

BIOGRAPHICAL EXPERIENCES AND COPING STRATEGIES OF ESSENTIAL WORKERS IN HEALTHCARE, SOCIAL CARE, EDUCATION AND LOGISTICS

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NCN OPUS 19 "COV-WORK: Socio-economic consciousness, work experiences and coping strategies of Poles in the context of the post-pandemic crisis"



STRUCTURE OF THE PRESENTATION

1. Biographical part of the project – short introduction
2. Methodological note – sampling and execution of the research
3. Biographical experience of the polycrisis
4. Coping strategies of essential workers
 - Survival type
 - Resourceful type
 - Relational type
 - Solidaristic type
5. Conclusions

BIOGRAPHICAL PART OF THE PROJECT — SHORT INTRODUCTION

1. We focus on microsociological analysis of the relation between the polycrisis and biographical experiences and coping strategies of essential workers
2. Our approach is based on critical realism-inspired concept of life strategies (Archer 2007, 2013; Mrozowski 2011) and sequential analysis of biographical narrative interviews (Schütze 2012)

The central research question:

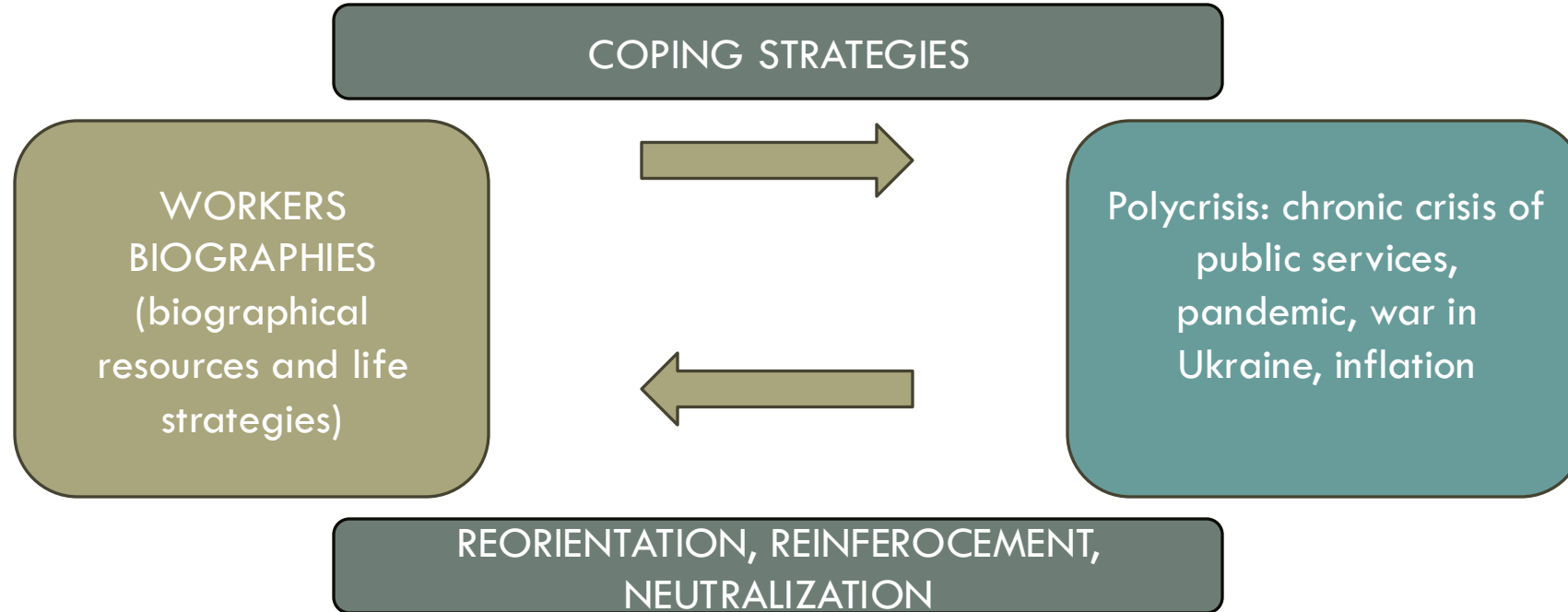
To what extent and in what ways is the polycrisis, most notably the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent exogenous shocks, reflected in the biographical experiences and life strategies of workers in selected essential industries?

SAMPLING AND METHODOLOGY

- ❖ The empirical basis consists of **90 biographical narrative interviews** (Schütze 2016)
- ❖ **Essential workers** in industries: healthcare, education, social care and logistics

Branches	Professional groups	Number of BNIs
Healthcare	Doctors, nurses, paramedics, non-medical personnel	19
Education	Primary school teachers	30
Social care	Carers, nurses, physiotherapists, non-medical personnel	11
Logistics	Warehouse workers, app couriers, delivery couriers, drivers,	30

WORKERS' BIOGRAPHIES IN TIME OF POLYCRISIS



BIOGRAPHICAL EXPERIENCES: BIOGRAPHY AND MACROSOCIAL CRISES

Three ways in which the 2020+ crises, including in particular COVID-19 pandemic, are reflected in the biographical experiences of essential workers:

- Crisis as biographical turning point – biographical **reorientation**

The redefinition of existing life strategies as a result of experiencing of crises (e.g. shifting the attention of individuals from work to private life, e.g. caring for a family, or reversely, becoming more solidaristic at work).

- Crisis as biographical **reinforcement**

Life strategies “developed” earlier are continued and strengthened by the exogenous shocks of 2020+ (e.g. becoming even more resourceful or trapped in a trajectory of suffering).

- Biographical **neutralization** of the crisis

Life strategies are presented as unaffected by the 2020+ crises, whose significance for individual biographical experience is minimized (or “silenced”) in biographical narratives.

TYPOLGY OF WORKERS LIFE STRATEGIES

Two main dimensions of describing the workers' life strategies:

(1) **the dimension of social ties** related to the biographical significance of social networks and relations for the implementation of life strategies

privatized or communitarian orientation

(2) **the dimension of agency**, referring to the general biographical orientations of the informants towards the events occurring in their lives

proactive or reactive orientation

BIOGRAPHICAL DIMENSIONS OF LIFE STRATEGIES

Biographical dimensions	(Social ties)	
	Privatised	Communitarian
Reactive (Agency) Proactive	Survival type 28 cases	Relational type 19 cases
	Resourceful type 31 cases	Solidaristic type 12 cases

Source: COV-WORK (own research)

DISTRIBUTION OF DOMINANT TYPES BY THE INDUSTRIES

Dominant strategy type	Healthcare	Social care	Education	Logistics
Survival type	3	5	10	10
Relational type	5	3	10	1
Resourceful type	10	1	7	13
Solidaristic type	1	3	2	6

Source: COV-WORK (own research)

SURVIVAL TYPE

When I was employed here, it was a completely different job. It was mainly working with people and the documents were just a supplement to that. And now it's quite the opposite. And there was time to have a tea, and now there isn't. There is no time to have a literal tea. BNI_13_OZ_Ula

1. The survival type combines the dimension of privatized social relations and biographical reactivity.
2. The experience of social inequality and the sense of helplessness and atomization characteristic of this type are intensified by functioning in conditions of precarity and limited support from social networks.
3. Privatized life strategies entail a type of limited solidarity, and an orientation focused on individual and family goals instead of an orientation directed at the wider community, e.g.: professional group or workplace.
4. The dimension of reactivity appears in biographies characterized by the experience of losing control over one's life, which is an element of the biographical trajectory of suffering as a dominant process structure.
5. The persistence of reactive strategies in the conditions of polycrisis usually indicated a limited access to biographical resources. The reliance on micro-groups and social ties contributes to the perpetuation of the patchwork order logic.

RELATIONAL TYPE

And I can sort of talk to them and sort of arrange these meetings with me, and for us to have a nice time, or I can just... [laughs] sit at the desk, bang my fist and say: 'Keep it down here!'. Which I don't do, because it doesn't make sense. (...) And it's like these are relationships. It's just relationships. BNI_05_E_Daria

1. The essence of the relational type is the combination of an orientation towards community relations (going beyond the bonds within primary groups, such as family) with the dominance of reactivity in the dimension of agency,
2. "Communitarianism" in the discussed type may refer both to the workplace and experiences outside the workplace.
3. Relationality is therefore the basic mechanism of social resilience here with importance of pre-pandemic relations with others
4. Relational type is close to Hirschmann concept of „loyalty” and as such it is rather conservative toward the patchwork order the individuals coping with – they use relations-related biographical resources to adjust to changing nature of critical situation (teachers during the remote learning phase in the pandemic)
5. In terms of biographical method, the reliance on relational biographical resources is an important asset in controlling the trajectory of suffering potentials

RESOURCEFUL TYPE

It wasn't that I suddenly woke up and said, 'Oh, I'd like to go to Alaska and I'll definitely go there,' but someone advised me here, someone helped me to get the papers and also, when we were going, it wasn't quite clear if we wouldn't come, or if we would come and it would turn out that the sponsor is withdrawing and the students won't be able to work there this year, but we had to look for something ourselves on the spot. BNI_18_OZ_Katarzyna

1. The combination of proactivity in the dimension of agency and privatized orientation in the dimension of social ties.
2. Resourcefulness as a crucial asset in developing coping mechanisms with different dimensions of the crisis
3. The biographical core of resourceful type is developing biographical actions schemes by the individuals (the individual – not the community in which he or she is – is a main subject of the story)
4. Being resourceful is connected with utilizing various types of biographical resources available for the individual and navigating between them in relation to type of the crisis the individual is facing at the moment
5. Being resourceful is also based on making use of gaps and cracks inherent to the patchwork order which itself supports its reproduction (normalization) rather than transformation (the case of public sectors workers in the pandemic)

SOLIDARISTIC TYPE

I'm saying, because I'm a fighting person, so I'm still trying to fight for those people at work, to, to improve some conditions, to improve myself, no, let's not kid myself, no, I'm not that altruistic not to improve myself. [Laughs] But by fighting for, for, for others, among other things, I improve the situation for myself, no. Er, and it is/ also a good way to fill maybe like a bit of a void in your personal life. Because there's always something going on, no. BNI_05_OZ_Božena

1. The solidaristic strategy combines a focus on relationships with others within broader communities such as trade unions, work teams, and sometimes other cases of social involvement (e.g. third sector organizations) with a proactive attitude in the activities undertaken.
2. In biographical terms we see the strong presence of biographical action schemes (sometimes combined with elements of metamorphosis as in the case of becoming union activists)
3. In some cases, the experience of the crisis (predominantly working in the COVID-19 pandemic) can be the trigger for developing the solidaristic strategy; in other cases, activism is a longer-term life strategy
4. Economic (focused on inequalities in the workplace) and political (ideology-related) dimensions of the solidaristic strategies
5. Solidarsitic type has the most vivid potential of transformation the patchwork order, in particular by crossing boundaries between various social worlds and organisations

CONCLUSIONS

1. Only in some cases did the post-2020 crises lead to a change in the dominant life strategy. A more frequent and clear-cut scenario was **the reinforcement of strategies present in the biographies of respondents before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.**
2. Due to the tendency to continue life strategies, **the polycrisis did not lead to a reversal of the tendency to privatize life strategies** observed in previous studies (Mrozowicki, 2011; Mrozowicki & Trappmann, 2021; Waniek, 2019).
3. Central to maintaining this type of continuity at the level of individual life histories was **biographical work, which allowed life strategies grounded in past events to be sustained under conditions of overlapping crises** (Burski et al., 2022; Strauss, 2012).

CONCLUSIONS

4. On the mezzo and macro level **normalization tendency can be linked to certain features of patchwork capitalism, such as the vital importance of social micro-groups and informal relationships** replacing imperfectly functioning state and formal institutions (Gardawski & Rapacki, 2021). It also contributes to the perpetuation of this order despite exogeneous shocks.
5. Some of **biographical resources** (professional ethos, resourcefulness and disposition toward solidarity with others), with the support of significant others, labour organisations and social movements, **may also have led to overcoming the dominant tendency to privatise life strategies and shifts towards solidaristic types**. However, this was a minority tendency in our data.

THANK YOU 😊

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IDUB "The experience of a mental crisis in the precariat and in the narratives of experts"

