



# Pandemic coping strategies of workers with mental crisis

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# Introduction

- The experience of a mental crisis is associated with problems of mental and social balance.
- It is associated with the inability to independently cope with a critical situation in the image of the entire life.
- Often, however, mental crises that are chronic remain untreated. The main and significant psychological problem of late capitalism is depression as a phenomenon considered in terms of the influence of biological and social factors. It is a picture of a failure to adapt to the course of everyday life events that results in a mental crisis. It is a state of permanent suffering, which in itself is a strong trajectory potential.
- Depressions are different, as are their causes, which may be of social and biological origin. According to forecasts by the World Health Organization (WHO), depression will be the first disease on the Global Burden of Disease list in 2030. Therefore, it will be one of the most common causes of health loss, which is related to the inability to function in various spheres of life, such as the labor market.
- It is also a reason for redefining one's identity, as depression leads to thoughts of suicide and anxiety. The universality of experiencing depression and the media discourse make it an increasingly disenchanted sphere that deserves understanding. Despite this, we can still talk about a certain stigmatization of people struggling with this disease, because it excludes from certain spheres of life, such as the labor market.
- The aim of the paper is to discuss the biographical conditions, properties and consequences of coping practices developed by workers in Poland during Covid pandemic. Interviewees tend to be systemically disadvantaged in terms of greater risk of poverty, being in mental crisis, temporary employment.
- Pandemic as social crisis referring to work issues.
- Pandemic concerns also mental health (Monaghan 2020)

# Questions and goals

- Under which conditions of work during pandemic starts to be framed as biographical problem? Under which it is not a problem?
- How do young people experience and manage employment precarity at the biographical level? Under which conditions is precariousness experienced as a biographical problem and, conversely, under which conditions is it not recognised as problematic by those affected?
- What biographical, social and economic factors impact the experience of mental crisis?
- Can we analyze therapy and work as immunisation against mental crisis?
- The narratives make possible to search for ways of perceiving specific situations, events, breakthroughs in the course of life in various spheres of activity. Crises experienced by the informants may constitute reference points for causing serious problems such as: the feeling of losing control over life, surrendering to external circumstances, alienation from oneself and the world in connection with turning events with personal consequences (Waniek 2016). The consequences of such situations may be the experience of blocking planning processes, even at the level of simple everyday tasks, which are also involved in wider processes of social change (Waniek 2019).

# Crisis

- Mental crisis is the response of a person to a difficult situation for him or her, in which he/she cannot use his/her resources and problem-solving skills because they are insufficient. This is difficult life breakthrough.
  - Mental health by Freud is the ability to love and work. Work is the sphere that determines independence and self-sufficiency. This is not always possible because the disease limits it. Nevertheless, in the biographical interviews I have analyzed, one can see a struggle with participation in this sphere. The ability to work has been recognized for years as an element of effective functioning in society. Work brings the sick back to society.
  - Mental illness today does not necessarily mean isolation, but it is an element that can be struggled with by working and loving. Therefore, analyzing cases from biographical research, I will present the experience of combining a mental crisis with an attempt to function on the labor market. The thesis of this study is to establish the relationship between the ways in which people experiencing mental crisis function in the labor market.
  - Crisis as lived experience.
- Pandemic crisis:
  - Period of breakthrough and change hitting various aspects of life;
  - A crisis (regardless of its scope, scale, depth or duration) is a moment of change and transition from one state to another (Kosseleck, Richter 2006)

# Essential workers

- This paper will be based on a analysis of biographical narrative interviews with essential workers. Essential workers are persons who perform essential work that includes the following characteristics: job providing essential services; work outside (not remote); threat, uncertainty, instability; physical hazards. This type of work is necessary and crucial work on the frontline, „first line“. “Essential” during the pandemic include:
  - education [primary school teachers]
  - health care [doctors, nurses, paramedics]
  - social care [nursing homes staff]
  - logistics [truck drivers, couriers, food-delivery workers, logistic centre employees]

# Coping strategies or coping tactics?

Theoretical dilemma: **strategies or tactics?**

- Tactics are the individual actions included in everyday activities.
- The strategy is thought out, it presupposes some power.
- The tactic is characterized by absence - it is blind, but at the same time penetrating, controlled by chance. It gives a chance to change the system from the inside.
- Tactics is the art of the other, that is, the one who is deprived of the privilege of power, discriminated against, treated as a stranger.
- Other must use the area imposed and organized by the law of foreign power. Thus, it is not possible to create a **comprehensive plan of action** for himself/herself, or to subjugate the opponent into another, visible and objectively existing space (de Certeau 2008: 37).

**Coping tactics** - uncertainty and lack of planning element in action. These are reactive actions taken by an individual in a crisis situation.

# Research design

- The COV-WORK project NCN OPUS 19 aiming at the exploration of the consequences of pandemic for socio-economic consciousness, life strategies and social dialogue: education, health care /social care, logistics, HORECA industries.
- Data used in project: biographical narrative interviews (BNI) (21) (Schütze 2005) with a list of additional themes (in part III).
- 9 BNI with gastronomy employees.
- Pandemic data - 2021
- Thematic analysis.
- The relevance of story-telling and narrations in the social construction of pandemic.



# Biographical problem

- The threat of job loss or its restriction.
- Pandemic stress - uncertainty and unpredictability of the work situation:
  - Coping tactics: therapy or forced freezing due to lockdown (waiting for the development of events)/ compulsory search for an exit: exit tactics.
    - The tactic of crossing the crisis
    - Adaptation tactics to the crisis.
    - The tactic of being an employee after all; uncertainty; precarity; survival tactics.
    - The tactic of waiting in gastronomy.

# Pandemic stress

- *Maybe somewhere it (stress - AK) deepened during this, this pandemic, but it was also, as I said, because **we do not really know what will happen with the company now, so somewhere it may have deepened a bit.** But these are things that **I have no influence** on, neither I nor anyone else, so I just need to wait, what will happen next and **be with people with whom you get along**, so that this stress does not spread somewhere, but just to get over it somehow today and live on (Tomasz).*
- ***if it goes on like this, we'll go to the psychologist or we'll end up in some kind of crazy.** Well, maybe not so much, but for a moment there was such a fear that everything that is going on around us is a stigma that leaves trivial things, I left the small, the big ones leave the big. **So there was a fear for a moment that if it didn't end soon, or nothing changed, it might affect us, our psyche** (Tomasz).*
- *this **uncertainty about tomorrow** does not help in anything either (Karolina).*
- *I mean, at this point, I only have the greatest **stress when it comes to finding this new job, because I have set myself such a goal that as soon as I finish school, I quit right away, looking for a new job, something permanent.** Well, it's been almost a month since I finished school and I still can't find this job and it's a bit annoying or stressing out somewhere, because I would like to start my life as soon as possible, buy this flat somewhere and somewhere already this is the life to implement (Anastazja, 21).*
- *all the stress of ... "What if it doesn't change?" or "What if y ... will it stay that way for a long time?" Y ... I have the impression that y ... even though, as I said, I ... / **I missed these relationships and I still miss such an even more non-pandemic life** ((coughs)). That's y ... maybe even I got a little used to it ... / I got used to all of it and that it is ... / such a **return to normality**, a return to ... being with others in such an amount as ... / how was it normal ... it will certainly be difficult, it will not be such a ... **happy jump back into the same life** ... So it will definitely also be associated with such y ... well, stress related to simply returning to ... being with others ... to the same extent as before (Kasia).*
- *So the pandemic maybe not so much increased this **fear as it made it visible**, that's for sure (Liliana)*

# Pandemic stress-coping tactics

- *I think so that y ... **this form of entertainment gives us a chance to relieve y ... relieve all worries and stress.** We can just sit y ... and ... take care of these y ... / these things, this **handicraft** y ... in such a way to calm down and cut off from what surrounds us, and we are currently surrounded by very negative ... many ... / many very negative factors related to the pandemic (Blanka).*
- *You could call it that, it is such a fear for tomorrow, what will happen tomorrow? For example, will the government come up with something again and, I don't know, introduce some new restrictions, will it lift them, it is not known whether I can expect a quiet job, or will they close everything again and stay at home? (Karolina).*

## The tactic of crossing the crisis

- *however, during the pandemic, I found that my mental health had deteriorated, I felt more lonely, but what is happening is terribly overwhelming. Y ... constant uncertainty about work, earnings, education y ... well, everything has changed. I found that ... it is also worth seeking help at this point. Y ... so for some time now, for about two months, I have been going back to ... another therapist (Blanka).*
- *But later it became very overwhelming for me, y... there was no sense at all in getting up in the morning, because why should I get up when nothing was waiting for me. That day, I could have had a whole day in bed as well as I was just doing, which only made me feel worse. At the beginning, I was still trying to stay in shape. I wanted to run and exercise alone, but after some time I did not see any sense or purpose in it, because I did not know when these trainings would come back and who exactly should I train for, who would check it for me and that the government prohibits sports, so what do I do? I have to do properly. All my plans that I had for the future fell apart, because I wanted to connect my future with the music industry, organizing large concerts (Paulina).*

# Adaptation tactics to the crisis

- *I would like to go back to the character that I was, to the person I was before the pandemic, because something has changed in me, because now I'm so y ... so anxious and I still had such over thinking and such thinking and very such ... negative, automatic thoughts, so intrusive, until... / until... / until I said, which I just couldn't quite cope with, **that's why I returned to therapy.** (...) Y ... and **even work became a bit difficult for me** then y ... because even though I worked in gastronomy and I was very used to this team of people and it often improved my mood that I could talk to them, y ... very often I was ... / it looked like **I couldn't focus on what I was doing** because y ... this fearful way of life that appeared to me y ... just about y ... in April 2020 y ... and it was not until I was finished schools, and maybe even slightly increased at that time. Well, it was with me and ... working at the moment ... / at the same moment over ... / I had some over-thinking about another random, nonsensical thing that I even knew was pointless, but **my brain was still flying around. Y ... and I remember that it also made me not able to concentrate a little on what I am** (Kasia)*
- *I did not use a psychologist or a psychiatrist. During the pandemic, I did not undertake any therapy, **but I try to cope on my own, I also try to avoid stressful situations or minimize them.** I know how to react to many things so that they don't just affect me and that's it, but **physical activity**, among other things, is a big plus here. It is precisely sometimes these **trips to the countryside or spending time with yourself relaxing without the Internet ((snorting)) or simply informational stimuli is a solution**, but we have as much of this stress in a pandemic as we allow it to reach us, because we can live with news and statistics, the disease curve and so on, and we can not worry about it, **we can just turn off the news, radio, TV and read a book** (Paulina).*

# The tactic of being an employee after all; uncertainty; precarity

- *I think that ... the time I devoted to my family ... / the time I spent with my family during the y ... pandemic has shortened, but that's only because **it was hard for me to find a job locally during the pandemic.** I also had to waste time... / not only money, but also time to travel. Y ... unfortunately ... because of that ... **I had to .../ to leave the house earlier, I came home later - I had no time for my family.** M... also in a restaurant like M restaurant, however, it is busy, but there is a lot of stimuli. I am sensitive to these stimuli ... **also after returning from work, I often had to just go ... to my room alone, isolate myself from the others. I didn't feel like talking to anyone anymore** (Blanka).*
- *But, but it looks much worse, as if it starts creeping in as if so to speak, a little bit of aversion to us. **Caused by the fact that I think that this is a defensive reaction of every human being, that as if a person does not want to get used to something that he may immediately lose and here is the same situation, we subconsciously do not want to get used to the fact that we work again, we go to parties.** Due to the fact that we do not know whether it will not change in a week, in a month, in 2 months, **this uncertainty still appears** ... unfortunately it does not give as much satisfaction as before. Because, in fact, each of our topics, each of our conversations, or **what will happen in a moment when it comes to companies or any investments ends with one and the same term, it makes no sense to wait because you do not know what will happen in a week** (Tomasz)*

# The tactic of waiting in gastronomy

- *Certainly, the pandemic changed a bit such a sense of y ... constancy, and so I have already mentioned it before that to me, as a person in general ... / such constancy understood as y ... routine and such a feeling in general, well ... my whole feeling I have an impression of safety as a person, because what happened to me, when it comes to my emotions after the pandemic, was also a reflection of this, but when it comes to gastronomy, it looked like that all the time that I was looking for a job, not knowing if I would find her, or y ... that y ... not knowing if she would not be closed the next day anyway y ... and when I talked about another ... / with my friends from the gastronomy, that's what it looked like with them same (Kasia)*

# Pandemic problems in gastronomy

- Working hours in a pandemic: commuting (Blanka)
- Pandemic as the inhibition of development opportunities at work (Paulina)
- Pandemic employment concerns (Paulina). The feeling of safety at work is related to the lack of job security, but also to the obligation to maintain pandemic hygiene.
- Work in a pandemic - stationary work;
- fear of dismissal (Blanka from a shoe shop got a job in a gastronomy);
- compulsory leaves;
- lower payouts;
- rotation among gastronomy employees ("catching every job" (Blanka),
- commuting to work;
- discomfort at work due to pandemic restrictions (dry skin from disinfection);
- work in a pandemic as extra money and a kind of desperation;
- risk of losing a job, imbalance ( "however decent to live, however worthy to earn (Blanka);
- catching everything;
- increased number of duties;
- hybrid or online training;
- limiting the number of employees during one shift;
- 9-hour shifts and no possibility of overtime (Paulina),
- taking overtime (Anastazja) lower salaries,
- restrictions on the number of customers,
- new devices at work (alarms informing about disinfection);
- returning to the family home (Paulina).
- combining work in the gastronomy and office to make a living;
- police registering customers



# Conclusions

- A pandemic is a biographical problem when it translates into a mental crisis.
- The concept of coping tactics is more appropriate than coping strategies because it expresses uncertainty when it is impossible to plan an action.
- A pandemic is a trajectory potential in the event of a threat of job loss and health safety.