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Anomic Experiences in Anomic Social Conditions: Polish Youth During the Pandemic in the Light of Memoirs

Abstract: The aim of this text is to demonstrate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the psychosocial well-being of young people. For this purpose, the authors used the concept of social anomie as reconstructed by Krystyna Szafraniec, who pointed to seven dimensions of the experience of anomie: cognitive, axio-normative, interactional, identity-related, temporal, emotional, and behavioral. Consideration of these dimensions allowed for an in-depth analysis of empirical material consisting of pandemic-related memoirs obtained in two editions of a nationwide competition. The analyses used 103 diaries by authors aged 18–25. The collected material showed how the experience of the pandemic was especially difficult for young people due to their phase of life and social position. The subjects were entering adulthood in a context of uncertainty, limited social contacts, disruption of the temporal structure ordering their daily life, and emotional difficulties concerning their health and future.

Keywords: youth, anomie, anomic society, Covid-19 pandemic, memoirs

Introduction

Krystyna Szafraniec (2017: 9) noted that

> Young people are (…) a very good point of reference for observing what is happening to a society in general and the [group] undergoing unusual changes in particular. It is a lens in which the most diverse problems and tensions of the system are focused. It is a barometer of changes and social moods.

The observations of this Polish sociologist have not lost their relevance and have even gained in significance in view of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the well-being of young people. The pandemic is understood to have been a crisis that, even if it exposed society to entirely new stressors, above all exposed the shortcomings of the pre-pandemic "normality."

Researchers and publicists are now raising the alarm that (1) the pandemic has caused a significant deterioration in young people's mental health, and (2) the situation has not improved in the years following the lifting of restrictions (cf. Kleine, Galimov et al. 2023; Bevilacqua, Fox-Smith et al. 2023, Magklara and Kyriakopoulos 2023; Sundqvist, Korzhina et al. 2024; CBOSNews 2021). Lucyna Myszka-Strychalska (2022: 167–171), in

a synthesis of the results of empirical studies, points to the pandemic experiences of young people (aged 18–24 or 19–25) in four core areas. In the dimension of social relationships, young people reported experiencing a deterioration in relationships with their partners, parents, and friends, and a decline in interpersonal skills and trust. In their inner lives, they indicated experiencing a loss of sense of control and agency, the disruption of the rhythm of their daily lives, boredom, fear for the health of their family members, especially the elderly, and also a generalized fear for the future. Professionally, loss of employment, changes in employment, and also the sheer decrease in job security have led to increased anxiety and risk of depression. In the area of mental health, the pandemic has led to mood disorders and depressed moods, increased stress levels, anxiety, increased frequency of depressive states and feelings of loneliness. There is also an increase in the declared need for psychological support among academic youth, and increased alcohol consumption and use of psychoactive substances. Characteristically, it is among young people that the desire to return to the pre-pandemic situation seems to be greatest. What emerges from contemporary research is thus a bleak picture of young people's everyday lives—burdened, anxious, and displaying a deficit of social relationships, which are crucial for emotional stability.

When the pandemic hit, young people were already in a weakened situation: systemically, due to the specificity of the contemporary social order, which sets ever higher requirements for individuals, and structurally, due to the very specificity of being young. The hardships of coping with everyday life had had a destructive effect on the psycho-physical well-being of young people long before the pandemic. Here, experts have pointed to trends of widening experiences of depression, anxiety disorders with panic attacks, phobias, behavior disorders, periodic explosive disorders, alcohol-, tobacco- and drug-related disorders, and suicidal behaviors (e.g., the results of the EZOP1 and EZOP2 studies).[1] Young people's vulnerability to the pandemic crisis also stems from the very nature of youth, which is a time of profound and rapid change in the physical, mental, and social spheres of life. While young people are constructing their identity and organizing their self-image, and at the same time seeking their place in society, they are particularly susceptible to the effects of any social, cultural, or economic upheaval—especially one as violent as a global pandemic.

The focus of this article is how Polish young people[2] (18–24 years old) experienced life during the Covid-19 pandemic. On the basis of memoirs collected in two nationwide competitions, we have attempted to analyze the ways that Polish youth dealt with the change the pandemic brought to the existing socio-cultural conditions. We juxtaposed the experiences of the diarists with the theoretical categories proposed by Krystyna Szafraniec and attempted to outline the reality of the anomic social conditions in which young people (and not only they) have to function today.

[1] Cf. https://ezop.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/EZOP-I_Raport_max.pdf (accessed: 24.05.2024); https://ezop.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/EZOPII_Zmiana-kondycji-zdrowotnej.pdf (accessed: 25.05.2024).

[2] We refer to the category also referred to as "young adults." In the text, the term "youth" will be used as well.

Anomic Society—Inspiration from Krystyna Szafraniec's Work[3]

Krystyna Szafraniec's monograph *Anomia—przesilenie tożsamości…* (Anomia—The Crisis of Identity…) was published in 1986 and was a significant contribution to Polish sociology in the field of anomie theory.[4] Although this monograph was written nearly forty years ago, it provides a useful construct for diagnosing and explaining contemporary processes and individual experiences due to the questions it poses, its creative reconstructions and discussions of the classic approaches of Emile Durkheim, Robert Merton, Talcott Parsons, William Simon and John G. Gagnon, and David Riesman, and its syntheses (e.g., of dimensions of anomie, abstracted features of an anomic society, and typologies of adaptive responses to social change and anomie). Our present attempt to view the social changes unleashed and amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to young people's experiences and sense of identity is thus not so much based on a particular "classic" theory of anomie as it is rooted in and inspired by Szafraniec's recapitalizations of these theories. Her ideas have important operational qualities (in the form of insightful questions, syntheses, characteristics of anomic experience) and have the undeniable potential to be applied to subsequent diagnoses and explanations (in other times, and in connection with other changes).

We have thus followed in Krystyna Szafraniec's footsteps. The monograph cited here is the beginning of the trail, in the 1980s. Szafraniec posited that adolescents could be viewed as a litmus test of social change. At the same time, she pointed out that we are discussing a life stage characteristic of youth, who in verifying their ambitions are constantly confronted with norms and systemic limitations. Szafraniec, while recognizing that these processes are typical in the shaping of social maturity, emphasizes the specificity of the assessments made by youth. Thus, she writes that

> (…) the marginal positioning of youth in the social structure, the clash of awakened ambitions with the limitations of one's own (unstable) position and with the limitations of the social system, typical of youth, rarely result in positive assessments of reality. (…) Living with an awareness of the border-ness of the surrounding world is a reason for inquiring into the changeability and multidimensionality of one's own Self. In borderlands, individual experiences are always intertwined with someone else's, not always fitting into established or imposed patterns and schemes of thinking (Szafraniec 2011: 12).

Returning to the key questions that Szafraniec poses, which inspired us in writing this text, it should be noted that in the above-mentioned monograph on anomie, she attempts to answer the questions of how "people behave in the face of abrupt changes in the social environment" and how this could "relate to the process of individual and social

[3] This text has provided the authors with an opportunity to pay their respects to Krystyna Szafraniec, a sociologist who passed away in 2022. Her professional work consistently developed a discourse on what she described as "the sociology of education and upbringing in its entanglements in the processes of social change" (Szafraniec 2016: 164).

[4] Krystyna Szafraniec describes the background to the creation of this monograph in a jubilee volume dedicated to Professor Zbigniew Kwieciński (supervisor of her doctoral dissertation) (Szafraniec 2009: 179–180). Szafraniec, faced with the challenge of studying people who had experienced both the profound systemic crisis of the People's Republic of Poland and also a crisis of their own identity (in the context of coping with the changes around and within themselves), received a suggestion-hypothesis of anomie from her supervisor. The studies undertaken resulted in both the dissertation itself, which was subsequently published as a book (Szafraniec 1990), and the previously published book on anomie, to which we primarily refer.

emancipation" (Szafraniec 1986: 12). The Covid-19 pandemic can be considered such an "abrupt change in the social environment," in the form of, for example, the threat, the universalized experience of infection (with uncertainty about the course of the disease), spatial isolation, the reformulation in terms of social roles (e.g., in education and remote work), and lack of access to previous forms of activity (such as socializing, walking, or running, which are also treated as anti-stressors against daily pressures). Szafraniec's analysis of anomic society stems from her observations of social changes at the beginning of the 1980s. Szafraniec wrote of those times: "The accumulation (…) of tensions (…) gave a peculiar, grotesque-schizophrenic face to the socialization conditions of successive generations. The average Pole had to cope at the same time (!) with a shortage (scarcity) of goods and necessities of life, with a deficit of security (trust, hope, bonds), with a deficiency of ideas, norms, values, faith—with a deficiency of purpose" (Szafraniec 1991: 49). For Szafraniec, significant social change and, at the same time, conditions in which the breakdown of a sense of purpose and identity becomes inevitable, or at least very likely (ibid.: 9), is practically "(…) a syndrome of phenomena whose genesis and character clearly seem to result from the breakdown of the axio-normative structures so far in force in the society, including—primarily—the phenomenon of the lack of integration of a significant number of individuals with socially established cultural patterns and the decline of motivation to act accordingly (…)" (Ibid.). It is fair to ask here whether contemporary youth do not face similar deficits and problems, and whether the above symptoms can be detected in the experience of young people during the pandemic?

In the above-mentioned monograph (1986), Szafraniec draws attention to the consequences of social change manifested in individual experiences:

> …is it difficult in our environment to identify people who are disappointed, confused, aware of the emptiness around them and in front of them, retreating to their "hideouts" or deciding to play their own roles under pressure? (…) is the crisis of motivation, purpose and identity a social problem, or does it rather concern a certain narrow category of people—particularly sensitive, with a particularly developed self-awareness, with an exceptionally strong commitment to their own lives and the problems of others? (Ibid: 8).

The above questions inspired us to undertake analyses to answer the question: to what extent do the above-mentioned feelings of disappointment, confusion, withdrawal, and the crisis of motivation, characterize the young people who wrote of their experience in the pandemic memoirs? At the same time, we have attempted to reconstruct the young people's sense of identity, which we have understood, following Szafraniec, as their convictions in regard to the roles they want to play, their way of life, and the values that form their everyday attitudes as "(…) a symbolic structure that provides the individual with continuity and coherence despite changes in the biographical situation and despite changing positions within the social space" (ibid.: 41).

The pandemic affected a generation that had already faced the challenges of growing up in specific socio-cultural conditions. Szafraniec claimed that

> The crumbling of traditional institutions and authorities, the fluidity and opacity of the environment, make the world unpredictable—it becomes a "to-be-made" world, with the fundamental task of creating different strategies and life patterns, adequate to new situations and challenges. In this task, traditional solutions and traditional authorities do not necessarily apply (Szafraniec 2011: 29).

It is, however, a world from which one cannot opt out. The modern age is a challenge both for institutions, which have to reinvent themselves in the face of new expectations, and for people. There is a need to develop certain skills, of which openness and reflexivity, and active participation in everyday life (where the Self becomes the planning center of one's own biography), are among the basic ones (cf. ibid.). Thus, the pre-pandemic social conditions and challenges themselves released pressure and opened up opportunities, but at the same time they did not provide ready-made coping patterns. As Szafraniec concludes, "The pace and scale of change leading to the uprooting of traditional institutions and authorities, combined with the deficits of the 'catching-up' state, made the do-it-yourself strategy the clearest signal sent to the youth" (ibid.: 33). She wrote about these conditions in a later text as well and pointed to the doubled pace of cultural change and doubled social tensions in relation to the structural capacity of a system that encompassed phenomena such as the abundance of goods and socialization into a world of consumption (as having no alternative); the pluralism of offers and the high valuation of individual choices; risk society, which uproots tradition and established patterns and forces individualization processes and strategies on the reflexive subject; the opacity of norms; and the internal contradictions of capitalism (cf. Szafraniec 2011a: 33–34). It can thus be presumed that the pandemic did not so much trigger new problems but rather changed conditions in a way that made the previously experienced problems, tensions, and uncertainties more pronounced and acute—so that they constituted anomic experiences (cf. Karwacki and Lepczyński 2022).

In verifying to what extent the symptoms of anomie can be found in the experiences of the young people of the memoirs, we have taken into account two important dimensions of anomie that Szafraniec draws attention to: anomic social conditions (a society immersed in a state of anomie) and specific human behavior (changes in one's social personality and experiences occurring under such conditions) (ibid.: 130). At the operational level, the above two dimensions of anomic society (as closely related phenomena) are based on processes of (a) a breakdown in a social system's applicable values, norms, and principles (their interpretative rules) and the emergence of other axio-normative structures (new social norms) in their place; (b) a breakdown of social bonds—both interpersonal (distrust, competition, instrumentalism, cynicism) and macrosystemic (the breakdown of existing mechanisms of social integration, regulation and control); and (c) a breakdown of the dynamics and prospects of social development (a state of non-equilibrium manifested in alternating phases of rapid change and deep stagnation, committed participation for the sake of change and powerlessness, a leaping oscillation between good and bad prospects, short-term or non-existent prospects) (ibid: 131). In analyzing the collected material, we therefore looked for symptoms of a sense of anomie as a state of uncertainty (helplessness, confusion, bewilderment, disorientation, and tension) appearing in important layers of "human-world" relations and being the result of various degrees of the disintegration of previous personality structures (ibid.: 133). This approach is consistent with what other authors refer to as a personality identity crisis, a crisis of motivation and purpose (ibid.: 134).

In which specific experiences (in this case of representatives of the youth category) can we search for and structure the state of anomie? According to Szafraniec, what is relevant here is the sense of uncertainty and multidimensional tension in the following spheres:

cognitive—the world is difficult to understand;
axio-normative—internalized norms have lost their integrative power (they seem subjectively alien) and there is a lack of alternatives and a moral void;
interactional—a sense of distrust towards people, a sense of cynicism, and the instrumentality of relations;
of the self-consciousness—self-identity, the individual does not fully accept themself in their roles, or accepts themself but has a sense of the inconsistency of the roles performed; there is a loss of their "self," an alienation in relation to themself);
temporal—the awareness of a shortened, wrong, or blocked perspective, of living in a temporal void);
emotional—an ambivalent attitude towards socio-cultural reality, one's own position in it and towards oneself;
behavioral—a conviction of limited possibilities or difficulties in making choices and deciding on one's own behavior, uncertainty about the validity of adopted programs of action from the utilitarian or moral point of view, or for the sake of a sense of security (ibid: 133–134).

The above dimensions of the sense of anomie as an identity crisis provided the basic structure for our analyses of the empirical material, and the analysis itself was accompanied by the awareness that, as Szafraniec said, "Without disintegrative states and tensions within axio-normative structures, signifying an actual identity crisis, there can hardly be any development" (ibid.: 169).

The Pandemic and the Social Conditions of Anomie Among Young People

As a crisis situation, a pandemic is a collective experience that exposes both the previous weaknesses of the social system and generates new ones as a result of unsuccessful attempts to cope with the next rapid change. In a pandemic situation, crises in the legitimacy of the system and in the motivation to participate in social life in an engaged way (Tillmann 1996: 206–230) are sources of strong tensions and axio-normative conflicts, which are exacerbated as the authorities attempt to interfere in the everyday life of citizens in a more determined manner than before. The violation of the core value of the individual's need for self-determination and autonomy creates an even greater sense of human confusion and insecurity. Although the problem affects society as a whole, adolescents are particularly susceptible to various types of "harm." This is due to the fact that they are in a phase of life associated with significant physical and psychological changes and with changes in social expectations resulting from their roles. Adolescents and post-adolescents (or adult kids) (Szafraniec 2010: 14) face important life challenges, which involve both defining their own identity and building lasting social bonds in peer relationships (Erikson 2000; 2002). Searching for one's place in numerous social groups requires a structuring of the self-image. For the individual, this type of search is reflected in the processes of assimilation and accommodation of new elements of the identity structure (Melchior 1990: 50). Adolescence is also a period when, through identification and a sense of belonging, a person gains self-confidence and a sense of the purpose of their own existence (Misztal 1974).

In human life, the phase of youth is connected with a strong need to establish social relations and to perpetuate and maintain them—a kind of faithfulness both in social relations and involvement in various fields of activity (Witkowski 2000). Such bonds allow for the crystallization of the young person's own self-image and of the axio-normative system; these will be the basis for all the person's life decisions and attitude to the surrounding reality and themself (Tillmann 1996: 184–205).

The process of growing up and entering adulthood, being a time of major changes in a young person's life, requires a restructuring of the experienced world and of the individual's own image and identity. The crisis that occurs in this connection (Erikson 2000) is intensified by unstable life conditions. The scale of the experience was increased by the unprecedented scope of the pandemic, and by the preventive measures taken, which totally disrupted the world of the individual, especially the young, whose independence and autonomy was severely limited.

As studies have shown (Benninger et al. 2023; Drozdowski et al. 2020; Khan and Kadoya 2021; Loades et al. 2020; Parola et al. 2020), the pandemic, the restrictions associated with it, and the social consequences we have begun to observe, have particularly affected young people, due to their life situation and social status. All the restrictions on mobility and social isolation cut young people off from peer relationships and prevented them from developing their interests in those physical activities (e.g., sport) that had previously given them a sense of satisfaction derived from involvement and control over their own mind and body. Activities that enabled young people to generate a sense of self-esteem and well-being became impossible, and sometimes even forbidden, in the new circumstances.

Studies conducted in a number of countries on the psycho-social condition of young people during the Covid-19 pandemic seem to confirm the thesis that their experience of the crisis is one of particular disruption and multiple burdens. The Covid-19 pandemic, in the form of the risk of infection not only for the young people themselves but also their family members, forced changes in the functioning of everyday life and had a very strong and multidimensional impact on the activity, mental health, and well-being of young people. Researchers here have exposed negative mental health indicators (e.g., depressive mood, feelings of loneliness, experience of stress, sadness, depression, psychosomatic symptoms), lifestyle changes (e.g., limited sports participation, reduced sleep time), and major effects on the quality of interpersonal relationships and digital hygiene (cf. e.g., Lundström 2022; Salerno et al. 2021; Pyżalski 2021; Poleszak, Pyżalski 2020; Makaruk et al. 2020; Brown et al. 2020). After analyzing a number of research results, it is possible to advance the thesis that it is adolescents and young adults whose mental health was most affected by the pandemic, as they suffered from fear for the health and lives of their loved ones, the destabilization of family life, isolation from their peers, the need to change their current habits, and, importantly, they often had to cope without the help and support of their loved ones (cf. Lundström 2022; Chen et al. 2021; Subocz 2023; Drozdowski et al. 2020; Golberstein et al. 2020; Makaruk et al. 2020). Young people were thus exposed to anxiety and the loss of a sense of security in a phase of life in which important social relationships are usually formed and educational and occupational pathways are constructed (cf. Subocz 2023; Hafstad et al. 2020; Craig et al. 2022).

The experience of loneliness and insecurity on the part of young people, who are often dependent on others for their housing and material goods, was intensified by their inability to meet frequently with people (for instance, a partner) with whom they had close relations but with whom they did not live (MacDonald et al. 2023: 4). This limited their ability to fulfill their need for closeness and independence, which play a special role in the developmental process at this stage of life. Such an experience interferes with entry into adulthood and disrupts the stability of the life environment, which, especially for young people, is the basis for the formation of a lasting and continuous identity structure. This has a significant impact on their psychological well-being. During the pandemic, there were an increasing number of people with mental health problems who required specialist intervention (Benninger et al. 2023: 377–378; Loades et al. 2020: 1236; MacDonald et al. 2023: 5), which was difficult given the conditions. The uncertainty of external conditions, as well as the increasing health risks, were a source of fear and anxiety for young people, who are not yet equipped with the necessary skills and resources to cope with such difficulties. As pandemic-era research indicated, "the younger seem to fear the pandemic more than the older and oldest, and show a greater intensity of depressive symptoms" (Budzyńska and Moryś 2021: 439).

The occupational status of young people absolutely exposed them to the risks arising from the pandemic. On the one hand, those who were unskilled but essential workers (whose work is necessary even when there is a high risk of infection) were particularly at risk of Covid-19, and, on the other hand, those who were in low-skill occupations (in catering, tourism, leisure, etc.) were the first to be deprived of their jobs as a result of lockdowns (Benninger et al. 2023: 368–369; MacDonald et al. 2023: 10–13). It can be seen that during the pandemic, risk and uncertainty were not distributed among members of society in an egalitarian way, and all manifestations of social inequality and discrimination seemed to become more pronounced and clearer in the public perception.

A young person's development and identity construction requires the development of a coherent and continuous temporal structure that allows them to organize reality and their own biographical experiences. The individual's identity is expressed in their ability to synthesize and accumulate all the elements of their personal structure on a timeline. The individual can then maintain the continuity of their self-concept in spite of any significant changes to their self (physical or mental changes, changing social roles, etc.) or external conditions. The capacity for self-reflection, self-appraisal, and valuation of their self-image, which are particularly important in the young person's process of forming a self-identity, are closely linked to experiencing and living through time (conducting a dialogue between the present Self, the past Self, and the future Self (Archer 2013: 222–250)). The reduction of an individual's temporal structure to only one dimension ("the past," "the present," or "the future") is an expression of problems of adaptation to current changes in the social environment. Rapid change often evokes in those experiencing it a longing for the past and a return to "normality," that is, the world they have so far experienced with a sense of obviousness and relative security.

The regulations that were applied to society during the pandemic were unfamiliar to young people (social isolation, the disruption of familiar patterns of social interaction, the limited functioning of numerous social institutions, etc.) and violated their temporal

structure. Such a break gave rise, in the minds of young people, to a nagging sense of having lost a year or two, which in their opinion were so significant and unique. This applies both to peer relationships—that is, the lack of opportunities to make new friends—and to important educational experiences, which often have a ritual quality that can be associated with a "rite of passage"—finishing a certain stage of education, starting a new one, going to university, etc. (cf. MacDonald et al. 2023: 5–6).

Youth is a period of life when, through the experience of a normative crisis, the individual coping with the situation is engaged in the crystallization of their own self-image and the axio-normative system that will guide them in later life. This is the "primary identity crisis" inherent in the epigenetic cycle of human development (Erikson 2000; Witkowski 2000). It is a necessary part of the process and, in the fairly stable external conditions of the social environment within which it takes place, allows the individual to become independent and to enter adulthood. The developmental process may be significantly disturbed in a situation of social anomie, as such a situation deprives the young person of the clear and legible axio-normative landmarks that allow for the development of their own life orientation. The implication could be that the experience of the pandemic and its consequences will be particularly burdening for young people who did not yet have a clear and stable value system. "[…In] adolescence, in the process of overcoming crises, all previous experiences acquired during childhood are challenged and reordered in a qualitatively new way. Here, the adolescent is faced with the task of reconstructing and reintegrating 'the values collected during childhood that are related to the 'self' (*Ich-Werte*)'" (Tillmann 1996: 197).

During the pandemic, young people experienced all the dimensions of anomie reconstructed by Szafraniec—cognitive, axio-normative, interactional, identity-related, temporal, emotional, and behavioral (Szafraniec 1986: 133–134)—and thus their sense of uncertainty and the tensions in their relation to the surrounding world and to themselves were intensified. The question that arises at this point is whether, when the relative stability of life has been disrupted by a pandemic, a shaken sense of identity is a universal experience (especially for the young), or can we find examples of diverse forms of adaptation? In her analyses concerning adaptation to a situation of anomie (especially secondary anomie), Szafraniec draws attention to differentiation in the levels of identity development and cognitive-moral development (in reference to Jürgen Habermas's concept (Habermas 1974; Witkowski 1988)):

> […] identity instability and crisis (forcing a search for more or less constructive solutions to one's own adaptation problems) occurred in the least socialized individuals. The crisis of the SELF's structure was in this case a function of the crisis, contradictions, and rapid changes within the socio-cultural macro-structures, which triggered an inevitable conflict in upbringing and socialization processes. Unconcerned individuals, functioning at the level of natural identity (Habermas) characteristic of the pre-conventional phase of moral development (Kohlberg), are somehow in this situation naturally immune to the experience of crises, tensions, and conflicts in the structure of the SELF (Szafraniec 1990: 187–188).

Consequently, the experience of anomie, which can lead either to an atrophy of the individual's personality or, on the contrary, to development, depends on the identity level reached so far (natural identity, role, ego).

An important addition to the above issue, and one allowing for a better understanding of young people's experience of the situation under analysis, is the distinction between

the twofold consequences of this social state at the level of individuals' adaptive forms. What is meant here is "[…] the difference between the situation of a split identity and an existential split identity" (Witkowski 1988: 165). In the latter case, we can assume that this is a situation where the individual cannot cope with the acute experience of their own incoherence. As a result, this can lead to the person's loss of their sense of self and an axio-normative crisis (situational steering). In the first case (a split identity), the problem is even more serious, as the individual does not experience a crisis of the sense of identity and the mechanism of anomic adaptation that arises under these conditions but, somehow transferring the incoherence of the external world into the structure of the human Self, does not feel the ailments that this situation could generate (Witkowski 1988: 165–166). Thus, the situation does not motivate the individual towards any change, leading to stagnation and withdrawal.

The characteristics of adaptation forms and identity problems connected with disruption of the existing order indicate the need for social sensitivity to the experiences of the young, who are particularly susceptible to crises, wounds, or traumas (these may be a source of developmental blocks for them). Krystyna Szafraniec's findings on youth justify social concern for the state of the young generation, especially in conditions of change and crises. She writes that

> Young people, due to their peripheral location in society and the social vulnerability typical of this age, are a sensitive indicator of the state of society. They are never "like this" for their own sake. They are aggressive, destructive, and angry when the social system does not give them opportunities and pushes them to the margins of life. When these opportunities are clear and within reach, they can be creative, active, entrepreneurial, and committed. They cause educational problems insofar as they expose the weaknesses and crisis states of their own society (Szafraniec 2000: 30).

The Contests for Memoirs of the Coronavirus Era —Assumptions and Analytical Strategies

The empirical material of the present analysis is qualitative and was obtained through two nationwide memoir-writing competitions during the first and second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic (respectively, in the second quarter of 2020 and fourth quarter of 2020). In 2020 a team of researchers from the Institute of Social Economy (Warsaw School of Economics), together with a team from the Institute of Sociology (Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń), conducted a memoir study. The Institute of Social Economy had experience dating back to before the Second World War in implementing this type of competition; it had also collaborated with researchers from Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń in holding a competition for the best diary of an unemployed person.

The invitations to the two editions of the contest, which were distributed in the Polish media, called on adult respondents to describe their own and their family's situation against the background of their daily life during the pandemic, their reactions to the events of the epidemic, their assessment of the support they received, and their perspectives on how they reconciled their roles in the household. The authors of the memoirs were also asked to complete a short questionnaire, from which socio-demographic profiles of the respondents

were created and their life situations were assessed. An Ethics Committee agreed to conduct the study.

The participants were informed that the best entries would receive cash prizes. Committees consisting of sociologists, economists, politicians, and journalists were appointed to evaluate the entries in each round of the competition. The Commission members reviewed all the submitted entries and then each recommended the ten best. The meeting of the Commission involved consideration of the selected works, discussion, and agreement on the verdict, which had to be based on consensus. The criterion for the selection of the works was the richness of the description of everyday life, and the inclusion of multiple themes, which allowed the author's experience to be reconstructed in relation to the themes outlined in the competition's call for submissions. Participation in the competition entailed written consent for the author's data to be processed. The memoirs were anonymized after the competition.

The participants submitted the memoirs themselves in response to the invitation to enter the competition. In the first edition of the competition, 449 memoirs were submitted, 84% of which were written by women. In the second edition, 249 memoirs were submitted, 86% of which were written by women. The average age of the authors was 38. In the analysis, we focused on memoirs written by young people, that is, those aged between 18 and 25 (one participant, who was taking part with the permission of her guardians, was 16 years old). In total, 103 entries were analyzed (67 of those submitted in the first wave and 36 of those submitted in the second wave; 86 were written by women).

The memoir accounts were analyzed following a qualitative content analysis procedure (Miles et al. 2014). A coding key was developed and two researchers coded the collected material to obtain blocks of text pertaining to dimensions of the experience of anomie. During the coding, additional subcodes were added. Following Berg and Lune's (2012) principles, each coding category was supplemented with quotations until a satisfactory thematic saturation was reached; that is, each successive quotation did not contribute any new information. Following the same set of rules (Berg and Lune 2012; Charmaz 2014), the most representative statements were then selected for presentation in the article. MAXQDA 2022 software was used for the analyses. The designations of the diary citations indicate, sequentially, the first or second edition of the memoir competition and the number of the memoir in the complete set obtained in that edition. Thus, [2/122] denotes the diary obtained in the second edition and recorded in the set under number 122.

We are aware of the limitations of the memoir method. The invitation to participate in the competition provided for the submission of any form of memoir (diary, post-author account, blog, or photographic documentation). The organizers of the competition were keen to enable the experience of the pandemic to be shared in the form most familiar to the authors, giving them space to respond to the suggestions about the main themes listed in the call for submissions. The material was pre-selected by the team, and the diaries that matched the contest announcement were considered for analysis. While maintaining freedom of expression, the participants were provided with a set of issues and problem themes relevant to the perspective of the research project. There are two main risks with the diary method. First, the authors of the entries may color or modify their actual experiences and opinions. Second, the contributors may be either those people who had more energy

than others, or on the contrary, they may be those who felt very unhappy and therefore needed to be heard. However, this risk also appears with other data collection methods and techniques.

The study thus explored the memoirists' experienced world—the subjective experiences of individuals—while at the same time attempting to apply basic methods of qualitative data analysis, such as avoiding extreme cases (and exemplifications), identifying several exemplifications of a given regularity, searching for repeated experiences and patterns, and having several independent researchers check the findings (Lune and Berg 2017). Therefore, although the collected material does not quite allow for the experiences described therein to be generalized in regard to the whole society, it certainly shows that the problems and phenomena affected quite a number of people in that society and were connected to broader macro-social processes.

Anomic Experiences of Young People During the Pandemic —Analysis of the Material

Following Krystyna Szafraniec, the authors of the present text looked for manifestations of anomie in the experience of uncertainty and tension in seven predefined spheres: cognitive, axio-normative, interactional, self-conscious, temporal, emotional, and behavioral. Szafraniec's theoretical proposal provided a sieve through which a wealth of empirical material could be filtered. The complexity of the situations in which the memoir authors found themselves, however, meant that the proposed dimensions were often intertwined. Hence, the analysis points to the most noteworthy phenomena from an anomic perspective, signaling the dimensions of uncertainty present in them. Below, the authors of this article will start with those experiences that are universal among age groups in order to move on to phenomena that seem specific to young people.

The virus as the unknown

The basis of uncertainty is lack of knowledge. According to Szafraniec, the inability to understand the world is the cognitive dimension of uncertainty that accompanies anomie. The pandemic suddenly made the world even more difficult to comprehend. The memoirists, especially in the first weeks after the virus appeared, were confused: they did not know where to get information and were nervously awaiting decisions from their superiors and the authorities. The decisions, however, were all too often "empty words" [84]. The lack of information created fear:

> …with childlike naivety, I wanted at that time to hear from the lecturer a deadline, an assurance. As if he were some kind of oracle on the matter. Or maybe I was just afraid that I would lose everything that formed my everyday life [225].

However, an excess of information was as frustrating as its lack. The memoirists were constantly bombarded by conflicting reports and apocalyptic visions. Others, in their search for information, fell into the terror-filled media pot themselves.

I am all nervous and stressed. I fear everything and for everything. Every day I read the coverage of the day in regard to the coronavirus. I'm up to date with everything. And it's blowing my mind, but I can't stop. A lack of knowledge terrifies me [252].

The flood of information doesn't equip you with knowledge; it just makes you feel surrounded, [it] "heightens the fear and paranoia" [267].

I was scared. I genuinely freaked out. I didn't know what was going on, and the news was hitting me like bullets, ripping my thoughts apart, left and right [83].

The panic of the first weeks of the pandemic only exacerbated an old dilemma for media audiences: Who should one trust? Who is telling the truth? The diarists maturely tried to reach for "verified" and "factual" sources of information, WHO and government recommendations. However, they were still surrounded by rumors, conspiracy theories, and alarmist reports from those challenging the official narrative. There was no need to believe them for fear to grow on their grounds. "And how am I supposed to be wise in this turmoil?" asks [119], while trying "rationally" to support the government's actions.

[…] the seed of doubt sown by opponents of the virus is germinating. Do you know anyone who has fallen ill […]? No. Would this wonderful minister, if he were honest, have scammed millions? No. Confidence is declining. But there is no void in life. You notice that, in fact, most of the actions of the authorities and decision-makers are chaotic, random […]. Or maybe it's the very people who say the virus is harmless […], only people have turned it up and made an unnecessary fuss? Or maybe traditional methods of building immunity are actually enough? […] All this makes me confused as to how much truth there is in what [119].

Some diarists thus capitulated, stating that "we will never learn the truth" [158]. "We stop listening to fake news," [267] said one respondent in revealing their remedy for the information chaos, adding, "Ordinary news too. It's a tactic for staying calm."

Cutting off information, however, does not allow one to escape the virus itself. For months the virus was the great unknown: How did it actually get transmitted? What was the threat? Who was at risk? The microbe appeared to be "merciless, treacherous, inconspicuous, unexplored," and full of paradoxes, since it "kills the strong and spares the weak" [2/107]. Thus the memoirists would wonder, "Is my itchy throat already the coronavirus? Or have I been ill a long time? Will I infect my illness-ridden mother when I return from the shop?" The growing awareness of the nature of the danger, however, did not break the transmission of uncertainty. After all, the questions remained: Are the restrictions working? Since they were loosened, has the danger passed? Why did we have a lockdown when the scale of infection was many times smaller, but today we behave as if the pandemic were not here?

The politicians don't really know what game they are playing either. Since this whole pandemic broke out, I have the feeling that all the people around the world are being experimented on. Some this way, some that way, some yet another way. We lock down, we are unlocked. We close temporarily. We open temporarily [2/131].

"How is it possible that the virus is killed by the soap we used to make in chemistry lessons in middle school and there is still no vaccine for it?" asks one diarist [253]. And when one does appear, how effective is it? Or safe? "We're waiting for a vaccine, but we're not even confident about it," states another diarist [326].

What to do?

Thus, if it is impossible to understand the pandemic, perhaps there is no point in trying?

From the beginning of the pandemic, I didn't understand the situation and the point of closing anything down. […] there have always been diseases and there will always be diseases. So we're going to get sick and die anyway. I thought it was better to live a shorter but happier life [2/239].

However, eschewing ignorance will not solve the dilemmas of uncertainty related to deciding on one's own behavior. Because knowledge is supposed to be the basis for rational action.

The worst thing is this uncertainty about whether I am doing the right thing and whether it cannot be done in a different, better way [115].

The implementation of quarantine forced people to make instant decisions, including young people, who are active and mobile, yet often lack the resources needed to act. Where should they spend the quarantine: in a rented flat or the family home? How should they organize moving out of the dormitory? How should they prepare for a lockdown: should they let panic set in and stock up on the essentials? Should they go out shopping or not?

The pandemic's day-to-day reality brought further dilemmas. How should the pandemic restrictions be interpreted? Is walking the dog for the fifth time that day already a form of defiance? Will I get a ticket for jogging in the woods? Should I go to church when there will be so many people there? How should I spend the holidays? Do I get involved in sewing masks or volunteering when it raises the risk of infection?

I found it unimaginably hard to get used to constantly questioning every activity before leaving the house. Are there hours for seniors, or is it Saturday and they don't apply? Should I wear a mask or are face shields also allowed? Can I stay on the beach without a mask? […] How many people per square meter? But damn it, how many square meters does this shop have? [2/122].

The subsequent weeks and months brought new questions. What about the interrupted treatment of a chronic illness? Should one look for a new job or to wait out this difficult time for the labor market? How to manage the prolonged quarantine, and how not to let boredom set in?

Behavioral uncertainty is closely linked to the axio-normative dimension. Pre-pandemic norms and values came into striking contrast with the new ones imposed by the virus. The restrictions made people consider matters that under normal circumstances would have been taken for granted: Should one go to the polls? Should one meet a friend? Should one hug one's mother? Every day of the pandemic, then, the diarists put safety and democracy, friendship, and love on the line. Sometimes the dilemmas were of a lesser weight: Should one go on holiday to the lake or further away? Could one go to the shop to buy a favorite product? Still, each decision was a weighing of fundamental values because ultimately someone's health, and perhaps life, could be at stake.

Entangled in relationships

Pandemic dilemmas became most acute where relationships were involved. Here the axio-normative conflict recurred. The memoirists were caught in a corner, facing a choice

between maintaining relationships and safety. There were no good solutions; each led to a different problem: fear, loneliness, longing, or conflict.

The loneliness of isolation could arise from an obligatory situation, or it could be voluntary, when a relationship was sacrificed on the altar of safety.

On that day it had also been two weeks since I saw my boyfriend […] we decided there was no point risking it [8].

The pandemic spoiled our plans, our arranged life and, above all, what we had been waiting for so long. Intimacy [2/119].

The pandemic put relationships that had previously seemed happy and stable to the test. And it destroyed those that, even without the virus, were not entirely healthy. The presence of a partner did not protect the diarists from loneliness. It could even make the loneliness worse, when the other person did not live up to expectations.

In quarantine, loneliness, which was previously a harmless affliction, turned into a severe illness. The memoirists only noticed their lack of connection when confronted with the happiness of others.

The sight of people causes [me] pain. They look so happy. They certainly have someone to talk to, someone to cry beside [2/167].

The pandemic swept away the environment in which young people made and sustained relationships. The memoirists regretfully point out that chat rooms, webcams, and communicators are poor substitutes for real bonds. Before, they used to choose the web; today they are doomed to it.

The coronavirus exposed the cost of structural individualism. Even those diarists who did not suffer from loneliness, did not fall into conflict with their loved ones, and did not lose anyone, felt that they are alone in society.

Online learning being one big, painful lesson that at the end of the day everyone is alone with everything anyway [54].

Shut in among loved ones, but also isolated from them [326].

Under the conditions of long-term obligatory lockdown in a small space, previously harmoniously functioning relationships became a burden. Yesterday they were a resource, today they consume energy.

A dose of any component of an exemplary household in excess functions like poison [2/153].

In isolation, hatred, anger, and violence took the place of care, attentiveness, support, and understanding. Quarantine led to the eruption of previously smoldering conflicts, as in the case of [184], whose father cut himself off from the family and tried to sell the family home, with its inhabitants still in it. The pandemic also gave rise to entirely new fields of tensions, based on the above-mentioned necessity to choose between relationships and safety. One diarist [2/170] threatened her closest relatives with the police if they did not report their exposure to the virus to the health authorities. Without blinking an eye, she broke the principle of loyalty to the family.

Relationships more often provided support in difficult times, and were sometimes the only lifeline. At the same time, however, the well-being of vulnerable loved ones was a source of concern.

I don't fear for myself. I have this silly feeling that nothing is threatening me. I do, however, worry about my loved ones. I also fear for other people, strangers, for whom at times I feel responsible [26].

However, when one diarist [26] wanted to help a man who had fallen on the pavement, she hesitated: should she do it without gloves? Might the attempt to help end tragically for one of them? "Everyone was a potential threat to everyone," another diarist pointed out [137]. Strangers became even more distant as they controlled the diarists' behavior, while at the same time disobeying the pandemic rules themselves.

I have become unaccustomed to strangers, to interacting with them. Slightly bewildered. Intimidated that they are watching. And the fact that they are on the watch. Powerless over the glasses fogging up [386].

Alone, craving another person, the diarist forces herself to continue creeping into solitude.

When I go for a walk […], I experience a strange feeling at the sight of a passer-by who passes by rarely—I would like to hug him, just chat, smile. And on the other hand, I get scared, I move back to the edge of the pavement [2/167].

Return to the nest

A phenomenon specific to young people—at least in regard to its scale and significance—was their "return to the nest." The pandemic forced many secondary and university students or young adults to abandon their lives in a larger city and "retreat" [2/210] to a provincial home. For many memoirists, this was disheartening. They had to return to a place from which they had already fled once and to which they no longer belonged. The boredom of the province and the toxicity of their parents were further topped with the sauce of isolation.

How much I hate this sad town; how much I want to leave it [2/193].

This hopelessness of being stuck at home with people who haven't understood me for at least a few years, not being able to meet friends, and knowing the miles that separate us [2/170].

Even if the young person had not fled from a place that was unfriendly to them, they were returning to the unknown. They were returning to a home that was different and people who were different. "The friendships here (and there were three of them) have loosened up a lot. I don't feel I trust these people; I almost don't know them," writes one [2/167] about their hometown peers. The other diarists were also lonely: those few years of self-reliance, independence, and freedom had often changed them profoundly. It had made them strangers in their own home. This was another dimension of loneliness: the young realized they had no roots. The old ones had been pulled out a few years earlier, and the new ones had been disturbed by the pandemic.

I felt like a bird that had just left the family nest, only to be caught in a cage immediately afterwards [2/22].

Returning to the nest did not have to be negative; relationships were, after all, an important basis for surviving isolation. "I'm even comfortable here; I can stay a while longer," admits one person [288]. This diarist writes of "a substitute for the old life," the absence of worries and the awareness of parental care. However, they have no illusions: "when we leave […] for [the university town] after the pandemic, childhood will definitely be over."

Here's a great return to the status of a kid, even though you're already in your 20s [2/113].

A return to childhood means a change of status. Yesterday's student or worker is again "just" a son or daughter. Parents control the lives and the slightest behaviors of their children, who are adults after all. "Where is my freedom, the adulthood I have gained?" asks one diarist [2/210].

[…] my mother came to me and said, "time to make up the bed." It's nice that she wants me to get a good night's sleep, but at 23, can't I decide for myself when I want to go to bed? [288].

Returning to the nest means new-old responsibilities. The memoirists were once again home dwellers; once again they had to join in the life they had left behind: helping in the family business, working on their father's farm, or fulfilling domestic duties. The latter becomes all the more troublesome the less subjectively the parents treat their offspring.

Now, on the other hand, I don't have a moment to myself; I'm constantly "on duty at home." I've even started to think of them as "Mr. and Mrs." It's sick. I understand why I ran away to school outside this town; I understand why I didn't want to come back here so much [2/167].

The loss of adult status is at the heart of conflicts—especially since the person who has returned to the nest is no longer an unfledged teenager. Those few years, and sometimes even months, away from home have given them a different view of the world, and new goals, aspirations, and habits. They have tasted independence and freedom, but also responsibility. They have matured, although their nearest kin do not necessarily want to acknowledge the fact.

I argue with my parents all the time. I can no longer stay in the same house with them and pretend that I don't see the things that have always bothered me. My father discovered that I swear [2/170].

Returning to the nest does not have to be exclusively depriving and disempowering. For some memoirists, it became an opportunity to change their own goals and values—to realize that in the rush to adulthood, career, and success, they had lost themselves. One diarist [211] recognized that the big city she had left during her quarantine "will always again be my bittersweet synonym for happiness and the pursuit of a better version of myself." In the family home, during this "retreat to childhood," she realized the pointlessness of the pursuit. She accepted herself.

The pandemic pause

The reconfiguration of social roles and change, which most often involved a degradation of status, obviously affected more people than just those returning to their family homes

for the lockdown. The memoirists highlighted three dimensions of the disruption to their sets of social roles. First, cognitive insecurity disturbed their established routines, making it impossible to function effectively, even when their work or family situations were not profoundly changed. Second, the pandemic brought new and unexpected burdens. The young diarists pointed in particular to remote teaching, which in many cases consumed more time and energy than traditional teaching, or made them ask themselves whether they would be able to cope in a new, unfamiliar setting. Third and finally, the closing of schools, universities, and workplaces pushed people into passivity. The situation was accompanied by a whole set of new uncertainties. The two most significant concerned existence and self-consciousness.

Young people experienced uncertainty related to their material situation. Students working part-time were the first to be exposed to the economic impact of the pandemic restrictions. Even slightly older diarists with seemingly established careers became aware of the fragility of their material situation. The precariousness was also recognized by teenagers, who observed how their parents faced the economic perturbations. The very prospect of losing financial independence and being "doomed to the mercy" of their parents [2/193] was a strong blow to self-esteem.

Financial stability, however, did not make the young diarists fully immune to the effects of the pandemic. It was more difficult to protect one's identity from self-consciousness and emotional uncertainty than to protect one's own wallet.

If the pandemic pushed the "reverse" button in the lives of those returning to the nest, it also imposed a "pause" mode on the rest of us. One memoirist [244] wrote of a "frozen life." "The beginning of the quarantine was for me the equivalent to stopping time," she stated [267]. "I feel frozen. It's a bit like time has stopped, but it's still running," she noted [2/18], drawing attention to the temporal dimension of uncertainty. "The thought of how much better my life could be now if the pandemic hadn't happened doesn't leave me," she added. Another diarist [2/59] wrote plainly of the first months of the restrictions: "a wasted year."

The young had plans, dreams, and ambitions. They wanted to progress and conquer the world, just as their elders had told them to do. "I liked to rush; I valued spontaneity, adrenaline. I tried to manage every free moment. I was afraid to stop," [2/10] as one diarist described her pre-pandemic life. Now those same elders had told them to stop.

In the diarists' narratives, this pressing of the emergency brake appears as a traumatic experience. The hectic pace of life and the multitude of activities paradoxically gave them the strength to keep going. Each new project, task, or role was another step into adulthood. Ambitious plans were the foundation of security and a sense of purpose.

> Until recently, I was convinced that I had a wonderful, idyllic life ahead of me. I had everything planned out and didn't have to worry about anything. Now I have the feeling that everything is slipping from under my feet. Nothing is certain [29].

The pandemic took away the sense of control over one's own life, which is, after all, an important part of maturity. It deprived young people of the energy they used to draw from the future. Above all, it robbed them of their youthful audacity, which allows them to attempt seemingly unattainable goals.

Simply put, I am afraid. I'd like to know today […] whether I'll be able to dare to dream about the future again and start making it a reality. At this point I even have a pretty loud fear of dreaming quietly [211].

Thrown into a prison of isolation, the young diarists discovered boredom. Stripped of responsibilities and opportunities, the days of quarantine merged into an indefinite mass. "What is there to write about in the pandemic?" asks one [2/123]. "It is enough to describe one day and paste it to every other day of the week […]."

Even though the days passed quite quickly, […] I went to bed feeling unfulfilled. That I hadn't done anything useful, that I would have liked to spend my days differently. […] And here there was still emptiness and the feeling that I was doing nothing [405].

Previously active and dynamic, proud of their full calendars, the diarists, even if they grew accustomed to idleness and laziness ("which they have always been disgusted by" [2/119]), were "terrified" by their new lifestyle [49]. They were disoriented by the lack of productivity, by the waste of time in a world that, after all, demands maximum efficiency.

When the source of purpose is action, inaction leads to discomfort. One memoirist [253] observed that what is most distressing about the pandemic was not the isolation itself, but "the lack of life's challenges and progress" [253]—the lack of external stimuli.

The confinement of one's own mind

Locked inside four walls, left to themselves, the diarists soon realized that the real prison into which the pandemic had thrown them was their own mind. They found themselves alone with their own fears and dilemmas. Before, there was relief from action. Now there was no escape from oneself.

Reflecting on the current situation, a lot of questions arise in our minds. Especially those for which there is no answer at the moment or the answer is too frightening for us [267].

The memoirists had too much time to dwell on all that was happening around them due to the pandemic: the breakdown of their previous lifestyle, the loss of their jobs, loneliness, the illness of their loved ones.

When so many things fall on such a young person at once, it's hard not to break down. And I was breaking down little by little, and with each stage of that breakdown, I was more and more clueless about how to cope [2/119].

Even more difficult is the situation for people who faced mental health crises long before the pandemic. It became then another stressor, another mental boulder to carry through life, a burden that could prove too much. The memoirists were aware of this. They feared that the demons held at a distance would now strike with double force.

It's happening again. I'll go back to the countryside again. I'll come down again. I'm going to shut myself away again [2/170].

I'm fed up with the state. I'm fed up with the people. I'm fed up with myself. Of this feeling of hopelessness. The emptiness. Fuck, how long can this go on? Without willingness. Without motivation. Without anyone. Without anything to make me feel like getting out of bed in the morning. I'm not even trying to be happy anymore, I'm

just trying to survive somehow, to not have an attack, to not cry, to be sad in this ordinary way that doesn't take me over entirely, to do anything—any fucking, useful thing [2/193].

It is characteristic that mental health problems come out in full force in the accounts of the second round of the competition, which were written a few months after the outbreak of the pandemic. The memoirists recognized the slow but unavoidable changes they were undergoing. They longed for themselves—for an identity free of the virus of uncertainty.

Today I realized that that girl from a year ago is no longer here. I have lost her qualities and have become one bundle of nerves, which shouldn't have happened, especially at such a young age. Pandemic—you are destroying our body, but why are you also destroying our soul? [2/119].

"I wish it was like it used to be," one interposed [2/159]. She is echoed by many other diarists, who craved normality: a sense of purpose, control, meaning.

What I miss most in the world is everyday life. Leaving the house, seeing people on the street, talking to friends face to face before class and that slight curiosity about what's going to happen today. I don't know when it's going to come back and that's the worst part [2/165].

What if the worst thing is that normality is not coming back? The memoirists admitted that they were longing and waiting for what they feared at the same time. "It is possible that normality is here. Now," one noted [2/153]. "We don't want that kind of normality," they added, because normality requires a minimum of certainty, a foundation on which a young person can slowly build an adult life. "I, my friends, my acquaintances—we are all afraid of the grayness, the routine. We crave adventure in normality," one writes [2/107]. Normality is thus made up of the certainties, routines, and rules that structure life. The normality of everyday existence prompts young people to venture out into the adventure of life knowing that they can return from it. The pandemic makes all life a macabre adventure. And there is no coming back from it.

Sometimes the diarists break out of the shackles of self-reflection and question the social order. And it is not a question of criticizing politicians, their attitudes and decisions, of dwelling on the effectiveness of the measures taken to combat the pandemic. The pandemic pause invited reflection at a higher level. "One has a moment to take a breath and ask oneself what is really important," one stated [303]. Because if we stopped, why were we rushing so much? If the most important thing is life and health, why were we pursuing anything else?

Covid-19 has seriously disturbed the foundations of the modern world. Even though they had probably been rotten for a long time. It is now impossible to set them upright again. The reality as we knew it has been crumbling (has crumbled). Who built these pillars? By what laws did they hold the world together? [184].

Lost youth

What if the space for self-reflection is a privilege? One diarist scolds herself:

I feel stupid shedding tears for such a stupid reason. Thousands of people are worse off than I am at the moment. They've lost their jobs; they can't find new ones, so they have no way to feed their families. […] They get infected with the coronavirus. They are dying. Others are worse off than me—I know that. But I think it makes me feel

even worse. I feel sorry for myself, even though I haven't experienced a real tragedy. I should change my attitude, but I can't, not at the moment. I'm too depressed, too many negative thoughts overwhelm me [2/41].

The young diarists saw what was happening all around them: the injustices of the system, the loneliness, suffering, and death. Just watching this calamity stripped away their youthful illusions. And some were themselves confronted with the misery brought on by the pandemic. They had to mature rapidly to face their own problems and those of their loved ones. The pandemic turned them into adults.

It could be said, therefore, that the virus added years while taking away youth. When the pandemic ended and the adults hit the "pause" button again to unfreeze the world, there would be no going back to the way things used to be. The young were no longer who they used to be. After what they had seen and experienced, they no longer had the same feistiness, audacity, and energy to pursue their dreams.

I had a lot of plans, really great plans. […] Because of the pandemic, almost all of them remained in the dream zone, and I don't even know if I will ever be brave enough to pull them out again [2/18].

The memoirists feel that the pandemic caught them at a particular moment in their lives: in their youth. "These were supposed to be the best years of my life," they wrote [2/59]: the formative years, structuring identity, determining life's paths, and equipping them with the most important resources. The memoirists emphasized that the pandemic did not just put their life on hold but broke its trajectory. A high school graduate [2/165] wrote of a broken relationship and the ruined, longest holiday of her life. One [2/86] felt that the isolation had robbed her of the chance to form a closer relationship. Fearing for the health of her loved ones, [8] another had to give up her dream internship. One [2/142] did not go to work during the summer holidays in order to become independent from her parents and finally move in with a girlfriend. "I'm actually a whole year behind with life. Anyway, I'm not the only one," she [2/106] stated. Another diarist [330] wondered, "Maybe we'll catch up, but when?"

The terrible feeling of having lost my life at the age of twenty-three is coming back to me [232].

Summary

If, following Szafraniec (1986: 134), we consider anomie as "an identity crisis of personality, a crisis of motivation and purpose," the memoir material provides evidence of the anomic nature of the pandemic in the experiences of young people. In the analyzed narratives we can observe the intertwining of all seven dimensions of the anomic uncertainty proposed by Szafraniec. Cognitive uncertainty is founded on informational chaos and erosion of trust. After all, it has long been unclear what actually caused the pandemic and what measures should have been taken to protect against it. In the minds of the public, these might still be the unknowns. Learning about the virus by no means removed uncertainty: it was still difficult to understand and adapt to the dynamic changes in the situation and the nervous reactions of the authorities. Cognitive uncertainty is the direct cause of behavioral uncertainty: the inability to make rational choices and the breakdown

of established action strategies. Interactional uncertainty is expressed in the disruption of social bonds. While strong interpersonal relationships, especially family and partner relationships, are one of the cornerstones of survival in a pandemic crisis, they are also put to the test. The memoirists were overcome by fear for their loved ones and had to face conflicts arising from the ruin of their everyday life. For some, the pandemic also exposed their lack of relationships, making loneliness, which had previously been at least partially acceptable, even more distressing. Temporal uncertainty fed on restrictive constraints: the necessity of interrupting previous activities and the uncertainty of tomorrow made people ask what was coming next. The pandemic was not even so much a "pause" as an end: of normality, of life, of dreams. And above all, the end of youth—a real one—even if the pandemic seemed to allow it to return for a while. The disruption of everyday life highlighted the uncertainty of the consciousness involved in the formation of an individual's identity. Even before the pandemic, the memoirists were struggling with the hardships of growing up and searching for their own place in the world. The pandemic locked them in the prison of their own minds and prompted deep self-reflection. The conclusions were sometimes bitter and culminated in the loss of a sense of purpose. Dynamic changes of roles and status are the day-to-day reality of youth, but in the pandemic they became too abrupt, too often degrading, and above all, they were imposed from the outside and incomprehensible. Since the framework of everyday life has crumbled, since one is told to stop, since it is not worth dreaming, what is there to build one's self-worth on? And can one keep oneself in a stable psycho-physical condition? All of these phenomena intersected with the last two dimensions of uncertainty: the axio-normative and the emotional. The pandemic challenged the norms previously ordering young people's lives. Axio-normative uncertainty was revealed in the dilemmas accompanying almost every decision made during the pandemic; in the paradoxes, inconsistencies, and irrational actions of others, which in the eyes of young people became clear evidence of the moral decline of the old world. The pandemic was perhaps not a complete breakdown of norms and values, but rather an arena of spectacular conflicts between them. The memoirists tried to find their way in the new pandemic world but encountered considerable difficulties. There was emotional uncertainty—the insecurity of a person searching for their place amidst the collapse of everyday life.

Szafraniec (1986: 133) observes that "a state of social anomie […] creates specific conditions for socialization processes and human behavior." For the maturing young person, these specificities involved unprecedented difficulties. Examples of accelerated adolescence in the form of having to face unique challenges and tragedies were evidence of the breakdown of the structure of everyday life that underpins growing up. In the narratives of many young memoirists, the pandemic became a catastrophe that can be compared to war or a natural disaster—so devastating were its effects. The diarists recognized that the pandemic had taken away their youth. It had done so by disrupting the previous social order, which, even if dysfunctional and frustrating, provided a tenuous basis for the construction of a mature identity. In place of a tame enemy, an even scarier opponent had appeared—one that was completely unknown and completely unpredictable. This is how anomie works.

Finally, it is worth posing a question of interest to many readers (and one formulated repeatedly by Krystyna Szafraniec): what follows from the analyses in regard to understand-

ing the functioning of the entire social system? The authors of this paper have indicated a way of reading (in a structured form) the essence of the problems experienced by young people during the pandemic period. Anomie is a complex burden, a compound of deficits and tensions that impinged on various aspects (psychological, social, or health-related) of the everyday life of young people. However, it seems crucial to anticipate what will or may happen to the social system in the future. And here one can legitimately advance the hypothesis that the costs for future collective life from the pandemic insecurity experienced by young people will be all encompassing. Lack of confidence may become entrenched; growing up in fear may intensify mental disorders or maladaptation, and the individual effects may be extrapolated to the general labor market situation (the instability of people in professional roles), the burden on the health system (the rate of psycho-physical disorders), and low levels of social involvement. Over a year of growing up in conditions of fear and isolation may make young people a fragile collective, whose social functioning (also in terms of the state, nation, and community relations) cannot be fully predicted. However, on the basis of the collected material, it is possible to formulate justified fears and at the same time to indicate the necessity of actions providing systemic solutions to the problem of mental health support for children and youth, as well as to emphasize the necessity of a holistic perception of the problems connected with young people's entering adulthood. This implies the need for social concern, and for both institutional and environmental support, taking into account the special role of the education system, which in this context requires particular transformations—as the pandemic period has ruthlessly exposed.

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