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## **The Fragility of Social Status and the Mediocrity of Middle Class Life in Social Memoirs of the Unemployed**

*Abstract:* The article contributes to the Polish tradition of research using personal memoirs to illustrate the experience of everyday life. The authors analyze the experiences of middle-class representatives based on data collected through a nationwide competition for a diary of an unemployed person. The diarists experienced unemployment for at least one month between 2016 and 2017. The article shows the fragility of middle-class status, one that is difficult to achieve and easy to lose. The Polish middle class is under constant threat of being “washed away” by a wave created by low wages, poor working conditions, insufficient savings, credit burdens, and the trap of comparing oneself with other representatives of the middle class. The article illustrates the mediocrity of middle-class life—the disillusionment with the quality of life in the middle of the social structure based on deficits in health and psychological well-being and disruptions in social relations.

*Keywords:* middle class; memoirs; unemployment; autobiographical method; quality of life

### **Introduction**

This text is a voice in the discussion on structural transformations that have resulted in the middle class crisis. The aim of the text is to expose the problems with achieving the status and quality of life characteristic of the middle class that are encountered by its representatives wishing to pursue middle-class aspirations in the unstable labor market in Poland. Using memoirs and life accounts in the diaries of the unemployed, the text depicts the fragility of middle-class social status resulting from global crises and processes destabilizing the middle class in Poland. The unique and rarely used memoir method allows one to discover the depth of motivations and aspirations and to gain insight into the experience of the everyday life of middle-class representatives.

Naturally, this analysis and the diarists’ experience are framed by the specific time perspective of 2016–2017 (a different context to the post-2008 crisis and post-pandemic period). Each of these periods takes into account different economic and social conditions. With regard to the period associated with the covid-19 pandemic, we draw projections (hypotheses) in this regard, based on the previous experience of the middle class under

crisis conditions. In this respect, a peculiarly timeless tendency of exploitation and systemic unresponsiveness to the needs and problems of the middle class is drawn.

These data were generated using the social memoir method, which is strongly rooted in the tradition of Polish social research. For over a hundred years, researchers applying this method have announced diary competitions that allow them to gain insight into the 'life world' by representatives of various social categories. The text is drawn from diaries that were written as part of a competition announced in Poland in 2016. The authors of the diaries are people who experienced unemployment for at least one month between 2016 and 2017.

The middle class in Poland is experiencing the failure of the "Polish flexicurity" concept, which is linked to labor market instability, poor labor market conditions, irregularity, and small incomes, as well as the widespread sense of exploitation in the workplace (Woś 2017). The consequences are episodes of unemployment that are destructive to the psychological well-being of middle class representatives. When analyzing the experience of the middle class, it is worth bearing in mind the conclusions of the 'classical studies' on the experience of unemployment (psychosocial effects of inactivity). Studies from the early 1930s by Marie Jahoda, Paul Lazarsfeld and Hans Zeisel (1974), Ludwik Krzywicki (ed. 1933), among others, expose such risks as, increased mortality, the incidence of certain diseases and the appearance or intensification of mental disorders.

As the middle class defines itself through self-development and work (Vaughan-Whitehead 2016), its experience of unemployment is the result of reluctance of taking up employment below qualifications, a sense of exploitation, and the lack of public policies supporting the middle class. The analysis of the memoirs reveals that middle-class status turns out to be a promise without fulfillment for those who aspire to belong to it. Belonging to it entails hardship and sacrifice, whereas achieving this position implies being stuck on the treadmill of tedious professional life and a lack of satisfaction.

## Literature Review

### *Middle class: towards qualitative socio-cultural understanding*

The interpretation of the processes currently affecting the middle classes in particular societies depends on the definition adopted. There are many competing approaches to class analysis based on the proposals of Marx, Durkheim, Bourdieu or Weber (Wright 2005). Many empirical studies of the middle class use the concept of the latter. Neo-Weberian class analysis assumes that classes are sets of positions embedded in the social structure (Breen in: Wright 2005). However, it is controversial how the positions should be designated. In their syntheses, Vaughan-Whitehead (2016) and Pressman (2015) distinguished five approaches to defining the middle class:

- (1) an income approach based on categorizing income and setting thresholds that identify the middle class on the scale of income distribution. The middle class is defined here by the income located in the middle deciles or the income space around the median income (Atkinson and Brandolini 2013);

- (2) an extended approach that involves wealth and available capital alongside income, including its evolution over time (Scott and Pressman 2011);
- (3) an occupation-centered approach where the identification of class membership also involves workplaces and occupations “typical of the middle class” (Goos et al. 2014);
- (4) the participatory approach, which involves a self-definition of belonging in relation to income, wealth, and occupations held by others (Rose 1983); and
- (5) the education-centered approach, which is debatable for many analysts and which focuses on the highest level of education obtained by family members. The middle class is located in those households in which one adult has earned a minimum of a bachelor’s degree (Pressman 2007).

In contrast, Horrigan and Haugen (1988) identified three approaches to defining the middle class—economic, empirical, and sociological. The economic approach refers to income and overlaps the income approach described above. The empirical approach coincides with the participatory approach mentioned above, where respondents define the income of the middle class themselves and thus self-locate in the structure. In the sociological approach, the middle class is distinguished by criteria in the form of reaching a certain level of education and working in a certain kind of occupation that would guarantee an appropriate social status and determine a specific set of values and attitudes (Coleman and Rainwater 1978).

The way the middle class is defined is inevitably linked to attempts to define the scope and size of this social category. Using economic criteria, the proportion of the middle class in the structure may be small (Bigot et al. 2012), but by using a self-identification procedure and a subjective definition of income specific to the middle class, the size of this category may be larger (Vaughan-Whitehead 2016). The way in which the middle class is defined is also strongly related to the objectives that researchers set for themselves (Pressman 2007). Such objectives can be, for example, the analysis of income redistribution processes in society or the assessment of the consequences of solutions adopted within the scope of public policy (e.g., within social transfers, in the labor market, in access to social services, in health care, or in the tax system). However, the aim can be an attempt to gain insight into the multidimensional determinants of the quality of life of the middle class, taking into account both the common experiences of its representatives and the internal differentiation of this category. Sociological and cultural ways of defining the middle class are related to such an aim.

We therefore assume that the middle class cannot be defined solely by the level of income, the economic capital available, or the type of occupation performed. Talking about classes requires examining dimensions other than income. The middle class has its own cultural dimension. Taking into empirical account the quality and lifestyle of the middle class, one should also consider the specificity (e.g., history) of the region and the culture in which it functions (Domański 2015), while trying to search for transnational and cross-cultural universals (Freire de Mello and Aparecida de Paula 2019). At the same time, the contemporary middle class shows clear differentiation in terms of income and economic capital owned (Dallinger 2013).

Thus, the broad sociological approach, which allows exposing socio-cultural characteristics, such as the aspirations and cultural patterns or ways of experiencing everyday life

of “people from the middle of the structure,” is the most suitable for our purposes. To be able to describe the processes shaping the middle class today and the changes affecting it, it is necessary to gain insight into these experiences, into the feelings and motivations of its members, and more generally into the broader lifestyle and quality of life of middle-class representatives (Boyne 2002; Manstead 2018; Ornstein 2007). In turn, the exploration of the lifestyle and quality of life of these people requires considering such issues as health, sense of security, troubles in the labor market, the stability of family systems, and other social relationships or status comparisons made.

We therefore assume that the middle class is a social category based on socio-cultural similarity. Similarity—as the essence of belonging to this category—is based on the tertiary education obtained and/or the occupation requiring specialized competences,<sup>1</sup> the lifestyle and quality of life viewed as characteristic of the middle of the structure (Savage et al. 2013), and the commonality of aspirations for self-development. This class is further shaped by self-identification and self-location within the structure.

### *Vanishing middle class: the process and a review of factors*

Studies on the middle class, particularly those that use income and property as criteria for class membership, point to a distinct shrinkage of this segment of the social structure in many Western countries. The vanishing, shrinking, or squeezing of the middle class has been discussed at least since 1988 (Horrihan and Haugen 1988).

The process of shrinking of the middle class, considered in macroeconomic and political analyses as the backbone of the market economy and liberal democracy in most developed societies, has become noticeable over the last 20 years of the intensifying, negative consequences of globalization (Birdsall et al. 2000). The middle class is shrinking in developed societies for a number of interrelated reasons. The first reason is income stratification, which is increasing at a steady pace (Dallinger 2013; Salido and Carabaña 2020; Vaughan-Whitehead 2016). The proportion of middle-income earners is decreasing. The second reason is that the availability of steady, well-paid jobs is decreasing (largely due to globalization and new technologies displacing human labor), while earnings are shrinking and the cost of living and household debt are increasing (OECD 2019). The third reason is that there are significant impediments to the social reproduction of the middle class (Kaufman 2005). The middle class has fewer children who have ever greater educational expenses (Banerjee and Duflo 2008). Class identity in this population segment is also disappearing due to the increasing difficulty of buying and renting property (Benson and Jackson 2017).

Globally, the middle class is a unique social category limited to enclaves in developed Western countries. From the perspective of macroeconomic studies (Milanovic and Yitzhaki 2002), the world’s social structure resembles an hourglass—very thick at the bottom and much thinner in the middle. The main factor limiting the growth of the

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<sup>1</sup> Among such education-related competences are the unique skills related to one’s profession (e.g., lawyer, accountant, psychotherapist, graphic designer, social worker, stock market analyst, engineer, etc.). Additionally, in part of the middle class these competences are related to supervising the work of others and the ability to run one’s own business.

middle class globally is income and social inequality. Although research since the early 2000s shows that the middle class is “bulging”/“swelling” in developing countries, it constantly remains non-resilient to various threats (Ravallion 2010). Between 1990 and 2005, economic growth and global shifts in distribution allowed an additional one billion people to join the middle class of developing countries. However, many members remain quite close to poverty, and those who have advanced are constantly facing the specter of declassing.

*The emergence of the middle class in Poland: three decades of trouble*

It was not until 1989, the year democracy was re-establishment, that Poland for the first time in history had a relatively egalitarian and well-educated society without major barriers preventing vertical mobility. The post-1989 rapid economic development resulted from i.a. (1) a neoliberal shift implemented by post-communist and post-Solidarity élites, (2) an educated and cheap labor force, (3) macroeconomic stability, (4) development of the banking sector, (5) privatization, and (6) a friendly environment for foreign investment (Piątkowski 2018). It seemed that the opportunity for the emergence and development of the Polish middle class had just opened (Jasiewicz 2003).

Seemingly, the rules of market competition and capitalist labor relations introduced in the early 1990s have created conditions for the emergence and consolidation of a new class category. However, Poland still lacks a large and stable middle class characterized by both higher income and a separate lifestyle and a set of social values and practices. According to previous research, the “new middle class” is missing. The “new middle class” in Poland<sup>2</sup> is defined by specialist competences and high the complexity of professional practices, higher education, a certain level of wealth, and—most importantly—its representatives’ visible effort to prove to themselves and others that they have achieved success (Domański 2012). This exposition of status success is connected with the pressure felt and the disposition for self-development. The new middle class aspires to live a better life and to show this life to neighbors and friends. However, consumption, which is proof of success, is tempered by a long-term strategy. It is a characteristic of the new middle class to think about the future. This is why they send their children to the best schools and give up current pleasures for future gains.

Research shows (CBOS 2020) that as many as 77% of Poles declare themselves to belong to the middle class—14% to the lower middle class, 46% to the middle class proper, and 17% to the upper middle class. Of course, this is only a self-declaration, which does not necessarily have to be grounded in the education obtained, the occupation pursued or the income. By contrast, estimates by the Polish Economic Institute, which uses an income approach when analyzing the middle class (those whose earnings fall between 67% and 200% of the income median are assigned to the middle class), have shown that 54% of

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<sup>2</sup> In Poland, the “old” middle class is considered to consist of small and medium-sized owners and presidents of companies operating in the period before and at the beginning of the Polish transformation who became rich after the political system changed and who demonstrated the need for prestige (e.g., by building huge houses resembling palaces). They are recruited from a different environment than the “new” middle class. For example, the category of “non-agricultural business owners” today no longer recruits its members from among farmers or agricultural workers (which was the case for the “old” middle class) but from among people with higher education (see Domański 2012: 109–132).

Poles are in the middle class (Kukołowicz 2019). However, despite the self-definition of the majority of Poles as being middle class and despite the location of half of them in the middle class based on level of income, in the extended economic (due to the scarcity of savings and capital owned, low wages, and credit burdens) and cultural and social (opportunities to lead a lifestyle characteristic of the middle class) perspective, it is difficult to discuss the consolidation of a separate “middle” class in the structure as a whole (Gdula and Sadura 2012). The conviction that Poles belong to the middle class is an overstatement.

Almost half (45%) of the middle class defined according to the income criterion declare they have no savings at all. The majority—as many as 68%—declare only a “sufficient” (defined as “we can manage”) level of satisfaction in terms of meeting of household needs. Yet, this “managing” is the basis for the self-identification of the Polish middle class and distinguishing it from representatives of the lower class. When comparing their economic situation with others demonstrating a structural similarity, members of the middle class rarely consider their own earnings to be higher than those of their peers (only 14% declare so). At the same time, almost three times as many people (40%) perceive their earnings as lower than those of their peers (Kukołowicz 2019).

Strategies to invest in one’s own education have not translated into the dream of access to a middle-class lifestyle coming true. In 1989, 378,000 people studied in Poland, and in the record year of 2005 the figure was approximately 1.95 million. Over 25 years, the percentage of people with higher education has more than tripled. Educational investments were supposed to translate into market and social success expressed in terms of status and quality of life. However, it turned out that higher education as a ticket to status promotion proved to be an empty promise for many Poles. Recent studies pointed to an emerging phenomenon of higher education devaluation, characterized by diminishing returns on education among those with higher education and a relative increase in wages among those with vocational education (Kukołowicz 2019; Strawiński et al. 2018). Poles commonly perceive a lack of returns on investments in education, both financial and in terms of living standards (CBOS 2017).

The middle class has also fallen victim to the policies pursued by the Polish governments after 1989. This includes tax burdens, fiscal and administrative conditions for running businesses, social transfers directed mainly towards the popular class, and the continuous under-supply of public services. Many professions characteristic of the middle class were subject to changing tax regulations (scientists, artists, architects, etc.) and the norms of the types of civil law contracts preferred by employers, which were unfavorable to the middle class. Guided by a pattern of dealing with challenges specific to this category, members of the middle class bear the high cost of “coping” in an individualized form (Wilkinson and Pickett 2019), while remaining outside the support of the public (guaranteed) system (treatment of stress, depression, the cost of drugs, medical services, education, etc).

All this breeds frustration. As indicated by the data from the Polish Social Insurance Institution, in 2010–2016 the number of sick-leave days taken by the Polish workforce because of mental disorders increased by as much as 67% (Karczewicz 2017; Karczewicz and Sikora 2011). The consumption of antidepressants is growing (by 5%) year by year; 19.1 million packages were sold in 2015, 20.1 million were sold in 2016, and 21.1 million were sold in 2017 (Ferfecki 2018). This may be caused by the lack of a sense of stability, the lack of sufficient retirement security in the future, insecurity as regards the likelihood

of paying off loans, and lack of belief that life decisions are reasonable. In practice, the main reason for illnesses is therefore the stress typical of the Polish middle class, primarily connected with the fact that its representatives wish to meet social expectations and their own ambitions and achieve a level of living that is adequate vis-à-vis their outlay to acquire an education (EZOP 2020).

*Experience of unemployment among middle-class representatives*

It may appear that the risk of unemployment increases as education and specialized skills decline. If this were indeed the case, the middle class would experience the risks and consequences of unemployment to a lesser extent than the popular class. However, this is not the case.

Already at the beginning of the 1970s, researchers (Powell and Driscoll 1973) analyzed the risk of unemployment in the middle class. Today, the middle class's problems with the labor market only seem to be exacerbated. Despite the passage of years, although the situation differs contextually in different countries, people in the middle of the social structure are still struggling to maintain paid employment, to find better jobs, or to increase savings. The middle class is experiencing a shrinkage of its assets as a result of precarious working conditions, declining incomes, social security cuts (Koeber 2002), and increasing difficulty finding employment within traditional middle class professions. Technologization and automation are also challenges to middle-class employment stability. Automation reduces the number of characteristic middle-class jobs, from lower-skilled service sector jobs such as transport, health care, sales, and administration to high-skilled occupations in medicine and law. In developed countries, technologization and automation have led to a loss of middle-income jobs and an increase in low-skilled service sector employment. Changes in the use of advanced digital technologies have led to higher educational requirements for employees. While it is true that new technologies create opportunities for workers to increase productivity and thus earn higher wages, workers need to acquire further skills for these benefits to materialize (Acemoglu 2002).

Middle-class representatives have an ever-growing sense of insecurity in relation to the labor market. They are increasingly aware of the instability of their own economic position. While previous generations of middle-class European families could look forward to an improved standard of living in the future, the present generation is no longer so assured. Young people with higher education (i.e., the potential middle class) have problems finding a job, and when they do it turns out not to meet their imagination and expectations. Empirical studies have long argued (Payne et al. 1984) that anxiety, depression, and a general sense of psychological distress associated with the risk of losing a job and with unemployment itself are as acute in the middle class as in the working class. Research indicated (Andersen 2009) that the negative impact of job loss on the subjective sense of well-being is by far the highest in the middle class and at the same time the "psychological burden" associated with the fear of job loss itself is the highest in the middle class.

The economic crisis of 2008 left its mark on the middle class almost everywhere in the world. The bursting of the housing bubble undermined mortgage-related home ownership, a traditional characteristic of the middle class. Middle-class living standards deteriorated

significantly in the countries most affected by the financial crisis. This was, among other things, due to austerity in social policies towards those in the middle of the social structure and the insecurity resulting from part-time or temporary contracts. The analysis of job retention problems experienced by the middle class then began to be linked to the concept of the precariat. Among the “stakeholders” of this internally differentiated “class of chronic insecurity” were those located in the middle of the structure (Standing 2015).

The problem of middle-class unemployment and the problem of the precariat are particularly visible in Poland. Although the percentage of unemployment experiences among senior managers and specialists declined between 1992 and 2012 (in 1992, 17.1% experienced unemployment, while in 2012 only 6.3% did), already among lower-skilled white-collar workers and especially among business owners (especially microenterprises), this percentage has been increasing over the two decades (in 2012 it was 20.8% for lower white-collar workers and 24.3% among business owners (Domański 2015)).

## Context of Research

### *Memoir-writing competitions in Poland: tradition and uniqueness of the method*

The biographical method—where diaries written as part of competitions (social memoir, life writing) constitute the empirical material for analysis—has a long and rich tradition in Polish social sciences (Konecki et al. 2005; Markiewicz-Lagneau 1976; Sułek 2019; Thompson and Bornat 2017). After Poland regained its independence in 1918, sociologists began launching autobiographical memoir competitions for workers, peasants, the unemployed, migrants, and youth. The aim was to gain insight into the living conditions and ways of thinking of traditionally illiterate social categories as seen from a subjective perspective. Competitions for diaries were promoted in the interwar press and by socio-political organizations aimed at supporting literacy in illiterate post-partition Poland. They met with an unexpected mass response. By the end of the 1930s, approximately 20 competitions were held. The largest of them received more than 1500 memoirs. The result of these competitions was about 25 published volumes of memoirs, which met with a very strong public response and were widely discussed in the press.

The leading center conducting social research using memoirs in the 1930s was the Collegium of Socio-Economics (Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego [IGS]).<sup>3</sup> Under the direction of sociologist Ludwik Krzywicki, the IGS organized several competitions (Memoirs of Peasants 1935; Memoirs of Emigrants 1939) in the interwar period, including, significantly, a competition for the unemployed (Memoirs of the unemployed 1933). The IGS still returned to the idea of a competition for the diaries of the unemployed 70 years after the first edition of the contest in 2003, when the unemployment rate was the highest in the history of postwar Poland (Kubicki and Cichowicz 2005).

<sup>3</sup> A scientific and social institution established in Poland in 1920, initially as a section of the Society of Polish Economists and Statisticians. In 1926, it became an independent research institution involved in diagnosing Poland's major social problems of the moment. Among the issues monitored by the Collegium were rural overpopulation, living conditions of the population, employee self-government, social insurance, the functioning of local governments, and urban and rural unemployment. Its work resulted in recommendations for state social policy.



Despite its long history, the scientific use of diaries has faced criticism (Rak 2004). Above all, doubts have been raised about the failure of personal documents to meet the conditions considered necessary for the “facts” described in them to be considered the basis for legitimate scientific inferences (Giza 1990). Criticism of the diary method also concerned ethical aspects related to the peculiar competitiveness of reporting one’s own experiences to researchers by people with different characteristics and experiencing different problems, which is connected both with the exaggeration of the description of experienced problems by diarists and also with the attention paid by researchers to those diaries that contain colored, suggestive descriptions (Riesman 1979).

Today, however, there is a conviction that social memoirs allow for a more thorough tracing of the lives and reactions to unemployment, both of those affected by it and of their families and friends. Florian Znaniecki, the most famous promoter of the advantages of memoirs and the biographical method, claimed that the researcher “must place himself in the social situations in which the respondent lives and acts; he must see these situations through his eyes, feel and understand their problems. Otherwise, he will not be able to understand the most important area of collective life: the sources of activity and the sources of social movements and variability of social forms” (Chałasiński 1938; Znaniecki 1970). In the analysis of memoir materials, “praxeological” cognition is useful, based on the assumption that structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g., the material living conditions of a given social class), which can be captured in the form of regularities associated with the socially structured environment, produce habitus, that is, systems of permanent dispositions that determine attitudes and actions (Bourdieu 2013). The subjective evaluation of the attitudes and actions of different actors revealed in the diaries allows for a better understanding of the mechanisms guiding the behavior of the unemployed (seen precisely as structured, typical habitus) but most importantly also of the broader social, economic, and political context in which the diarists see the factors of their exclusion.

### *Methods and data*

The empirical material we use in this paper was obtained as part of a nationwide competition for the diaries of unemployed people. In 2016, the IGS (in consortium with the Institute of Sociology of Nicolaus Copernicus University) returned to the diaries of the unemployed for the third time. A national competition was launched for diaries written by people who had experienced unemployment for at least 1 month between 2016 and 2017.

The competition call, distributed in the national media and through district employment offices and municipal social assistance centers, asked potential authors to describe their situation and the position of their family against the background of their experience of unemployment, with a focus on their efforts, the reaction of their environment, the support received, and their future prospects. Those who prepared a diary were also asked to complete a short questionnaire (socio-demographic profile, duration of unemployment, number of episodes of unemployment, assessment of living conditions, and prospects of finding a job). The research covered i.a. the following issues: (1) the causes of unemployment in the authors’ biographies, (2) the diarists’ work experience before unemployment, (3) the unemployed person’s actions to improve their life situation on

their own, (4) the impact of unemployment on the functioning of the family and on the relationship with the immediate environment, and (5) a comparison of the quality of life during employment and during unemployment.

The competition received 378 diaries (written by 53 men and 325 women), of which nearly half were written by people with higher education (170) and of a younger age (25–34) (76 works). For the purpose of the analysis, we selected 186 diaries written by representatives of the middle class. We did this using three criteria based on the definition of the new middle class in Poland (Domański 2012): (1) tertiary education, (2) profession requiring specialized competence, (3) consumer and/or cultural aspirations. When a diarist fulfilled at least two of the criteria, he or she was qualified for further detailed analysis (computer-assisted) as a representative of the middle class. It is worth noting that 5 diarists indicated a direct identification with the middle class in their account of everyday life (while also meeting the adopted ‘objective’ definitional criteria).

Participants were informed that the organizers would award cash prizes for the best diaries (a total of four prizes and nine distinctions were awarded). Participation in the competition implied written consent to the processing of the diary author’s data.<sup>4</sup> After the competition was settled, the researchers performed anonymization of the diaries.

The accounts and memories contained in the memoirs were analyzed in accordance with the procedure of qualitative content analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994) and included the preparation of a code key and coding of the collected material by two researchers to obtain text blocks matching the main analyzed structures, that is, the authors’ education, occupation categories, work, health, relationships, money (earnings), and security. Additional sub-codes were proposed during encoding. In line with the principles presented by Berg and Lune (2012), each code-related category was supplemented with quotations from the diarists until a satisfactory thematic saturation was achieved, that is, until each subsequent quotation did not bring new information. Next, following the same set of rules (Berg and Lune 2012; Charmaz 2006), most suitable and vivid statements of diarists were selected for presentation in the article.

## Research Findings

### *The fragility of middle-class status*

The middle-class status that emerges from the diaries is fragile; it is one that is very difficult to achieve and yet easy to lose. The deck of the ship called “middle class” turns out to be slippery. First, for those who are just climbing onto it, the ladder leading to the deck is

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<sup>4</sup> The competition participant agreed to the processing of personal data contained in the submitted work, including possible information about health, religious or philosophical beliefs, or other special categories of personal data disclosed in the description of the work, that were given voluntarily on their own initiative. Among the special categories of personal data are personal data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data, and data concerning health, sexuality, or sexual orientation (Article 9 Personal Data Protection Act). Included was a statement indicating that personal data constituting the basis for the development of research conclusions will be processed for the time necessary for the implementation of the research and the achievement of its objective, as well as for the time of possible analysis and evaluation of the research results.

already slippery. Second, it is slippery for those who are trying with difficulty to stay on it. Third, it is slippery for those who think they are standing on it, or even those who have already established their position on the board.

There are among the diarists some who aspire to the middle class. Despite their efforts and investments, they feel that they keep slipping down the rungs of the ladder leading to the deck. This is, for example, Anna [F15], a law school graduate who cannot break free from the merry-go-round of successive unpaid or low-paid internships in courts and law firms, where she is treated as cheap yet qualified labor. This is Kaja [F24], a film producer who, when her company runs out of orders, has to move in with her parents. This is also Magdalena [F22], who after graduation lives in the family house in the countryside and is frustrated that she lacks the money to escape to the big city.

Another group is made up of those who have the right level of resources for the middle class yet cannot confidently stand on its slippery deck. Margaret [F7] works in an opera house in a responsible position, yet she has to work extra to make ends meet. Agnieszka [F8], with two PhD degrees and, as she herself admits, a prestigious job as a translator, struggles with frustration and depression. Karolina [F10], in pursuit of the “dream of the stage,” has finished drama school and accepted a precarious life. Maria [F18] is forced by the economic crisis to close her translation office and work illegally in a hotel.

Among the diarists, you will also find those who have achieved professional and financial success at some point in their lives. With a dismissal from their job, the collapse of their company, or economic turbulence, they lose their hard-earned status. This is Daria [F14], whose dismissal from a managerial position at a corporation leads to depression and the breakup of her family. This is Michał [M2], a journalist sacked from his job who is unable to find a satisfactory “plan B” for his life. This is also Dominika [F11], who describes the moment when she decides to apply for social assistance as follows:

“I myself have more than once helped friends who were in a difficult financial situation. Only two years ago I could afford a handbag for PLN 400. And today I will beg for PLN 200. Well, I have no choice. I’ve lost my company, I’ve lost my income, the corporation in which I’m employed is going bankrupt, my husband is in prison and I, with a small child, live in the house left by my deceased father, which needs general renovation.”

Loss of status does not have to come from outside. It is also the result of one’s own decisions. The desire to maintain a sense of empowerment, to change one’s life for the better, to get a promotion, to earn a higher salary, or simply to leave a toxic work environment pushes the authors of the diaries into difficulties they did not expect. Aneta [F16], Monika [F20], and Mirosław [M5] quit their directorial positions at corporations only to fall into humiliating unemployment from which only the first one will get out.

### *Mediocrity of work*

The memoirs are centered around the issue of work. This is no surprise, as the status of a middle-class member is achieved precisely by work, the income derived from it, and the prestige associated with the profession or position. Middle-class members define themselves by their work, which is why problems at work and with work resulting in the experience of unemployment form the axis of the memoirs.

An analysis of the diaries proves that the professional work of representatives of the middle class is precarious, meaning that it is precarious, unpredictable and risky from the worker's point of view (Kalleberg 2009). The analysis of precarious forms of work in Poland seems to overemphasize such a nature of middle-class work, focusing primarily on the problems of the working class, young people entering the labor market and such social categories as immigrants. In addition, it is recognized that the middle class is inclined to minimize the negative aspects of employment flexibility, meaning that it is better able to cope with the precariousness of work (Mrozowski 2017). Analysis of the diaries indicates that this is not the case. The middle class does not cope with the precariousness and uncertainty of its employment as well as the popular class. The precarious nature of the work of representatives of the middle class, increasingly present in the diaries, is at odds with the aspirations of this social category. The status of the middle class is founded on a professional position, and this becomes precarious in the situation of the increasing precariousness of professional occupations characteristic of the middle class, especially for its younger representatives. Uncertainty in the professional sphere means status uncertainty for the representatives of the middle class. The middle class, despite its focus on lifelong learning and career planning, and therefore greater acceptance of employment flexibility, still relies on a relatively stable career, as is clearly evident in the diaries. In Polish conditions, we have, in effect, not employment flexibility, but precariousness (Gdula 2014).

Reading the diaries proves that education and ambition do not guarantee access to the desired quality and conditions of work. Maria [F18] is forced to close her translation agency in a small town after the financial crisis of 2008. She finds a job in a hotel, where she works without a contract for up to 70 hours a week. However, a crisis is not necessary for work to be a source of disappointment. This is how Agnieszka [F4], a laboratory worker at a state institution in a big city, writes about it:

Working 4 shifts day in day out and earning a pittance, of course, harmful conditions, dealing with carcinogenic substances, but thanks to them I have PLN 200 more to my salary. There is some money for a trifle.

Rafał [M1] is an electrical engineer working as a manager on construction sites. His everyday life consists of overtime, stress, and outstanding wages (some of which are paid “under the table”).

Enough of me being used for a stamp when I had no real power, enough of overtime and working at home, enough of not being paid what we agreed to, enough of me being made responsible for managing three to five sites at once when the norm is one manager per site. [...] I was promised mountains of gold—unfortunately, I hadn't managed to get any before I had doubts whether this was really my path in life.

Diary authors point to the objectification associated with work. They are a “human resource” to be fully available, healthy, and committed to the company. Anna [F3] had an accident while working at a big TV station.

I remember the [employer's name here] station manager called me when I was in hospital. She was resentful asking when I was going to come to work, and I explained that I'd had an accident but she didn't care.

Even at the moment of leaving the company, the employee can feel that they are just a resource being moved from one place to another. This is how Izabela [F17], a manager in

a regional branch of a multinational corporation, describes the few minutes during which her superiors took away her access to the company mobile phone and computer when she was fired:

I wanted to write a farewell e-mail but unfortunately my mailbox is already blocked, and after a while all my contacts disappear from my phone (I have an iPhone and through iCloud they removed everything so that I have no contact with anyone) ... shock, why is it such a murder and quick deletion of a person from the reality of the company? and why? why do they treat me this way? Ok, they are firing me, but how. I don't even have the phone number of my children's nanny, who is looking after them at the moment, to tell her that I won't be home until around 11 pm.

The precarious employment conditions are the main reason for the insecurity of the diary authors. Maciej [M3] complains that he cannot maintain employment stability:

I have not worked anywhere for more than two years. In the mentioned period of 10 years that passed since graduation, I worked for about five or six years. This professional instability naturally carries over into emotional and life instability. I've had a girlfriend for five years, we've been engaged for four, but how can we plan anything if I have to count every penny and don't know what will happen next month, let alone next year?

The lack of a sense of security determines the lack of influence over the shape of one's own life and makes one postpone important life decisions, such as starting a family.

I cannot imagine starting a family because my income is insecure even for a single person [Kaja, F24], [...] our situation was not so good that we could afford a child. Childbirth, nursery, medical care and all other expenses related to having a child were beyond our means and thus we consciously postponed parenthood [Natalia, F27].

The diarists are trying to escape the dehumanizing direction of work beyond their capabilities. The escape takes the form of a fundamental life change: leaving one's job and choosing a different professional path. The motif of leaving one's job as an "escape to freedom" appears many times in the diaries.

And despite all the possible fears linked to not having a new job, as soon as the decision was born in my head, I felt above all a huge, infinite RELIEF. A relief that I would no longer have to work with fake people. A relief that this toxic situation, which was destroying me from the inside, would finally end [Magdalena, F23].

Importantly, the diarists as unemployed are ready to choose a job with worse pay but better prospects for development. Magdalena [F23] leaves a managerial position in a marketing company but relatively quickly finds offers of a new job. She chooses a job with worse conditions but that is more "exciting" [...] because I, such a simple little person could create something. [...] I could prove to myself and others that I am creative.

In pursuit of his dreams, Rafał [M1] quits his job as an electrician and decides to become a psychologist, but the counselling center turns out to be as disappointing as the construction sites. Similarly, Karolina [F10] decides to quit her job and finish acting school, but insecurity of the career on the stage makes it hard to earn a living. Aneta [F16], Monika [F20], and Mirosław [M5] run away from corporations that have become "zones of discomfort" for them, full of routine and suffering. These decisions often seem well thought out; they write *"I have qualifications, knowledge, experience, family support, savings. When to change jobs if not now?"* However, instead of finding meaning, they lose what they have developed so far, which they may not have appreciated. The rebellion against

the current “treadmill” and the escape, even if they finally turn out to be constructive and bring success and fulfilment, are almost always connected with suffering, trauma, and even greater confusion. This is a cost that the authors of the memoirs were often unprepared for.

Looking for a job and having to adapt to the demands of the market are further causes of humiliation. Workers are not treated as commodities; however, they have to prove their attractiveness just like commodities. In their resumes, the authors decide to simply cross out the qualifications and experience that are “superfluous” from the point of view of the market. Małgorzata [F7], a manager at a cultural institution, describes these practices as follows:

I still try to create several versions of my CV. I gradually eliminate in the documents I send the fact that I speak three foreign languages, and after some thought, I delete information about foreign projects and postgraduate studies, but I still do not receive any phone calls with job offers.

Looking for and changing jobs does not always mean disappointment, although examples of obvious success are few. Piotr’s [M4] 6-month trip across Europe motivates him to start an NGO. Małgorzata [F7] did not want to “obey” at work, which resulted in her being fired. However, after months of unemployment she found a job at a corporation that she is happy with. More frequently, however, “rebels” have to curb their ambitions. The answer regarding problems at work is to lower one’s expectations. Dominika [F6] leaves a financial corporation due to lack of development, eventually ending up in a car dealer’s showroom. Ewelina [F26] finds that journalism “is not her calling” and finds a job at a reception desk. In this way, diarists start considering applying to places completely incompatible with their aspirations, professional profile, and expectations.

### *Unfulfilled promise of prosperity*

Work in professions associated with the middle class in Poland in many cases generates incomes that are too low in relation to the expectations of educated people with specialist competences. Aneta [F1], occupying managerial positions, points to the high costs of work itself related to commuting or the need to take care of children: “How much time does a person work in a month to earn money to work? I think about fuel, hairdresser, babysitter... it turns out to be two weeks, a week. Does anyone calculate this?”

In some professions, the salary does not go hand in hand with the prestige and satisfaction of the job. Michał [M2], a journalist from a local supplement of a large newspaper, writes about this: “In fact, I rarely admit to my friends how much I earn.”

Małgorzata [F7], a culture manager, admits that her basic salary has never been enough for her to live on, and hence the constant additional jobs—tutoring, translation work, event organization. Some of the diarists point to the high cost of living, which requires them to have an income at the “right” level.

Lack of money is a difficult area. I feel ashamed. I feel embarrassed to meet up with friends from my old job because I haven’t bought myself anything new for a long time, and they know my clothes, shoes, bags very well. I won’t go to the pub with them because spending a hundred on dinner at this stage of life is not an option. I try to manage our reduced budget, over half of which is gone at the start. We had once elevated our fixed expenses. I get mad at myself because I know people live on less. [...] People work in corner shops and live on PLN 1,600 take-home. For us, this would be covering our mortgage instalment [Monika, F20].

Of course, the situation becomes much more difficult in the face of unemployment.

Since I am not working, my husband provides us with financial security. We have somewhere to live, we have something to eat. I think about people who don't even have that. Now every penny counts. Since I don't work, I don't surprise my loved ones, I don't give them surprise presents anymore, I don't invite them for coffee and cakes, I don't think about Christmas. I no longer think about making dreams come true. Now every penny counts. When there is money, it becomes invisible. It magically turns into pleasure. When there is no money, it is a nuisance. Every day it painfully reminds us of its absence [Barbara, F12].

In the absence of a job, the fixed costs of living, elevated at the time when the diarists had one, become a stone around their neck, a cause of debt and fear, as in the case of Klaudia [F2], who was fired from a corporation.

The debts are yet the worst, if they weren't there, there would be more time. They make you run as fast as you can to be still in the same place. After all, I have a loan at the bank, and the bank does not wait long. Interest, reminders, telephone reminders. A nice lady from the bank called me recently to urge me to pay as soon as possible because the bank may terminate the agreement. I am getting more and more scared.

### *Social comparisons*

Becoming unemployed, the diarists started to pay more attention to what the people around them—neighbors and friends—said about them and how they were perceived. Talking to friends and acquaintances costs the diarists a lot, which makes them try to avoid these conversations, like the unemployed Monika [F20], formerly a director at a corporation.

I start going crazy, I think everyone is better off than me. I can burst into tears shopping in the corner shop, out of envy that the lady behind the counter has a job. She knows why she gets up in the morning. She laughs with her friend. I avoid meetings. I think everyone has had enough of me.

For her, however, giving up her social life doesn't bring the desired result when the internet abounds with information about other people's successes.

[...] Facebook—it's so depressing, it shows that everyone except me has an interesting life, full of challenges, they work in cool companies or have discovered their vocation and breed bees, grow gardens, are writers, painters. I guess Facebook was invented to make someone feel inferior, just like women's magazines that generate needs and make me feel like the poorest person in the world.

The "whirlwind of social comparisons" intensifies the wider the circle of acquaintances. Acquaintances living in wealthier Western European countries, the traditional destination of Polish economic emigration, are the source of bitter reflections. This is noted, among others, by Aneta [F1], a manager dismissed from her job, when she meets up with friends:

A friend, a confectioner, previously on a part-time contract at the minimum wage, went abroad. He was looking for a better job in Poland, he sent a lot of CVs, but either the salaries were poor or there was no response. Now he has tasted money, he flies, he goes to restaurants.

The diarists—for example, Mirosław [M5], an unemployed former director at a corporation—facing a personal crisis are even irritated by the very lifestyle of those around them.

We don't go away on any summer holiday, but we are bombarded by news from friends and acquaintances about a great holiday spent away. It's strange, but before, I somehow didn't notice how happy everyone around me was in the summer.

### *Mental well-being and health problems*

Trouble at work, low income and problems resulting from social comparisons add up to disturbed psychological well-being (understood as the result of cognitive and emotional appraisal of one's life consisting of levels of fulfilment and life satisfaction, Myers 2000). The diarists point to a lack of self-esteem and agency, of being able to direct their lives, or even of having a clearly defined life purpose. They feel that they are pursuing things that are not worth the sacrifice. The feeling of being lost is particularly evident in younger people.

I would like to start a family, have a wedding, go on holiday, or take out a mortgage. Right now I feel like a loser. I often have thoughts that it would be better if I disappeared. I feel useless and worthless. I'm 25 years old and I feel like I have no future ahead of me. I want to lie down and sleep through all the bad things. To wake up pain free and healthy. My body can't cope with the constant stress. The stress is depleting me and slowly killing me ... and I want to feel safe [Anna, F15].

Stress and overwork lead to professional burnout and nervous breakdowns. Unemployment either exacerbates these problems or stifles the joy of leaving a toxic work environment.

Professional burnout syndrome got me. I talked to my family. They knew best how much each day at work cost me. At night I would wake up with a stomachache, with a feeling "like I had swallowed a stone." I was tense inside and could not sleep. I constantly felt that I had things to do, that I'd made a mistake, that I hadn't taken care of something, that I was doing something wrong. The family doctor prescribed sedatives and suggested a holiday. I thought: "nice, but what about then? Everything will go back to normal." And I no longer wanted such a 'norm' [Joanna, F13].

Similar mental health problems translating into physical health are described by Klaudia, who was dismissed from a corporation [F2]:

Problems with sleep, high blood pressure, plagued by headaches, a decrease in immunity and chronic fatigue. This chronic fatigue causes problems with concentration. Once an energetic, lively person, I am now kind of burnt out inside.

Aneta [F16], a sales director at a bank who was dismissed from her job, paid for her job search with a visit to hospital and the need for psychiatric treatment:

The morning was no better. The bliss of waking up lasted a few seconds as the sun stroked rays across my face. After a moment of bliss, my consciousness awoke, a strange cramp caught in my stomach and I immediately ran to the toilet. Vomiting [...]. My energy, power, willpower could be compared to a flat battery. I felt dizzy and the world was spinning. I woke up in an ambulance.

### *Disturbance of family life*

Professional duties in the middle class often interfere with family life, especially with childcare. This is how Daria [F14], a manager at a corporation, describes it:

Now I felt that 8 hours of work and no more because at home my children and husband are waiting for me. It did not always work out. There was overtime, late returns home, which sometimes caused tensions in my marriage. It is not easy being a working mum. It isn't easy to draw the line at which you say from now on I am a mum, please respect that I want to work 8 hours and not a minute more. Or that if I have sick children [...] Everyone is worried about their job; a working mother is twice as scared.



Interestingly, in such situations, unemployment is sometimes perceived as an opportunity to rebuild relationships with those that are closest, as in the case of Aneta [F16], a sales director at a bank.

I left the company deliberately, after 20 years of work. Deliberately, because there came a time when I reached a wall. It was either me or my family. It was no longer possible to reconcile the two. As a Sales Director, you don't have working hours or a pre-defined day when you go home.

More frequently, however, improving the relationship with the family is hindered by insufficient income, poor mental health, or even just being unemployed, as in the case of Barbara [F12], a cosmetics industry employee in a big city.

A married couple. Both people work. They come equally tired after work. They do their shopping together. One goes to pick up the carpet and the other makes dinner. One vacuums and the other takes the jars to the basement. They walk the dog together. They talk about work. When you don't work, you upset the balance. Chores are no longer shared. Conversations stop being shared too.

Sometimes, the diarists feel that when they are not working people in their immediate environment even turn away from them. Aneta [F16] and Izabela [F17], unemployed former managers in corporations, describe crisis situations in their relationships. Izabela's husband moves out.

On Saturday, the kids are having breakfast, stony silence, I suddenly burst out crying, and the father of my children preaches me that I have to buck up, that work isn't everything, that he's had enough of my hysteria, that he's always told me it's not worth working so hard, and I didn't listen to him, so now I have, he doesn't understand what's the big deal... and since I can't cope with it, he's moving out to his parents', and I have time to get myself together... He's moving out and leaving me alone with all this... and the kids... I feel dizzy and faint.

## Conclusions

The analysis of the diaries provides an original argument for the accuracy of previous findings on the escalating problems of the middle class recorded in situations of crises and global processes of middle-class shrinkage. The analysis shows that there four "strangling hands" on the necks of the middle-class diary authors: (1) the system of motivations and aspirations inherent in social mobility processes, forcing them to invest in a higher status despite the lack of state support and the scarcity of adequate resources at the individual level; (2) the transformations within work available to the middle class, which is increasingly precarious and "flexible" and at the same time has less and less security; (3) the deficits experienced by individual diarists of state policies in favour of the middle class (the middle class is a category that has to manage on its own); and (4) the cultural mechanisms of comparison, self-exposure, and defining social adequacy, which in turn influence individual motivations and aspirations. The memoirs clearly demonstrate how this combination of interrelated processes suffocating the middle class, "works" at the level of individual fates. Thus, the memoirs make it possible to analyse the needs and problems of the Polish middle class as expressed in the individual accounts of the diarists. It is also possible to describe the middle class more precisely, as the memoirs explicitly show how fluid this category is.

Memoirs provide “deep” argumentation that macro-analyses based on statistical material (most often used in this research field) usually do not. Memoirs allow us to look at the effects of structural processes affecting the middle class at the level of its representatives’ life trajectories. Memoirs give authors an opportunity to tell their own story, to present everyday experiences from a personal perspective that is not provoked by researchers. In Poland, the memoirs have yielded narratives in which the middle class, in order to fulfil its hopes and aspirations, puts effort and determination into everyday activities only to be confronted with uncertainty, fragile status, and only a semblance of life fulfilment. The authors of the diaries analyzed build narratives of the impossibility of achieving and, above all, maintaining the social status of the middle class, narratives about the fragility of this status. They describe the desire to build an identity around professional roles and around work, which instead of profits, stability, and prestige brings financial disappointment, a sense of exploitation, and frustration requiring psychiatric support. They vividly portray the unbearable precariousness of the work available to the middle class today and the individual struggles with instability resulting from a lack of public policy that leaves the middle class to its own resources.

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