This study offers a sociological contribution to the literature on coping strategies on the labor market, with an explicit emphasis on the crisis context and the resulting job insecurity. The COVID-19 pandemic has narrowed employment opportunities and worsened working conditions for many individuals who, in response, needed to cope with the unfolding changes. Based on a qualitative dataset comprising 70 in-depth interviews collected in 2021 in Poland, this paper sheds light on the two main types of coping strategies, namely emotional and problem-solving coping. Juxtaposing coping strategies with age, we discuss how younger and older workers in Poland handle work uncertainty. The paper contributes new data on coping strategies in the context of work-lives and offers evidence on the coping processes emerging in response to the pandemic.

Keywords: coping strategies, coping devices, job insecurity, COVID-19, Poland

Introduction

Much has already been written about the unprecedented and multifaceted nature of the societal shifts caused by the coronavirus pandemic (e.g., Bellotti et al. 2021; Moen et al. 2020), with researchers quickly realizing the large scope and significance of the global crisis for the labor market and individual work-related experiences (e.g., Gardawski et al. 2022; McFadden et al. 2021). Pronounced impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labor market in Poland (and beyond) spanned, firstly, the restrictive measures implemented by the government to prevent the spread of the virus, which were followed by the (temporary and permanent) closures of many businesses and a looming economic crisis with divergent sectoral implications (e.g. OECD 2021; GUS 2021; Adamowicz 2022).

Secondly, the mentioned circumstances influenced the situation of the workers and resulted, generally, in altered conditions of employment. Noteworthily, Adamowicz (2022) argued that the Polish government's 'anti-crisis shields and financial shields' were successful towards assisting businesses and employers, while also judging the protections as suboptimal in regard to workers, especially those employed on the basis of civil law contracts and the self-employed. The crisis' consequences were greater for those who were already precarious prior to the pandemic, as well as for the young people and women

(Gardawski et al. 2022; OECD 2021). Although the official statistics (GUS 2022a) did not prove the significant increase in unemployment during pandemic (5.2% in December 2019, 6.8% in 2020, and 5.8% in 2021), Eurofound (2021) studies state that in April 2020 almost 30% of Poles reported losing their jobs, and another 50% worked fewer hours. According to Gardawski et al. (2022: 24), the official statistics can overlook broader pandemic-related changes within labor, particularly when it concerns the decrease in job quality.

Thirdly, a new division in the world of work appeared "between those privileged enough to be able to work remotely and retain their jobs, those deemed essential who continued to work outside their homes, and those regarded as nonessential who were laid off" (Loustaunau et al. 2021: 857). In Poland, the scale of working-from-home remained small, with the peak of 9.3% remote workers during the first lockdown, i.e., in the second quarter of 2020 (GUS 2021: 16). It dropped to 6.9% by December 2021 (GUS 2022b) and to 3.8% by June 2022 (GUS 2022c). In the context of these three key structural issues, this article focuses on the micro-level and tracks how individuals perceive and deal with the pandemic-related consequences in their work lives. We argue that changes connected to employment can be classified in various ways—as structural or psychological, minor or major, immediate or more long-term—overall suggesting that individual experiences are complex, heterogeneous and diversified by one's socio-demographic characteristics, pre-pandemic job situation and personal history (Adamowicz 2022; Bellotti et al. 2021; Gardawski et al. 2022; McFadden et al. 2021; Moen et al. 2020).

Regardless of which particular issues—for instance job and income loss, shift to remote work or health-related fears at work—affect distinct groups or individuals, one of the key questions that should be comprehensively addressed pertains to how we have been coping with the pandemic and its aftermath (Fluharty and Fancourt 2021). In this paper, we shed light on coping strategies in a specific context of work lives during the crisis in Poland. In addition to contributing knowledge on pandemic-specific features of emotional (including avoidant) and problem-solving coping, we also investigate work experiences through the prism of age. On the basis of qualitative interviews (n = 70) conducted in 2021 with young adults (aged 18–35) and their parents in Poland, we answer the research question: How do young and older adults in Poland cope with the COVID-19 crisis as a stressor in their work-lives? Our hypothesis was that the career stage is connected to divergent contexts of school-to-work transitions, thus indicating that individuals of different ages would experience the pandemic-related work changes differently. Moreover, taking into account that young people have been particularly affected by the pandemic crisis (OECD 2021; Gardawski et al. 2022), we expected the younger generation would be "forced" to employ more coping strategies to deal with the new situation.

In the following sections, we first summarize existing research dedicated to coping strategies and complete the state-of-the-art by presenting emerging findings related to work, age and coping during the coronavirus spread. After that, we present the study, methods and analytical strategies applied to the data. In the empirical part, we outline key coping strategies adopted by the interviewees in response to the pandemic at and around work. Ensuing discussions and conclusions elaborate on the role of age in coping vis-á-vis broader employment pathways.

Coping Strategies, Labor Market and the Pandemic

Coping happens when people wish to protect themselves against harmful or problematic social experiences (Fritsch 2015). As such, coping strategies comprise efforts towards being able to better tolerate, minimize or overcome stressful situations (Castilhos et al. 2017; Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Lazarus (1966) sees coping as a process consisting of two stages: the appraisal of the harmful/threatening event and the secondary appraisal of one's coping options, which could, ultimately, be translated into coping strategies needed to deal with the situation. Developing on this, Pearlin and Schooler (1978: 2) state that coping may entail eliminating the problem, managing it, or neutralizing its meaning.

Seminal work by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) underlines that any examination of coping strategies should recount a specific stressor behind coping action responses. The stressor in this case is the COVID-19 pandemic (see, e.g. McFadden et al. 2021) seen as a long-term and variable sort of stress. Following Lazarus and Folkman (1984), two broad types of coping strategies that can be studied in the pandemic context are problem-focused coping and emotion-focused strategies. Using the former, individuals proactively mobilize resources through direct action and planning, whereas emotion-focused coping, also related closely (or even equated) in the literature to avoidant-coping (e.g., Christensen et al. 2006; McFadden et al. 2021), spans emotional expression or withdrawal, allocating blame, denial, but also self-care (Castilhos et al. 2017).

Quantitative operationalizations of the problem-solving coping (typically considered more effective, e.g., Lazarus and Folkman 1984) include assessments of a person's readiness towards finding work (or better work), starting one's own business, further education, networking, and structuring one's days around the typical workday schedule (Christensen et al. 2006). These often center on resilience, scientific approaches to one's situation, amassing expertise or consultations (Savitsky et al. 2020). As an obverse to problem-solving, emotional coping relates more to passivity and deferment, for instance not giving due consideration to work options, people-avoidance, as well as self-blame (Christensen et al. 2006). Emotional coping can signify mental disengagement, yet also spans potentially useful short-term coping via spiritual practices or humor (Savitsky et al. 2020).

Waters and Moore (2002) observed that emotional coping is more common among the unemployed, young and recent hires. In comparison, continuously employed individuals tend to rely on problem-focused coping. While resourcefulness and self-efficacy behind problem-focused coping generally make individuals more adaptive, there is much debate about the ultimate advantage of one coping strategy over the other: avoidance/emotions might offset main stressors in the first phase of the crisis, yet might not be as productive as problem-solving coping over time (e.g., Baker and Berenbaum 2007; Fluharty and Fancourt 2021).

A meta-review by Cheng et al. (2014) adds 'coping flexibility' as a longitudinal measure of an individual's ability to adjust coping strategies over time. Instead of ranking coping approaches, the emphasis can be placed on the correctness of the strategy-situation fit in the face of change. This transpires in research on work-related strategies characterized by a strong argument for discerning 'coping strategies' from 'coping devices' (Anderson et

al. 1994). 'Strategies' underline more long-term or prospective delineation of plans and actions towards changing one's position in response to the difficulty, whereas 'devices' might be ad-hoc measures related to flexibilization; an example would be to temporarily broaden the scope of acceptable career choices without necessarily abandoning previous plans or dreams (Hyman et al. 2005).

Sociological work focuses on social rather than psychological dispositions of coping, often seeing it as related to class and socio-economic status (Castilhos et al. 2017) that engenders certain structural constraints. In biographical research of disadvantaged classes, coping strategies belong to the broader concept of life strategies, developed by individuals reflexively in a given structural and cultural context (Mrozowicki 2011). Although coping strategies might appear to be linked to a particular 'stressor'—for instance unemployment or poverty—they rather reflect multi-layered approaches to challenges within social settings (Anderson et al. 1996; Snel and Staring 2001).

Socio-demographic factors and past experiences contribute to certain coping strategies. In the large-scale study of long-term unemployment, Christensen et al. (2006) found that low educational attainment—more so than economic strain—predisposes individuals to the considerably lower use of problem-solving coping. In their meta-review, Sverke et al. (2006) suggest that low-status job-holders (often with lower levels of education) forge fewer coping resources (e.g., amassed knowledge and information, social network, savings), even though blue-collar workers report higher levels of job insecurity. Financial problems have dual effects on coping as they may intensify job searches (i.e., be related to problem-solving coping), yet prolonged monetary difficulties generate depressive symptoms and, ultimately, result in avoidance.

Middle-class employees have habitual dispositions towards problem-solving coping (Raito and Lahelma 2015) and gendered dispositions of coping exist in that problem-focused and active coping is less common among women than men (Fritsch 2015; Leana and Feldman 1990). Intersectional perspective was, however, recently employed in qualitative research by Bowleg et al. (2008) and indicated more nuanced results: sexual orientation, gender and race all acted as work stressors for Black lesbian women who effectively coped by both avoidance (hiding their identity) and problem-solving (through education and disclosure, coming out and underlining their racial identity).

As within other crises, work during the COVID-19 pandemic is connected to over-lapping employment uncertainty and job insecurity understood as 'threats to valued job features, deterioration of working conditions, or loss of career opportunities' (Mantler et al. 2005: 200), as well as losing the sense of control over one's employment trajectory. Recounting a framework proposed by Shoss (2017), job insecurity hinges on stress, job preservation motivations, social exchange and proactive coping, yet how these mechanisms are individually used translates to different outcomes. As Mantler et al. (2005: 202) clarify, the employment status might differentiate coping strategies during uncertain times, but both employees and the unemployed are worried: either about possible layoffs and salary losses, or the reality of having no income and limited chances of finding work (see also Sverke et al. 2006). A capacity to identify appropriate coping strategies for an uncertain job market can assist individuals in creating positive outcomes (including better employment or career changes), even in the face of unemployment (Latack and Dozier 1986).

Emerging research on coping strategies and work during the COVID-19 expectedly shows that problem-solving approaches can work as protective mechanisms in the face of the crisis (McFadden et al. 2021). During periods of heightened insecurity, workers perceive their employment as being at risk (Hellgren et al. 1999) and might develop coping strategies in response to either already emerging or just anticipated challenges (Lazarus, Folkman 1984). For instance, a perception of job insecurity might prompt workers to pre-emptive job-exits, so as to create predictability (Bellotti et al. 2021). Furthermore, notable age differences in coping with job insecurity during crises exist, as presented by Bellotti et al. (2021) in a rapid meta-review. The authors argue that younger workers were more prone to sudden, pandemic-caused unemployment early on, yet they tended to rebound quicker than older workers, for whom finding new occupations after being let go was much harder (see, Moen et al. 2020) and intersected with their societal perception as frail and vulnerable. In light of these findings, it is justified to explore interlinks of coping processes with age among workers and this paper tackles this question through qualitative methods in the context of Poland.

Study & Methods

The data stems from the multi-component study titled "Becoming an adult in times of ultra-uncertainty: intergenerational theory of 'shaky' transitions" (acronym: ULTRAGEN). More specifically, here we used data from the WP2 component, which entails qualitative longitudinal research (QLR see: Neale 2020) with young adults and their parents, with in-depth individual interviews (IDIs) being used for data collection. Given the ongoing epidemic, digital research methods were employed through online interviewing conducted via Google Meet. Before fieldwork commenced, the project was approved by the relevant Research Ethics Committee at the implementing institution. Comprehensive project ethics information package and online informed consent forms were sent to participants prior to each interview. While young adults and their parents were interviewed separately, special care was taken to clarify matters of internal confidentiality in researching family clusters (Gabb 2010).

The first wave of the study (W1; May–November 2021)[1] entailed 70 IDIs with young adults (ages 18–35[2]; n = 35) and their parents (ages 41–66; n = 35). Participant recruitment followed a purposeful qualitative sampling and accounted for several criteria. First, all interviewed young adults had to reside in larger cities, as we hypothesized that spatial density would signify a more pronounced threat, given that city-life precludes social isolation, e.g., predisposing working urbanites to commuting and frequenting populated spaces (shops, offices). Second, heterogeneity and balance guided the selection process for gender, education and age (two cohorts: 18–25 and 26–35) for younger participants. Thirdly, gender and variability of socio-economic backgrounds was also strived for in the parents' generation. The interviewees' characteristics are presented in *Appendix 1* at the end of the article. The average duration of an interview was 85 minutes, with the range of

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[1] The study will include two waves of interviews, with W2 in the summer of 2023. One asynchronous exchange was completed in March-April 2022 in response to the new crisis of the war in Ukraine.

[2] Although we defined young adults as being in the 18–35 age group, we learnt that one pre-recruited person has just turned 36. We decided to keep her case in the study.

48 to 120 minutes for the entire dataset. By the time the W1 of the project started, online interviewing was an established way of data collection and the research team did not see it as obstructive to the depth of the collected narratives.

For the younger participants, sixteen men, eighteen women and one non-binary person took part in the study. Twenty-one were younger than 25, while the average age for all participating young adults stood at 24.2. In terms of education, seven were continuing or finishing secondary education during W1, nine were enrolled in Bachelor-level university programs, eight were in pursuit of further (Master's or PhD) degrees. Seven respondents had exited education with a secondary school or vocational diploma and were not continuing studies at the time of the interview, and four completed their studies already. Nine out of thirty-five young interviewees were inactive on the labor market at the time of the interview, yet they have had previous work experiences (typically recent summer jobs) to reflect on. Among the twenty-four young workers, thirteen had full-time and eleven part-time posts; one person was doing an internship and one was an entrepreneur. Ten interviewees lost or changed their jobs during the pandemic.

In the parents' generation, there are twenty-one women and fourteen men. They are from 41 to 66-years-old, whilst the average mother/father participant is 51-years-old. Education-wise, twenty-one of the older interviewees have university degrees, thirteen have secondary diplomas and one respondent had vocational training. The vast majority (thirty-three) were still active on the labor market, with greater preponderance for stable positions. Although almost all were employed, twenty belonged to the category of professionals, nine held working-class jobs and three identified as entrepreneurs.

Interpretivist paradigm and inductive approaches to data guided the data analyses (Miles and Huberman 1994). Audio-recorded interviews have been meticulously transcribed and thematic analysis was conducted via framework grids (Neale 2020), with the focus on the answers to questions about work and pandemic, with special attention to reactions, actions, emotions and evaluations of one's situation. Preliminary case-summaries were done with notes and vignettes (Miles and Huberman 1994), whilst thematically- and conceptually-ordered approaches have been used for data displays. Cross-case comparisons focused on age ensued to foster cross-validations. Importantly, in the paper we focus on intergenerational (age-based) rather than intrafamily comparisons, which is further justified below.

Coping with COVID-19 at Work

In the analysis, we have determined accounts of both broad types of coping strategies. The first strategy encompasses emotional/avoidant coping, which varied mostly in relation to age of the workers. The second type of active/problem-solving coping was more age-independent but revealed a notable distinction between ad-hoc coping devices (short-term actions) and coping strategies (long-term outlook).

Looking at the entire dataset, we have discovered that emotional coping is a dominant strategy for 24 interviewees, with the numbers split evenly for the parents' and young generations. The numbers themselves are not very telling here, as an in-depth look at the forms of emotional coping revealed a more fine-grained age-based variability of the

chosen emotional coping strategies and devices. Older respondents adopted problem-solving coping a tad more frequently and, as expected, differences transpired in regard to the prevalence of mixed/both types of coping being leveraged. On the latter, it was clear that the older workers in the study had a greater capacity for using emotional and problem-solving coping in parallel. Regarding gender, we found a relevant difference in the younger generation, wherein the majority of young women relied on problem-solving coping, whereas young men had a greater preponderance towards emotional and mixed approach. For the family dyads, there appeared to be little evidence of intergenerational transmission of coping and in a very small number of parent-young adult pairs the dominant coping strategies were aligned, which also informed the analysis focused on age rather than family connections. Indicators of the types stemming from the analysis are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Work-related coping strategies & devices in response to COVID-19

Behaviors / indicators		
Emotional coping	**Age-independent strategies**	**Strategies linked to age**
	• change-avoidance: managing job insecurity by anchoring/ stabilizing one's position at the current workplace • denial: reluctance to talk about the pandemic (and particularly its impact on work); rejecting the view that changes are happening • allocating blame: self-blame and blaming external circumstances for one's position, sometimes paired with irrational views • avoidant reactions: withdrawal, apathy, inertia	**Young workers:** • deferment: delaying labor market entry / participation • detachment: taking oneself out of the labor market by focusing on other life spheres (e.g., education) **Older workers:** • detachment & self-care: focus on one's well-being
Problem-solving coping	**Age-independent coping devices (short-term):**	**Coping strategies (long-term outlook):**
	Young and older workers: • temporarily broadening the scope of one's work (going for jobs that are not affected by the pandemic) • getting a second job / diversifying one's income • proactive reactions: increased engagement and energy at work	**Young workers:** • actively searching for work • job-changes: finding 'better' work • acquiring new skills • information-gathering, advice-seeking, consulting

It is important that we see the above types of coping as mutually non-exclusive (e.g., Anderson et al. 1994), meaning that individuals might concurrently rely on numerous coping strategies and devices, under the premise of coping flexibility (Cheng et al. 2014).

Emotional Coping Differentiated by Age

Among over forty respondents who relied on emotional-coping either exclusively or by mixing it with the problem-solving approaches, age clearly transpired as a vital determinant

behind the particular type of the adopted strategies. Starting with the younger workers, deferment and detachment were the distinct features of their responses to the COVID-19-created employment uncertainty. In other words, the pandemic frequently became a reason to delay working altogether. Available primarily to those in education, this strategy meant portraying oneself as a 'student first', even if work experiences were previously significant:

I had some opportunities because my uncle has a construction company and he offered me a job (…) I did not manage to sort myself out and go to work. Now (the summer is almost over), so I am not going to start working. (Stefan, 19, recent high-school graduate enrolled at university)

Withdrawal from the labor market meant that young adults often decided not to explore suboptimal options or solutions. This could be interpreted as an indicator that younger participants benefited from parental support long into adulthood, expressing a generational need of doing work that is meaningful and remunerated fairly. They could decide not to bring in any income if they saw employment conditions as unacceptable, especially if they lived at home and had parents helping with their expenses (see also Kajta et al. 2023):

I was looking for some temporary jobs because I've had enough of not doing anything. I even got an offer somewhere, not sure on what kind of contract, but it was 10 PLN (ca. 2.5 EUR) per hour, so I knew I did not want to take that, it was a hard no. (Damian, 23, student/looking for a job)

More broadly, despite the fact that combining education and work has become a norm in Poland (Sarnowska et al. 2018), the pandemic meant that self-imposed moratoriums became socially acceptable in various life spheres. (Working) peers were not as visible as a direct reference group in everyday life, so the topic of work could be pushed away or even abandoned. For example, Nikodem (18, high-school student), who was earlier involved in the theater and wanted to gain experience for his dream job in this sector, actually used the pandemic to justify his exit from all career-building activities.

Besides detachment, the employed young respondents decided to delay their previously formulated career plans. While they might take a cursory glance at their options, they tend to narrate vague dreams:

My dream job would be to own a big bike store. I have never done anything in this direction but I think this would be great because I am a people-person who knows how to advise others. I also know bikes very well (…) I have no clue whether this will ever happen. Looking at what is happening now, possibly it's not. Perhaps someday. (Igor, 31, hospital employee)

My goal is to hire people and have passive income, so that I can just focus on my passion (…) Before, I thought (I could get there) in 2–3 years, I'd (start my own business servicing phones) but now, with COVID and subsequent shots our government takes at small entrepreneurs, I am moving further and further away from this goal (Tymek, 24, mobile phone service employee)

For some young respondents, the pandemic resulted in a certain type of apathy and cessation of active pursuit of work goals, even if they retained their previous jobs and only one suffered a reduced income because of a (temporary) standstill.

In comparison to the young interviewees, the emotional and avoidant coping strategies were just as widespread in the parents' generation, yet they were framed in a completely different way. Specifically, they rarely entailed detachment from work, instead relating to a quintessential need for 'self-care':

I have already had such a crazy 12-hour job that I was always on the phone and on the run. I slowed down a bit. The pandemic has been a verifier for this. I also notice and talk to my friends that we have started to perceive our free time in a different way, to see that we need it, that we spend more time at home and it is so pleasant. The pursuit of career and money is not always a good thing, because it also affects our health. (Danuta, 44, banking sector specialist)

Thus, it can be concluded that young workers had greater preponderance for age-related emotional coping via deferment and detachment. In addition, work-withdrawals had different reasons in the two studied groups: younger workers believed they still had a lot of time ahead, while the older ones underscored the time they had already invested into their careers as a justification of deserving 'a break.'

Age-independent Emotional Coping

In terms of emotional coping strategies found among both older and younger interviewees, we have identified change-avoidance, denial, allocating blame, and generalized emotional reactions. By and large, change-avoidance and managing employment risk by retaining a current job was the most typical coping strategy in this type for both age groups. Hinging on having a relatively stable employment pre-pandemic, more established—often meaning older—interviewees were less likely to fear sudden or unexpected unemployment and pay cuts:

There was panic in the beginning, fear of the disease and so on (…) We complied with the sanitary regime and worked normally, we had to finish (our work) and nobody cared. We had to calculate taxes and so on, so there were no reductions, no salary cuts, nothing (like that). I heard that in other companies they reduced (remuneration and) personnel. Everything was fine for us. (Ewa, 59, chief accountant)

Anchoring at one's workplace often took the form of being inclined to trust in the employer 'doing the right thing' and holding on to one's pre-pandemic job, even if it was connected to new challenges:

The beauty parlor I work for closed for three months. I was given the lowest possible salary (…) The boss had to pay me (a minimum) so that I would not decide to (quit and) register for unemployment (…). I was getting the lowest hourly rate (…) It was very little money because, normally, I also get a bonus per client (…) I had less money and this depressed me. (Agata, 44, beautician)

Structural implications made the idea of stability and anchoring in a given professional environment more appealing and relevant also to young workers. As discussed by Dominika below, the pandemic made her realize that being constantly pulled in different directions was suboptimal, thus eradicating some of her career dilemmas:

The pandemic paradoxically calmed my professional situation (…) Where I work now, I was initially squirming, thinking it was a mistake, even started to go to interviews and received a different offer (…) but then the pandemic came. We were locked at home and I felt that this was not the right time for sudden movements, that it might be better to stay here where employment—at least for a time—is guaranteed. Thanks to this I somehow calmed down, managed to accept things that frustrated me, and changed my point of view. (Dominika, 30, PhD student/research assistant)

The response to the crisis-stressor here centered on resource assessment in the appraisal stage and attachment or change-avoidance in the reaction, demonstrating certain coping

flexibility. The COVID-19 labor market uncertainty often transformed jobs formerly seen by young people as 'temporary' and made them recognized as long-term commitments:

I've been working in a store with sporting goods. It was (initially) a seasonal job (but) it became my first (actual contract) job. The latter happened during the first pandemic vacation (…) It's a typical retail job but I have a complex attitude to it. On the one hand, it's started as a summer job, I don't want to dwell too much on it. On the other hand, I've been at it for two years already. (Dominik, 22, student/part-time retail worker)

For the older generation, recognition that the job might not be ideal but perhaps does not need changing took shape of a more long-term avoidance and consideration of one's age:

Increasingly I think about changing (jobs) because I have become indolent (…) But I don't know about the future, everything is changing: when I started, I earned well while now my remuneration is terrible, there were also pandemic cuts (…). Likely the call center will be closed down at some point (…), so I am wondering if I should stay till the end or try to change jobs. We'll see. Right now, I am just giving myself time (and staying put). (Ilona, 52, call center employee)

Anchoring can be understood as acknowledging tough employment conditions and deciding to bear them rather than risk facing the unknown. Related to change-aversion, avoidance seems tacitly inscribed in professional inaction, wherein even well-established professionals disclosed apathy or inertia that caused them to professionally plateau:

I've done nothing interesting professionally. Paradoxically I should have had more time (…) but subjectively (…) I had great difficulties. I should have done lots of things for work but I was too chilled, probably lazy. I can rationalize that I don't have to be in top form because there's a pandemic. (Izabela, 50, academic teacher)

Despite experiencing heightened job insecurity, many young adults—also those who exited education—remained passive:

It has gotten really, really bad because, due to the pandemic, the company cannot perform (its main activity). Nobody knows when the firings will come. There are a handful of people left but nobody knows for how long. There's a tremendous number of people being let go (…) I am not sure if the business isn't going to close down soon (…) but what can I do? (Adela, 26, office administrator).

Moreover, in line with previous research, financial problems often translated to longer-term depressive symptoms and avoidant-coping:

I have no good pandemic memories. I had plans with my fiancée, we wanted to start a business and we took out a loan. (…) We both lost our jobs and she [partner] simply had a breakdown. We split up and I also had a breakdown. (Mirek, 27, new entry-level job in logistics / previously a courier)

In Mirek's case, the return to the workforce did not happen for several months, during which he was unable to pay back his debts. While his emotional coping and self-care might have initially worked, he was prone to pandemic-related conspiracy theories and exhibited an external allocation of blame:

Everyone became an egoist. Everything that happens is exacerbated by the pandemic (…) One could say that people are just backstabbing one another. (Mirek)

Like other respondents, Mirek could rely on his family support and temporarily moved back with his father, indicating that household/family resources might be pivotal for

a shift from avoidance to action (see Kajta et al. 2023; Anderson et al. 1994; Snel and Staring 2001).

Problem-solving Coping Devices

Moving on to problem-solving approaches, short-term proactive action was by far most common among entrepreneurs. As business owners and employers who had to immediately react to make their work and financial situation controllable, interviewees who run their own companies or worked in the pandemic-affected sectors (e.g. hospitality, tourism) had to reorient and alter their business model:

We lost over 70% of our customers. They shut down hotels, restaurants that were our main customers. Offices moved to remote work, so they didn't need our services either since no one was at the company, no one was making those carpets dirty. We weren't needed (…) (We) always avoided orders from individual customers, but in order to survive, and (to finance) our daughter's studies, we had to turn a blind eye to the fact that we don't like it and started doing it. It had a huge impact on our company. (Anna, 47, cleaning company co-owner)

Self-employment in some sectors was not beneficial and often abandoned if one had a buffer in the form of other income sources. Andrzej, who has a full-time and stable job as a manager, decided to temporarily stop driving a taxi, which ceased to be viable given the cost and time:

It was hard. (…) It comes to a situation where you have to wait at the taxi rank for 4–5 hours [for a customer]. And that defeated the purpose. I suspended my business at first, then started it back but it is hard. There are no hotels, no tourists, so we are standing around, there's nothing to do. (Andrzej, 45, manager at a private company/taxi driver)

Age and sector variables overlapped in our analysis. While older business-owners and workers—such as Anna and Andrzej—could still manage to continue operations via (temporary) change in the scope of work, those whose businesses were less established (i.e., younger interviewee) had to make more permanent problem-solving choices. With one's financial situation fully dependent on the 'frozen' sectors, alternative income was sought out through a temporary diversification and having additional jobs for a given period. For instance Weronika, who owned and ran a tourist agency, unwillingly searched for remote work in a corporate environment:

I started a company in 2013 (…) but I had to reorganize my (career choices) during the pandemic. My business is in tourism, so it became completely incomeless during this time. (…) For several months I worked for one of the local corporations, providing English-language customer service. (Weronika, 31, entrepreneur)

Once the situation stabilized, Weronika returned to her company, yet is considering expanding beyond tourism because it has proven a volatile branch. As some young adults shifted their work activities not out of reflection but rather out of (economic) necessity, we also observed not fully legal, albeit clearly problem-focused, income-generating behaviors:

(I experienced) a tremendous depletion in my salary (…) I coped by becoming a freelancer, meaning that I provided (same) services in the privacy of my own home (…), advertising it by word of mouth or online, though not very bravely because I do not have my own business, it was not registered. I managed to get enough money for basic needs. (Tymek, 24, mobile phone service employee)

For people like Tymek, a reorientation is more likely to be a short-lived coping device rather than a fully-fledged strategy. At the same time, he has begun to consider further education as a way to be recognized as a specialist on the labor market, which possibly renders his professional reorientation long-term as well. Similarly, Weronika started to inscribe uncertainty into her long-term planning, accounting for possible recurrence of similar crises. Although she has gone back to being an entrepreneur, the interviewee is also prepared for subsequent detours into stability offered by being part of the corporate workforce. Both examples show that pandemic-born coping devices might turn into longer-term, problem-solving coping strategies.

Finally, a slightly different proactive approach was observed in the form of investing substantially more energy into work. In this coping approach, interviewees sought to ensure that their positions were safe:

> This pandemic certainly helped me a lot. I had something [e-teaching competencies] that the others didn't have (…) Suddenly it turned out (…) that I don't have to be ashamed of the lack of achievements, that there are other things that are also important and in this situation indispensable. I can offer them to my co-workers. (Dorota, 43, academic teacher)

Dorota exemplifies recognizing how pre-existing online competences have become valuable and could be leveraged to boost self-confidence. It reveals an immediate device of coping via knowledge-sharing or offering support to co-workers as a way to quickly overcome personal insecurity and stress.

Problem-solving Coping Strategies

Unlike temporary readjustments, longer-term coping strategies were found predominantly among younger interviewees. In addition, an appraisal of the pandemic situation and treating it as a moment of a wider biographical reflection (Radzińska and Pustulka 2021) was more typical among interviewees professionally belonging or aspiring to the middle-class. They were predisposed to habitually analyzing their surroundings and crafted ideas centered on new ventures, alongside amassing expertise. Luiza, for example, was able to live off her university scholarship whilst acquiring new skills:

> I see the pandemic positively because I could regroup. I did a UX course, and started designing websites (…) I had time to think, look, try things out. It was comfortable—financially and logistically (…) I started a new job (…) and that was great. (Luiza, 28, corporate researcher)

For younger adults at the earlier stages of their careers, the crisis could be a trigger towards making a jump from being fine with just 'any job' to focusing on jobs considered 'good' or 'serious' (see, Sarnowska et al. 2018). This was done via a problem-focused intensification of job searches characterized by advice-seeking and goal-setting, which interestingly appeared gendered and explicitly more common among young women. Pola and Ela, who both worked in retail before the crisis, experienced significant challenges during lockdowns and decided to change professional paths. Pola lost wages because of the pandemic and quotes it as a trigger to search for 'serious' work:

> I decided to find other work (…) and a friend recommended her company. It's my second week at a call center and I treat it more seriously. It's a different kind of work: I have a key card, a cubicle, and a manager. I sign contracts

with people (…). I am treated more seriously. (At a store) I was helping out, now I am a regular employee (Pola, 18, high-school graduate/call center employee)

This is also evident for Ela, who sees the pandemic as a broader turning point for her peers. As a cohort experience, COVID-19 possibly shortened the period of 'floating' between temporary jobs, instead making young people more proactive in their forward-thinking about a 'serious', 'rational' or 'safe' job under the new structural conditions:

(The pandemic) forced me to move forward. The truth is that without it I would still be selling suits. I don't mean that it was a bad job but I treated it as temporary and the pandemic made me—as well as other people from my network who worked in fashion retail and hospitality—think about something else that did not cease to function properly (…) One had to undertake something else and think about something serious. Many people around me found office work during this time. (Ela, 22, student/ an assistant/previous jobs in retail)

Connected to the above, proactively starting to self-anchor seemed a vital coping method also to those young people who planned extensive experimentation and exploration for their professional and personal development before the start of the COVID-19 crisis. One such example is Laura who decided to take a break from work to go traveling and figure out her next steps. However, she asked her former corporate employer for her job back upon her earlier return:

I wrote to my company saying I'm back six months early, asking if I could come back. They easily let me and it continued like that (…) If I didn't come back early, I wouldn't have gone back to doing this job. (Laura, 26, corporate specialist)

The latter ties together different coping strategies and age as the function of the pre-pandemic employment situation.

Discussion: Coping with Uncertainty caused by the Pandemic at Work

Confirming previous research (e.g. Bellotti et al. 2021; McFadden et al. 2021; Moen et al. 2020), we showcase the importance of seeing the effects of the crisis on individuals as highly heterogeneous, with age and pre-pandemic employment situations and sectors being the most evident factors behind the different coping methods found in our data. As the pandemic-related job markets continued to be 'in flux,' we acknowledged that coping might be 'better understood as a sustained process in which active and passive moments fluctuate in relation to the opportunities and restrictions in the environment' (Raito and Lahelma 2015: 728). The data shows that coping flexibility (Cheng et al. 2014) is becoming an increasing necessity as different crises unfold.

Given that coping signifies self-protection from harm (Fritsch 2015), the emotional versus problem-solving responses are seemingly contingent on the power of the stressor that an individual needs to appraise (Lazarus 1966) in their work life at a given time (Castilhos et al. 2017). Unlike the frontline workers in a large-scale study by McFadden et al. (2021), the interviewees largely had jobs that allowed them to disassociate the pandemic from work. We argue that those in stable jobs, in less affected business sectors, or younger participants with strong identities beyond work (i.e., students), could engage in the avoidant, business-as-usual, detachment and deferment-orientations, largely because they viewed the pandemic as temporary and

little-threatening to their jobs or income. This optimism about the coronavirus spread in the summer of 2021 is perhaps why our study did not find coping linked to anticipated challenges (Hellgren et al. 1999; Lazarus and Folkman 1984) among the interviewed Polish workers.

The findings are also consistent with coping behaviors predominantly aimed at taking control over ascribing the meaning to the stressful experience (Pearlin and Schooler 1978), especially since modification of the global pandemic as a source of stress is simply not viable. Thus, avoidant-coping (Christensen et al. 2006; Mantler et al. 2005; Savitsky et al. 2020) was traced across a variety of emotion-handling mechanisms, which spanned both blaming the pandemic for all of one's life-problems and denying that the crisis has had any impact whatsoever. Even though the working class might be more endangered by crises, the informants from such backgrounds largely engaged in avoidant coping (see, Sverke et al. 2006) as they usually could continue their onsite work. Despite new restrictions at the workplace and fear of getting sick, they were rather focused on the advantages of keeping their jobs and salaries. We can hypothesize that some of them, compared to these with higher education, could be more likely to be afraid of the change and wanted to postpone or avoid the difficult process of finding another job (cf. Gardawski et al. 2022). Similarly, just as in the study by Waters and Moore (2002) showing that recent hires are more prone to avoidant coping, our interviews with young adults who acquired full-time corporate jobs pre-pandemic also posit that their key focus was on anchoring via job retention.

The spillover structural effects of the pandemic for the perceived employment uncertainty (e.g., Bellotti et al. 2021; McFadden et al. 2021; Moen et al. 2020) were more saturated in the narratives of entrepreneurs and young adults who were 'floating' on the job market before the pandemic. Both groups expressed a sense of worry and were more likely to engage in problem-solving coping, yet their reactions can be seen as 'coerced' by the experiences of losing a job or a decrease in wages. Both factors were usually linked with working in the pandemic-affected sectors (retail, gastronomy, tourism, hospitality).

Besides those who had to employ problem-solving strategies, there are also those young adults' who decided to enter the labor market during the pandemic for the first time, usually via part-time jobs. The interviewees' approaches differed in relation to the adopted temporal perspectives. Many remained in the realm of utilizing 'coping devices' (Anderson et al. 1994), hence devising ad-hoc mechanisms to address the key emotional or financial issues brought forward to their work lives by the pandemic. Here we observed a higher work engagement, broadening the scope of one's work, or getting a second job during the lockdown (albeit quitting it when the situation stabilized) (see, Hyman et al. 2005). Finally, educated young women fearing an economic downturn stood out regarding long-term career planning, as they mobilized pre-existing resources for targeted job searches and changed their employment for the better most commonly (see also Christensen et al. 2006; Sarnowska et al. 2018; Savitsky et al. 2020).

Conclusions

Qualitative research explicitly focused on the work-related coping strategies in the pandemic remains scarce and this paper contributes to the broader literature on both coping

in the context of work-lives (Leana and Feldman 1990; Raito and Lahelma 2015; Sverke et al. 2006), and the particular impact of the pandemic on workers' experiences (Bellotti et al. 2021; Gardawski et al. 2022; McFadden et al. 2021), doing so by tracking coping-centered reactions to the rapidly changing context in Poland. Based on seventy interviews with young adults (ages 18–35), and their parents (ages 41–66), the paper offers comparative insights into specific emotional and problem-focused coping strategies and devices that Polish workers engaged in during the corona-crisis.

Like any qualitative inquiry, our study has certain limitations in terms of non-generalizability, however, unlike aggregated quantitative data, in-depth interviews can foster disentanglement of the specificity encroached in personal experiences of differently positioned workers. Notably, job uncertainty and seeing the pandemic as a stressor for one's work life and economic performance was not universal in the data (see also Fluharty and Fancourt 2021; Shoss 2017). Importantly, the time of the data collection being between May and November 2021 needs to be taken into account. On the one hand, it has already been more than one year since the COVID-19 outbreak and first lockdown, so the interviewees could share a longer perspective of facing the situation on a labor market over time. On the other hand, the stories concern 'current' or 'present' work situations, thereby hinting at a potential 'normalization' of living and working with the pandemic. Furthermore, many interviewees believed in the pandemic receding and saw few indications of the looming economic crisis in the Polish media. This might explain not only a slight preponderance for avoidant coping, but also dominance of coping devices over coping strategies within the problem-solving approaches. It also clarifies why coping flexibility (Cheng et al. 2014) is only in a nascent state. We argue that the pandemic was not necessarily a 'revolution' but rather a salient factor for change in the workplace among the interviewees, again supporting the hypothesis that 'coping devices' (Anderson et al. 1994) were developed in response to the peculiarities of the sanitary regime and remote or hybrid work. The latter needed to be coped with, yet also had an 'end date' (real or imagined) in the interviewees' stories.

With the potentially reappearing pandemic spreads and other crises (for example the war in Ukraine), the fact that the project collects longitudinal data (Wave 2 scheduled for 2023) might be advantageous for drawing an even more complete portrait of the longevity and short-term usefulness of emotional coping (see, Baker and Berenbaum 2007; Fluharty and Fancourt 2021). Based on the material collected in both waves, we will be able to discern the potential modifications in coping strategies and devices engaged by young adults and their parents in a longer perspective, alongside tracking the development of coping flexibility. Based on the current analysis, we observe that the interviewees tend to adapt to pandemic situations. Thus, we expect that these experiences will serve as a resource of resilience in dealing with new challenges. Moreover, we posit that some individuals employing mainly emotional coping strategies would avoid changes in their job situation at all cost because of the general uncertainty and fear of recession and additionally looming crises. A need for stability and fear of uncertainty can translate into increased acceptance for worsening job quality. It seemingly applies primarily to the workers without higher education who feel less self-confident in the labor market (cf. Gardawski et al. 2022).

We also suppose that for some young people delays in entering the labor market or negative experiences of precarity can result in a prolonged avoidance of looking for

a job and, thus, longer co-residence with their parent(s) (Kajta et al. 2023). In a broader sense, transitions-to-adulthood become more difficult to achieve when education-to-work transitions stall (Sarnowska et al. 2018). Contrary, individuals who 'benefited' from the pandemic by improving their professional situation and gaining new skills will be more likely to make further changes in their lives. We see them as developing the necessary 'coping flexibility' alongside exercising long-term problem-solving coping strategies.

Although in this paper we decided to focus on intergenerational (age-based) rather than intrafamily comparisons, after the second wave of the interviews it will be worth analyzing closer the strategies employed by the family members in regard to the possible intergenerational transfer. Based on the first wave, we see that there are various scenarios: in the minority of cases the strategies are the same for parents and young adults. These differences will be explored further but, drawing on the initial cross-cases comparisons, we can argue that young adults' strategies depend more on their pre-pandemic job situation rather than being a simple reproduction of their parents' coping strategies. At the same time, the strategies are usually the same in the cases where young adults and their parents have similar professional positions. As the interview guide for Wave 2 of the study includes more probes about family relations and work, we will be able to elaborate more on this through longitudinal and multi-perspective lenses.

We concur that problem-solving coping strategies are stratified by age, class and gender (see, Bowleg et al. 2008; Latack and Dozier 1986; Leana and Feldman 1990; Raito and Lahelma 2015). In our small qualitative study, young people, women and middle-class individuals were more likely to rely on problem-solving coping. In addition, younger workers who perceived the job market as already more hostile employed coping strategies in the form of pre-emptive job exits (Belloti et al. 2021; Hellgren et al. 1999) and found better jobs to create more stability and a sense of being on the right path. Taking into consideration the intersection of work-related experiences and coping strategies with age, gender, class or ethnicity (Bowleg et al. 2008; Moen et al. 2020), we suggest that further research could comprehensively study these relations, both in Poland and beyond.

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Appendix

Table 2.

Demographics of the participants (identified by pseudonym)

Young adult			Parent		
Pseudonym Gender Age		**Educational / Labour Market Status PT = part-time**	**Dominant Coping Strategy**	**Pseudonym Gender Age**	**Labour Market Status**	**Dominant Coping Strategy**

Pseudonym Gender Age		Educational / Labour Market Status PT = part-time	Dominant Coping Strategy	Pseudonym Gender Age		Labour Market Status	Dominant Coping Strategy
Marek	M25	PhD student	EMO	Izabela	F50	academic teacher	EMO
Zofia	F29	PhD student/researcher	PRO	Hanna	F56	teacher	PRO
Szymon	M23	student/PT work in gastronomy	EMO	Kaja	F44	specialist—public sector	PRO
Anita	F18	high-school student	X	Julita	F46	researcher/freelancer	EMO
Julia	F20	student/PT waitress	PRO	Piotr	M47	academic teacher	EMO/PRO
Sandra	F36	corporate specialist	PRO	Maria	F58	office worker	EMO
Laura	F26	corporate specialist	PRO	Wojciech	M52	academic teacher	EMO
Luiza	F28	corporate specialist	PRO	Barbara	F48	social worker	PRO
Gosia	F29	PT call center worker/PT student	EMO	Krystyna	F66	retiree	X
Pola	F19	high-school graduate/call center worker	PRO	Dorota	F43	academic teacher	PRO/EMO
Klara	F19	recent high-school graduate	X	Olga	F42	homemaker	X
Dominika	F30	PhD student/researcher	EMO	Ewa	F59	accounting manager	EMO/PRO
Dominik	M22	student/PT shop assistant	PRO	Beata	F47	chemist	PRO/EMO
Ela	F22	student/office assistant	PRO	Irena	F41	corporate manager	EMO/PRO
Bartek	M24	student/looking for a job	EMO/PRO	Klaudia	F52	psychologist	EMO/PRO
Wojtek	M19	recent high-school graduate/PT receptionist	EMO	Malkolm	M45	hotel owner	PRO
Mieszko	M28	full-time retail worker	EMO	Anna	F49	cleaning company owner	PRO
Karol	M31	factory worker/PT student	EMO	Bogdan	M62	electrician	EMO/PRO
Nikodem	NB18	high-school student/summer jobs	EMO	Emil	M48	entrepreneur	PRO
Damian	M23	student/looking for a job	PRO/EMO	Krzysztof	M49	storehouse manager	EMO
Mateusz	M21	student/PT job in gastronomy	EMO/PRO	Danuta	F44	banking specialist	EMO
Eryk	M23	student/temp jobs	EMO	Jacek	M51	municipal official	PRO
Stefan	M19	recent high-school graduate	EMO	Agata	F44	beautician	EMO
Kamil	M20	construction worker	PRO	Janusz	M54	retiree/store security guard	EMO
Kamila	F21	student/summer job	X	Ilona	F52	call center employee	EMO

Continued from the previous page

Young adult			Parent		
Pseudonym Gender Age		**Educational / Labour Market Status** PT = part-time	**Dominant Coping Strategy**	**Pseudonym Gender Age**		**Labour Market Status**	**Dominant Coping Strategy**
Tymek	M24	mobile phone service employee	EMO/PRO	Maryla	F57	kindergarten employee	EMO/PRO
Nina	F18	high-school student	PRO	Bartosz	M46	municipal official	PRO/EMO
Eliza	F21	PT student/retail worker	PRO	Andrzej	M45	manager/taxi driver	PRO
Magda	F20	intern at the public office	PRO/EMO	Witold	M46	dispatcher at post office	EMO
Weronika	F31	tourist agency owner	PRO	Antoni	M56	manager	EMO/PRO
Adela	F26	office assistant	EMO	Manuela	F47	retail worker	EMO
Mirek	M27	entry-level logistics job/formerly a courier	EMO/PRO	Jurek	M60	pensioner/dog breeder	X
Borys	M29	IT worker/PhD student	PRO/EMO	Marzena	F55	banking specialist	EMO/PRO
Ala	F28	student	X	Aurelia	F60	lab employee	EMO/PRO
Igor	M31	hospital official	EMO	Edmund	M55	modeler	EMO/PRO