

ESSENTIAL WORKERS' COLLECTIVE RESPONSES TO (POST-)PANDEMIC CRISES.

THE CASES OF POLAND AND THE PILOT STUDY IN THE NEW YORK STATE

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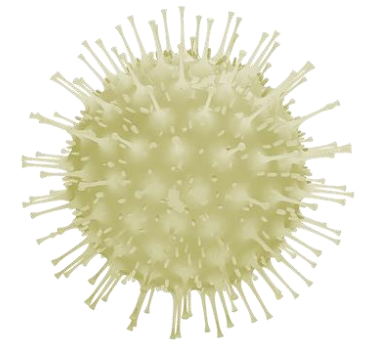


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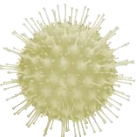
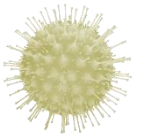
NCN OPUS COV-WORK project funded
by the National Science Centre In Poland,
UMO-2020/37/B/HS6/00479.

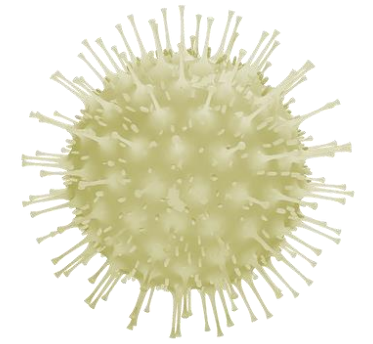




OVERVIEW

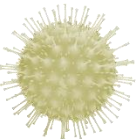
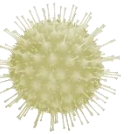
- Introduction: towards a comparative research
- Theoretical inspirations to the study of workers' collective responses
- The research on essential workers in Poland
- The innovation-control-resistance-normalization scheme
- The proposal of comparative pilot study in the USA



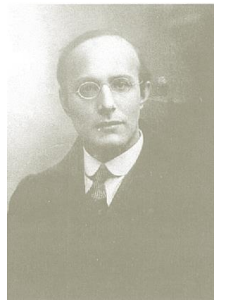
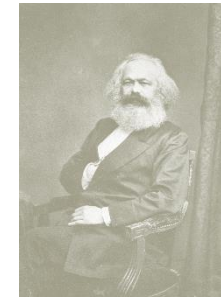


INTRODUCTION

- COV-WORK project funded by the National Science Center in Poland as a starting point for broader comparative research
 - What were the bottom-up, individual and collective responses of workers to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic at the workplace level in essential public services critical to the daily functioning of society? (focus on education, health care, social assistance, logistics in Poland)
 - How did other interlinked crises (including economic, war, political, and chronic public service crises) affect workers' experiences and coping strategies with the COVID-19 pandemic?
- The follow-up project carried out in 2024 in the USA within the Fulbright Senior Award by A. Mrozowski and research stay by J. Burski



THEORETICAL INSPIRATIONS (I)



- The COVID-19 pandemic approached at the workplace level as an organisational crisis “a **low probability, high-impact event** that threatens the viability of the organization” (Pearson, Clair 1998: 60)
- “Sensitizing concepts” (Blumer 1954) used to study workers’ responses to the crisis in order to build a link between meso- and macro-levels
- Bottom-up **innovation** (J. Schumpeter): improvised innovations in health care (Wiedner et al. 2020), often based on informal relationships and mutual help in the workplace (Chemali et al. 2022; McCallum 2022) and aimed at maintaining the provision of basic services (Drozdowski et al. 2020).
- Conflicts over **control** (Marx) and new forms of labor process control (including sanitary regimes) in the wake of the pandemic (Hodder 2020)
- Emerging **resistance** of essential workers: both “voice” and “exit” (Hirschman) in response to the malfunctioning of commodified public services: a potential for a counter-movement (Polanyi)?
- Adding **normalization** in the course of research – institutionalization of some practices shaped during the crisis (May, Finch 2009) and “return to a normality” (Drozdowski et al. 2020)

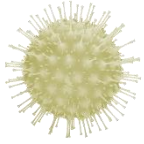
THEORETICAL INSPIRATIONS (II)



- From pandemic to polycrisis (Tooze 2021): health, economic, social, political, migration, environmental, war and humanitarian – what are the implications for public service workers who are essential for social reproduction?
- **Social reproduction** “comprising the structures, practices, activities and realms aimed at the daily and intergenerational regeneration of life and capitalist relations” (Mezzadri 2022: 381)
- Social reproduction theory pointing to “social-reproductive contradiction of capitalism” (Fraser 2017) and its “reluctant dependence on processes and institutions of life-making” (Bhattacharya 2020)
- Pandemic considered as the amplification of **the crisis of social reproduction** (Jayasuriya, 2023; Mezzadri 2022) fits into the anthropological notion of **the chronicity of the crisis** as “the result of slow processes of deterioration, erosion and negative change” (Vigh 2008: 9)
- SRT also helps to critically address the category of “essential work” and expose its classed, gendered and racialised character (Mezzadri 2022; Stevano et al. 2021)

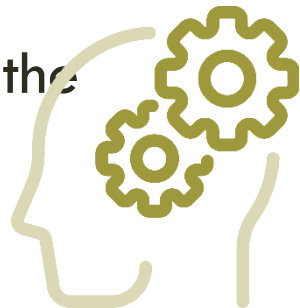
THE CHRONIC CRISIS OF PUBLIC SERVICES

- In the case of public services, the **unexpected crises (pandemic) overlapped and amplified the effects of the chronic crisis** caused by their neoliberal reforms
- **A deep and protracted crisis in public services** essential for the reproduction of social life both in Poland and in the USA (Kozek 2011; Keune 2020; McCallum 2022)
 - Liberalization, commercialization, partial (and “silent”) privatization, introduction of outsourcing and a “lean” service model inspired by the new public management = the ongoing commodification of social reproduction (Fraser 2017; Jayasuriya 2023)
 - Underfunding, deterioration of job quality, labor shortages
- “Patchwork” institutional order (Rapacki [ed.] 2019) shaped in confronting crises in Poland - inconsistent, delayed, poorly consulted anti-crisis policies and their high social and human costs under pandemic conditions (Gardawski and Rapacki 2021)
- **Patchwork capitalism as a variant of neoliberalism? How different or similar is it to the US context?**

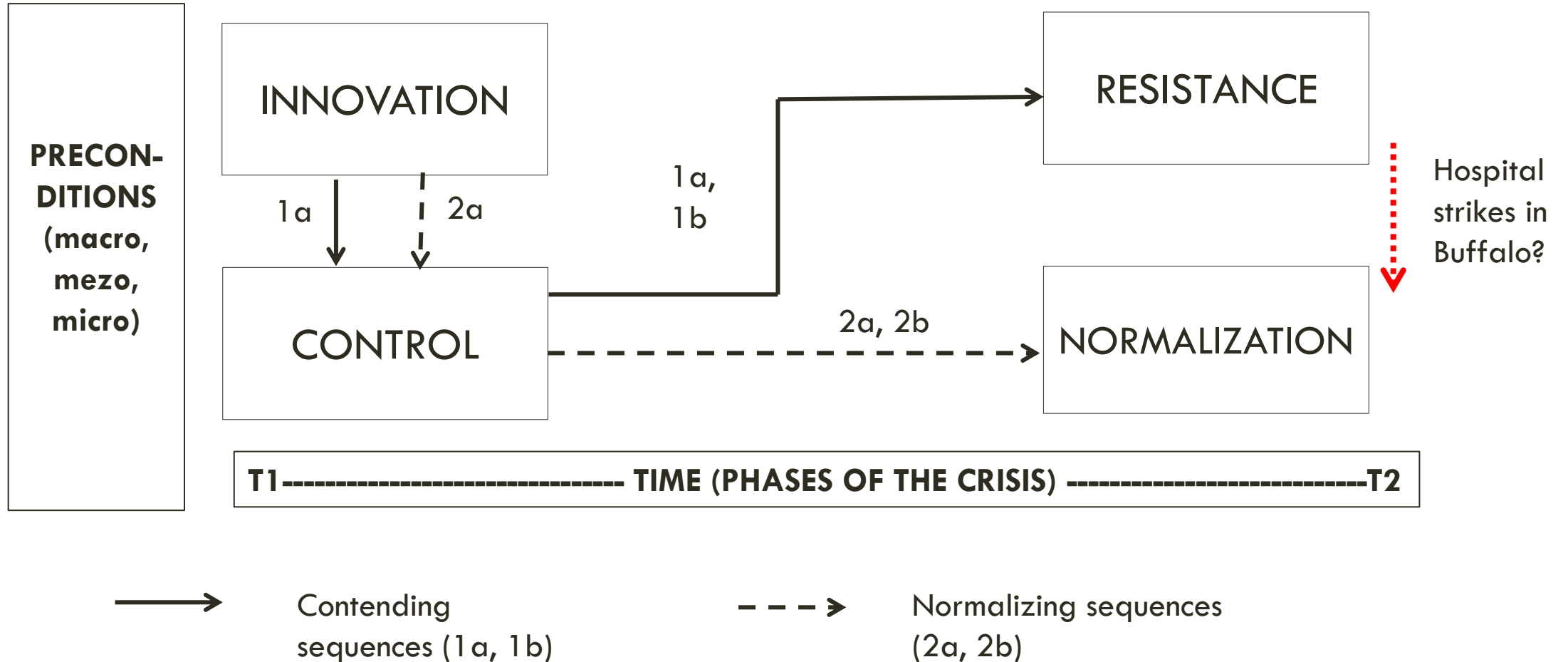


THE STUDY OF ESSENTIAL WORKERS IN POLAND

- COV-WORK project, which aims to study the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the world of work from a worker perspective, longitudinal, mixed methods, qualitative-quantitative (2020-24) – selected modules
- Industries: education (primary schools), health care (hospitals), social assistance (nursing homes), logistics (logistics centres, courier services, food delivery, road transport)
 - **Focus group interviews** (N=15) and 90 **biographical interviews** with workers (in Lower Silesian & Mazovian regions, large and smaller cities)
 - 40 **expert interviews** with union leaders, employers' organizations and government's representatives
- Analysis: thematic coding (Atlas.ti), theoretical sensitivity (GTM)
- The main focus in this presentation: workers' collective coping strategies, but the empirical material is much richer (e.g. a separate analysis of biographical interviews aimed at reconstructing workers' individual ways of managing the crisis on the way)



ICRN SCHEME: DYNAMIC AND RELATIONAL



PANDEMIC'S INNOVATIVE POTENTIAL

- **Organisational dimension:** improvisation and adhocacy in response to the shortages of staff, procedures, and infrastructure
- **Technological dimension:** The role of new communication channels (social media, instant messaging) in solving everyday problems in the workplace.
- **Relational dimension:** blurring of workplace hierarchies, responsibilities and (sometimes) bottom-up improvement of the social dimension of job quality (other aspects: health concerns and criticism of workers' excessive use of sick leave).
- **The role of context** in differentiating innovation potential:
 - Organizational context: less bottom-up innovation in logistics, larger cities and organizations, more in the public sector, especially in less resourced organizations
 - Social context: pre-pandemic social ties in the workplace as a basis for bottom-up innovation
 - Temporal context: innovation mainly in the first waves of the pandemic
- The essential nature of bottom-up innovation for the provision of basic, life-saving public services during the pandemic.

PANDEMIC'S INNOVATIVE POTENTIAL

Anna (a teacher): We were thrown into deep water. There were no prompts there and I was terrified. The first moment, the announcement that we were educating remotely, we were connecting with kids online through Teams at all, it was like: "But how?" (...) What helped me was the mmm training I had just found somewhere on the internet (...) And I actually started to come up with such/that form that would be best for my pupils (BNI_01_E)

Rafał (a physiotherapist, nursing home): Over time, when there was a shortage of hands, fatigue and frustration, people started to take the initiative themselves: but listen, since I'm already here, I can help, I can be useful for completely different things. Let's not limit each other. Either we care about doing the work or sticking to procedures (...) (FGI_10_PS)

Zuza (a nurse) This difficult work, in these Covid wards, has created various bonds (...). There was no rigid division, that I am a doctor, I won't touch it, because it's not my area. (FGI4)

CONFLICTS OVER CONTROL

- Return to hierarchical structures as a typical experience preceded by informal tensions, negotiated vs imposed organizational order
 - Virus control tools interpreted as means of employee control (e.g. in logistics)
 - New forms of remote control of teachers' work (e.g. via parents' remote presence) and imposition of classroom organization
 - Return to service hierarchies and typical tasks (hospitals, nursing homes)
 - Secondments to Covid wards - compulsion rather than choice
- In some workplaces: increased control as a primary experience during the pandemic; in others, it continues after the innovation phase
- Various responses: the sequences of contention and the sequences of normalisation

CONTENDING SEQUENCES

- No increase in strikes and labor disputes in Poland: skepticism about trade unions; informal, street-like nature of protests, new unions emerging in nursing homes and food delivery
- Four types of resistance visible in the data:
 - trade union-led in unionised workplaces (e.g. Amazon, health care)
 - trade union organising in non-unionised workplaces (e.g. Pyszne.pl, some nursing homes)
 - spontaneous wildcat strikes and protests (e.g. Glovo)
 - individual actions – “exit” (Hirschman) (though, no “great resignation”) and organizational misbehaviour (Ackyord, Thompson 2022)
- Pandemic and polycrisis seen as accelerators of protests by informants involved, but overall more normalization than contention in the Polish data



Photo: OZZIP, www.ozzip.pl

make  amazon pay



Photo by Karol Makurat | Tarakum Phtography

THE NARRATIVES OF DISCONTENT

Bożena (nursing home organised by COZZ/the Confederation of Labour): I think we started to appreciate each other more. That we for... y, we started to appreciate each other more, we more started to by/ speak with one voice, no. Also this pandemic gave us that, that, despite everything, in moments of extremes, together we are stronger, no?

Damian (union organizer, food delivery): The pandemic was a moment of such a boom for these services [food delivery]. It seems that it was also a moment of relative improvement in the position of these couriers as a result. (...) So I think it may be that we're operating a little bit in a post-pandemic context, because it's certainly the case that what annoys and mobilizes people the most, however, is that their delivery conditions are deteriorating, so [...] There has been a reduction in real wages.

Marcin (food delivery worker): It was such a shot in the knee for Glovo, because they were changing our wages [...] And all week long we kept fueling ourselves so that there would be strikes [...] So I stated, what's the harm, I'll try it. I created a Facebook event and announced that we were on strike [...]

NORMALIZING SEQUENCES

- “Normalization” as a belief in overcoming the crisis
 - Pandemic “veiled” in spontaneous biographical narratives: forgetting and silencing the crisis
 - Return to 'normal' (pre-pandemic) work organization
 - Weaker normalization if the crisis affected the narrators personally, overlapped with earlier biographical problems and was reinforced ideologically (e.g. by anti-vaccine ideologies)
- “Normalization” as the institutionalization of new norms
 - Promotion of hybrid work and new digital technologies (more limited in Poland)
 - The persistence of some forms of work organization after the pandemic (e.g. special organization of on-call duties in some hospitals; more autonomy in care work)
 - Biographical turning points and changes in life strategies at the individual level (e.g. leaving a strenuous and low-paid job, striving for a better work-life balance)
 - Limited normalization of „essential work”: low recognition and limited job quality improvements

THE CASE OF POLAND: CONCLUDING REMARKS

- The crucial role of bottom-up, worker-driven innovative practices for the functioning of key public services during the pandemic (especially during the first phase of the crisis)
 - Industry-specific nature of worker innovation (less present in logistics)
 - Is it only a Polish peculiarity? (the prospects of US research in 2024)
- The dominance of normalizing sequence over contending sequences – still, a potential of resistance in all industries;
- The short-term nature of social innovations as compared to top-down technological innovations (such as remote working)
- Forgetting the pandemic in the context of polycrisis – similar responses in primary schools in the case of the Ukrainian refugee crisis in 2022

THE FOLLOW-UP COMPARATIVE PROJECT

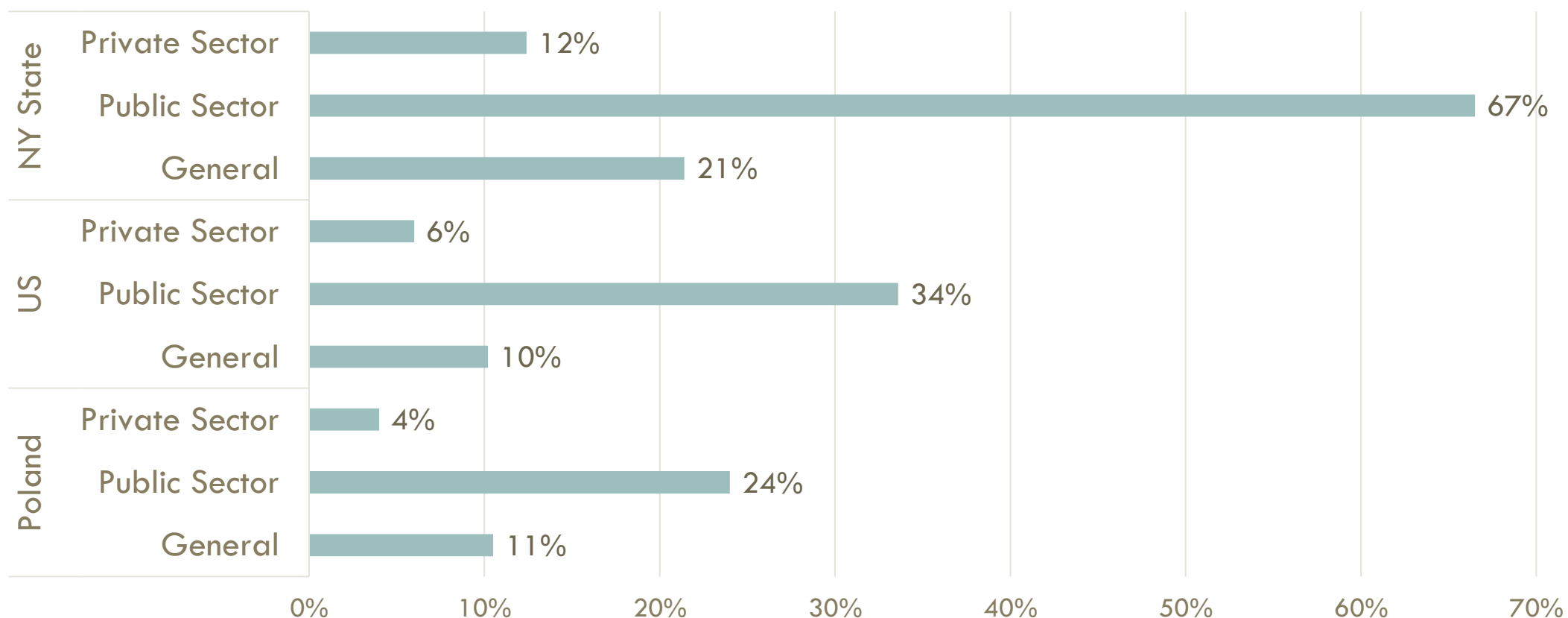
- COVID-19 pandemic as a moment of the polycrisis resulting from deindustrialization, precarization, intersecting (racial, gender, class and other) inequalities and neoliberal reforms of public services (financialization & marketization) → a crisis of social reproduction
- **Focus on workers in hospitals and nursing homes in the New York State** (with possible extensions) to achieve the comparability with the Polish study
 - How are the experiences and coping strategies of essential public service workers in the U.S. similar to and different from their Polish counterparts?
 - What is the role of intersecting inequalities, including those related to gender, ethnicity/race and migration status, in shaping essential workers coping strategies in both countries?
 - What is the role of institutional conditions, including models of capitalism and organization of public services in both countries, in shaping essential workers' coping strategies?

PUBLIC SERVICES IN PL AND USA: INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Similarities	Differences
The marketization of the public services leading to their chronic crisis and the crisis of social reproduction (Greer & Umney 2022; Kozek 2011; Keune 2020; Osterman 2017; Winant 2021)	Greater institutional heterogeneity in PL (Gardawski, Rapacki 2021) as compared to the LME in the case of the US; much more advanced and longer-term marketization and financialization in the US.
Much higher union density in education, health care, and social assistance than in other sectors; higher proportion of women, better educated, and (in NYS/NYC) Black and Latino workers in unions	Greater militancy of public service workers in NY (especially NYC!) vs. PL (e.g. strikes during pandemic) (ILR Labor Action Tracker) - More resistance in NYS, more normalization in PL during pandemic (Milkman, Van Der Naald 2022))
High reliance on community and solidarity in response to the crises (Illner 2020)	Greater role of ethnic segmentation/ racialization in the USA than (until recently) in PL
State failure in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic – high excess mortality rates	The existence of the political discourse of essential work in the USA (but not in Poland)

ANY OTHER SUGGESTIONS ?

UNION DENSITY IN POLAND, USA AND NEW YORK STATE



THE COMPOSITION OF UNION MEMBERSHIP BY INDUSTRY GROUP IN PL AND USA (2022) (SELECTED INDUSTRIES)



Source: The State of Unions
(2022) for the USA and
Statistics Poland (2023) for PL
Note: 9,5% union members in
mining in PL was not added

COMPARATIVE BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

- The comparative project uses a biographical method based on the assumption that it is not possible to understand individual experiences and life strategies without knowing the individual's life history.
- Biographies allow us to understand if and how the crisis has led to life change strategies, e.g. support for trade unions, quitting or changing jobs, changing the relationship between work and non-work life, etc.
- Biographies provide access to experiences outside the workplace, which were often central to strategies for coping with the consequences of the crisis.
- Workers' biographies provide an understanding of what dimensions of job quality are important to them and why, with direct implications for trade union strategies.
- Biographies of trade union activists are particularly important because they show the path to activism.

RESEARCH AS PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

- Traditions of participatory action research and critical labor studies;
- Sociology's public mission - providing tools to better understand the situation of workers in the context of the crisis;
- Planned webinars to discuss research findings with trade unionists from Poland and the U.S. In Poland
- Collaboration with the Buffalo Co-Lab of the Cornell University's ILR School and CWA Locals in Buffalo (1133 and 1168);
- Further collaboration planned with SEIU 1199 (nursing home employees and home care workers)

RESEARCH PROCESS AND PLANS

Hospital employees:	Physicians	Registered nurses	Technicians/nursing aids/LPN
Interview no. (including male)	4 (2)	10 (2)	4 (0)
Location	NY, CA, MD	NY (Buffalo)	NY (Buffalo)
Union members	0	10	4

- Interviews conducted in union premises or at home, between 60 and 120 minutes long
- Limitations: Predominantly white, unionized, higher paid, college educated.
- Next steps: interviewing lower paid nursing home workers and home health aides through SEUI contacts in Buffalo in May → the Buffalo case study vs. nurses and nursing home workers in Poland (the problems of comparisons)
- Attempts to access Amazon and food delivery in New York City (Adam) and interviews with doctors (Jacek) as separate mini-projects

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS FROM BUFFALO INTERVIEWS

- **Pre-pandemic conditions:**
 - **Workplace level:** negotiated collective agreements in two health care systems; good wages for RNs (worse for other grades), persistent staffing problems, and a sense of increasing numbers of patients in hospitals;
 - **Biographical level:** important role of union involvement as a biographical resource for stabilizing professional biographies and upward social mobility;
- **COVID-19 pandemic:**
 - **Less bottom-up worker innovation** as compared to PL despite limited staff, PPEs
 - **Shared control** between management and unions - **micro-corporatist arrangements** in hospital crisis management
 - **Voice** (a 5 week strike in Catholic Health) and **exit** as the means of resistance
 - **Less normalization of pandemic** as compared to hospital workers in Poland (possible explanations: the role of union narrative resources; pandemic narrated as a part of polycrisis manifested in deepening social and political divisions; stronger essential work discourse)
 - **Biographical level:** trade union resources as a source of resilience vs. a source of tension reflecting the role of a union

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