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Students of pedagogy on social relations at the beginning of the pandemic – in the light of a qualitative analysis of their personal and social reflectiveness

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Editorial preface

Reflexiveness is essential in the development of the Adult ego state. Searching oneself, analysing one's emotions or values initiates the process of the Adult ego state integration, helps to draw on experiences of other ego states while realizing practical tasks, facilitates dealing with problems. In its development, the Adult ego state is in contact with its environment and takes it into account while acting, analyses relations with other people and evaluates the effectiveness of own actions. Contact with one's environment is at the same time contact with oneself, as the Adult ego state undertakes actions based on their consequences for the environment and other ego states. Staying at home due to the COVID-19 pandemic might facilitate reflexiveness as transactional deprivation is linked with fear of infection and meeting other people turns out more difficult than ever. More than in an ordinary situation, the Adult ego state has to take decisions based on priorities of other ego states. The compromise between what should be done and what one would like to do or what one is afraid of requires hard work and might be a catalyst of positive change, but might also expose

the weaknesses of relations we maintain. The methodology of qualitative research makes it possible to study other people's reflections, describes the mechanism of taking some decisions and in this way offers an opportunity to better understand the mechanisms of personality development.

Zbigniew Wieczorek

Abstract

The article presents partial results of qualitative research concerning opinions of pedagogy students on the psychological-social situation experienced by people at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. The necessity of limiting the transmission of the virus sentenced whole societies to home confinement, limited their mobility and people-to-people contacts, brought the world to a standstill. For many, it also became an inspiration to reflect on the current hierarchy of values. 36 students of the Maria Grzegorzewska University were the sample of the research and they were divided into two age groups - those beginning their studies and those finishing them. They were asked to prepare short essays collecting their reflections from the first stage of the pandemic. The texts were analysed in accordance with the research methodology. There were 4 key categories singled out in the students' utterances, which made it possible to show the group differences in their attitude towards discussed issues. The younger respondents were more concentrated on their personal perspective and their opinions were more emotional and optimistic. The older respondents showed more distance towards reality, their remarks were bitter and targeted the issues of social policy, consumerism and egoism of modern societies, more frequently treating the question of the pandemic not as an end in itself but as a springboard for more thorough social criticism.

Keywords: pandemic, COVID-19, lockdown, reflectiveness, social relations, family.

Introduction

Facing the situation of the COVID-19 virus pandemic attacking the world at the beginning of the year 2020, Polish universities primarily took all technical and organizational measures to control the situation concerning lockdown introduced by our government and the necessity to immediately pass on to distance learning. There was a smaller emphasis put on psychological support of university employees and students, although educational institutions having such possibilities tried to offer them, even if to a limited extent. This was confirmed by the results of studies attempted by numerous research centers analyzing the situation of education and higher education during the pandemic (Buchner, Majchrzak, Wierzbicka, 2020; Jaskulska, Jankowiak, 2020; Pyżalski, 2020; Ptaszek et al., 2020). Students, in majority belonging to the generation of digital natives, managed the situation from the technological point of view, yet psychologically they faced a very difficult situation. Young people, on the threshold of their adulthood, who had not had any opportunity to reflect deeply on their life yet, faced the perspective of a radical change in their lives experienced in loneliness and anxiety about unstable and threatening future. In their childhood, the globalised and digitalised world moving with thunderous speed carried them away. Their school

years were filled with fighting for better marks, scoring more and more test points, nervous studying of school and university rankings. This stress and pressure were strengthened by their parents' anxieties as they remembered well the 20% unemployment period. Suddenly the world came to a halt and the young and adults were face to face with their own thoughts. Inspired by the essay entitled *Window* by the Polish Nobel Prize 2018 winner, Olga Tokarczuk, the research group decided to ask the students about these thoughts. Two groups – the one beginning and the other finishing their studies – prepared their written answers. In order to avoid filtering the answers through their own expectations, the researchers analysed the data with the help of instruments of their research theory. The collected material made it possible to analyse the pedagogy students' reflectiveness in the situation of the global crisis, to determine key areas of this reflectiveness and to notice differences in the way it was experienced by the two age groups.

Reflectiveness in the shade of the catastrophe

Every crisis situation by stopping people's rushing lives, disturbing their routine and everyday rhythm makes individuals, organizations and whole societies reflect on their biographies and the state of the world they all create. The global pandemic that touched us in 2020 definitely matches the definition of a crisis situation, even a catastrophe, which unexpectedly has shaken the lives of millions of people and taken the lives of millions as well. As other researchers dealing with psychological consequences of catastrophes, Krzysztof Kaniasty and Fran H. Norris think, mobilization and integration of societies in this type of situation is so strong that it creates in the eyes of a given community a utopian vision of an altruistic community, supportive in the times of crisis. After the "up" stage, however, there is a severe mood decline as everyone is tired of the situation, prolonged stress and disappointment with institutions and ordinary people. The researchers call this stage "the fall" (Kaniasty, Norris, 2004, 2006). This emotional pendulum is hard to bear even for mature people, yet it has become everyone's experience, regardless of age and life experience. As Agnieszka Dauksza emphasizes, the experience in itself is creative and impacts one's identity. Under its influence "issues look different, one redefines the way they act and perceive their relations differently, not only interpersonal ones, but their attitude to places, plants, animals" (Dauksza, 2017, p. 771). However, there are certain conditions that make it possible to benefit from this experience – on the one hand, it is one's environment's support, support of people sharing the same experience, the feeling of shared fate, on the other hand, it is readiness to reflect on it.

In Piotr Sztompka's opinion (2016) the key to happiness is, accumulated by an individual, "capital deriving from positive moral relations, trust, loyalty, reci-

procity, respect and justice. [...] people function in a given environment whose most important element are other people. Life in society means first and foremost one's engagement in interaction with other people" (Sztompka, 2016, p. 46). In this context, it is worth emphasizing "[...] the role of team spirit in team sport, morale in the army, good atmosphere at school. These are metaphorical terms demonstrating the need of community in certain groups" (Sztompka, 2016, p. 155). Meanwhile, Zygmunt Bauman remarks pessimistically that "[...] Nowadays, we live in the world where people [...] fight with the distribution of interpersonal relations, experiment with various definitions of their own person and seek psychological truth, negotiating with interpersonal requirements of everyday life" (Bauman, 2018, p. 215). However, unprecedented rush caused by dynamic development of technical civilization does not leave people much space for careful development of stable interpersonal relations. It does not offer any opportunity for more profound reflection on „the sense of being and life" either (Tchorzewski, de, 2016, p. 177).

Reflexive thinking seems to be a *sine qua non* condition of experiencing the trauma of the catastrophe, finding own "self" and rediscovering one's place in a community. John Dewey already emphasised, with respect to pedagogy, the importance of reflectiveness in the process of constructing everyone's identity (Dewey, 1988, p. 33 and further on). Reflectiveness of a given subject should not be directed solely towards the very individual, but has to take into account the relations between them and the world, between them and another person. This necessary duality of reflection is aptly described by Wojciech Chudy, who writes that a reflexive person faces two horizons: the horizon of "self" covering "thinking inside one's consciousness" (Chudy, 2006, p. 70) and the horizon of existence referring to objective reality, relation of "self" and the real world and other "selves". As the author emphasizes, "we shall not have contact with ourselves if we do not have contact with reality; learning about existence, we learn about ourselves" (Chudy, 2006, pp. 70–71).

Following this reasoning, the authors of the research decided to focus on reflectiveness developed at the time of the pandemic in a particularly sensitive group – young adults, intensively experiencing the process of creating their identity. The subject of the research was the pandemic and lockdown caused by COVID-19 serving as catalysts for the pedagogy students' reflectiveness. This issue took the shape of three detailed questions: How did the perception of the world and themselves change in the eyes of the students? Which set of values was questioned and which one was elevated in the face of pandemic reality? Are there any differences in perceiving this reality by different age groups (choice of topics, attitude to them)?

36 students of pedagogy from the Maria Grzegorzewska University constituted the purposeful sample of the research. These were students beginning their first-degree studies in 2019/2020 (their opinions are marked as EME in the text)

and second-degree studies (PEK code), studying at two related faculties connected with media pedagogy. These students show a particular interest in cultural and social issues, they are keen observers of reality and its media representations. They were asked to prepare a short essay inspired by Olga Tokarczuk's text (2020), *Window*. The collected material was analysed with the use of the adopted research theory (Glaser, Strauss 1967; Glaser, Holton 2004; Konecki 2018). The looped comparative analysis of the data has led to the emergence of concepts that allow for a precise description of the key categories, not preceded by hypotheses.

After the initial analysis, there were 381 coded phrases obtained and they were attributed to 16 main codes. These were assigned to four categories which emerged in the process of the analysis. Due to a personal, even intimate nature of the respondents' utterances, all the essays share the common denominator – they showed the relation between “self” of the writing subject and the world – both the respondents' internal world and the external one observed by them attentively. The aforesaid four categories are of a relational nature and they were ordered according to the degree of proximity of a circle of elements to the writing subject. Thus, there is *subjective self*, self-turning, focused on reflection on oneself, one's own identity and internalized system of values; *self-relatives* – focused on contemplating values and evaluating the quality of primordial social links (family, friends, neighbours); *social self* – pertaining to widely-understood social relations and their state in the modern world, covering the reflection on human attitudes towards the pandemic threat, the role of social links, responsibility for the fate of others, criticism of the state and society, etc.; *self-environment* – connected with ecological awareness of the respondents, their attitudes towards nature and man as its part.

This article concentrates on presenting the results pertaining to two relational categories of a social nature: *self-relatives* and *social self*.

Self-relatives, i.e. on the value of family and weakness of links

The *self-relatives* comprises altogether 43 utterance fragments revolving around two codes: the value of family and weakness of links. Here, the emphasis is on the younger group, where contact and conversations with closest relatives occur altogether 35 times, which constitutes 15 percent of thematic essay phrases. The diversification of selected phrases and their content seems both clear and characteristic. Among female and male students (22/2) from the younger group some selected content still signals strong attachment to family home. Their indicators are 24 phrases emphasizing the value of family and 11 others stressing the issue of weakness of links; only in six cases there are no direct references confirming the interest in this category. Older female and male students (9/3) put less stress on this issue in their opinions – which should be understood as the reflec-

tion of their own perception, evaluating the context of “self” between parents or by the significance of family home. This accent is only eight cases for all coded phrases (there are altogether 132 of them in that group), constituting the lowest rate of interest in that category. In eight essays (out of 12) there are no references to the category *self-relatives*, however, the older respondents demonstrate more care of the environment (15% of all the phrases), and the biggest one of social issues (44%).

I enjoy every moment spent at home...

The value of family. In case of the younger group, the reflection is directed towards the value of family – there are 24 out of 35 cases of this category under this code. This reflection occurs due to the paradox of the pandemic, which put people’s rush to a halt, made them look at their rat race from a different perspective and concentrate on what is most precious. An EME2 student writes that the pandemic stirred people from their lethargy, interrupting a perfect dream about their career. Everything evaporated. Vanished. But there is family. It was and is – even in difficult times of the pandemic, which “Isn’t it reach? Made us talk to people who are most important to us” (EME1).

Everything that we were striving for has no value now. Family, health, safety are the values that we care for more these days (EME2).

And, according to the researchers, this is another piece of evidence that the time of the pandemic can have a healing effect on family:

Confined at home, we have more time for ourselves and our family. We reach certain conclusions, dream, bring back memories (EME2).

I think it is a great opportunity for us – people to stop for a while and appreciate what surrounds us, our family, our strengths and weaknesses, which show that nobody is perfect (EME3).

This difficult quarantine time can be devoted to making up for last years. We can have a look at our family relations – what are they like? Maybe it is worth changing something, doing something to achieve it (EME6).

I really miss meetings with my friends, colleagues or family (EME15).

The beautiful world that people do not notice every day as they are too busy, they do not appreciate what they have, i.e. “happiness” in the shape of a lovely family, health. And time flies and we never know when our life will end. Currently, I can see what is going on now. Staying at home, one gets to know their own family (EME17).

It’s time to stop that life race and devote some time to our family, the elderly who need our support more than ever before (EME13).

The value of family lies also in the place where everyone dwells – due to the pandemic more often and longer: family home, no matter what it is like. It can be one’s own room in a flat or a semi-detached house.

I thank for that opportunity of spending time with my family, watching how my child is growing so fast, feed him with whatever I feel like, watch him again and again how he develops so fast

– writes an EME19 student, enjoying her new experience of motherhood and so far desperately trying to find some time for her child in her timetable filled with work and studies.

I enjoy every moment spent at home, I appreciate the fact I am calmer, I have time for everything and I'm not rushing anywhere. For me this obligatory leave is something wonderful, and it's a pity not everyone appreciates that. Yet, one's glass can be half full or half empty (EME19).

Others also appreciate an opportunity of being with their families.

I am glad I could come back to my peaceful family home. I really appreciate this time, when no one nags me, wants anything from me, pushes me to meet others. I rest. I feel full of energy again, I can spend more time focusing on my interests and I am happy (EME16).

An EME23 student perceives her family home as a value, asylum, where one gathers energy before they move on.

We have our little nest. Sometimes it is empty, sometimes filled with family members who welcome us with open arms. We come back when we do not know what to do next. When we have a problem. And maybe that is why at such a risky time, the very first place to hide is not a sunny Florida beach, but our home where we used to grow up (EME23).

The author summarises everything with a reflexive conclusion,

That is why when I look out of the window now, I can't see anyone. I can only hear the drumming of someone's suitcase coming back to their haven (EME23).

In the essays of the older group there are more general phrases concerning the value of family as the first main code of the *self-relatives* category. Their comments are less emotional than their younger counterparts', but very reflexive and pragmatic.

I've understood how little time I used to spend with my nearest and dearest who are so important in everyone's life. It's a perfect time to think about ourselves and our priorities and maybe try to redefine them (PEK4).

There are three phrases concerning the need to focus on one's closest family, to redefine one's values.

In these difficult moments we should look for benefits and good sides that may bring something good, something valuable. If we have that opportunity, it is good to use it to slow down for a while, calm down and focus on ourselves and our closest relatives (PEK4).

"Maybe it's worth devoting more time to my own family?" asks one PEK12 student, but she passes on quickly to broader social issues. "How long is it going to last?" asks another student rhetorically. And she remarks that "one thing is

certain. It is not the world that belongs to us at the moment, but it is time and how we use it with our families” (PEK 11).

We have become strangers to each other...

Weakness of links. In the younger group this category covers 11 out of 35 indications. It is almost fifty percent less than in case of the value of family, but here the emphasis is put on the fear of infection – that is why we avoid others, even closest family members. An EME10 student writes that we used to be more joyous and smiling, but since the pandemic broke out, people have been dejected.

I look into their eyes and I can see fear. Are they afraid of me? Unwelcoming looks directed at someone who dared to cough or sneeze.

The EME10 student continues:

We have become strangers to each other. We don't want help from someone met on the street. We stay as far away from each other as possible.

This mistrust towards strangers is the fear of infection. Another universal and “pre-pandemic” cause of weakness of family relations is an absurd world pace, not letting anyone stop and build relations with their nearest and dearest.

Every day we fulfil our duties speedily, falling into the so-called routine, and not paying enough attention to devote enough time to our closest family members. We believe we have unlimited time (EME13).

Before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic the world was rushing. Sometimes we did not have time for breakfast, not to mention a conversation with our family members or a lazy day spent in pyjamas. And then we missed it badly. We wanted more time to take a deep breath (EME18).

And here is a pandemic paradox – the dream about time for our nearest and dearest comes true, but too much time to be together, getting to know each other, is too much and makes us realise what is missing in our relations.

Now that we have too much time, we cannot handle it (EME18).

We spend more time with people we live with and who we did not have time for, immersed in the humdrum daily round of work, studies, things to do. This brings us closer to each other. It teaches us how to develop relations with the nearest and dearest. It shows us whether we know the people we live with at all (EME10).

Yet, sometimes it is not easy. Lockdown is something forced on us, something that limits us, sentences us to each other's company.

We are not used to being exclusively in the company of our family members all weeks, all days. This situation heightens negative feelings, irritation or anger. Probably people who spend that time alone are even in a worse situation. Obligatory closure of public areas makes it impossible to have a little respite from our family, to go out and relax. Even an ordinary walk is impossible (EME4).

Lockdown is a test for the value of relationships. As an EME12 student points out, in China after a long quarantine the number of divorces increased. Why? Because people had not fully realized who they had been living with. Everyone had had their own life and finally due to quarantine confinement they understood they did not match. It is due to the fact that after their marriage ceremony, they had had no time to get to know each other well.

[...] married couples have enough of each other, begin to feel irritation, get angry, due to that constant company children complain about their parents and parents complain about their children (EME7).

And although – an EME17 student concludes – “People are not used to spending so much time with their family members,” in another respondent’s opinion (EME21), this forced solitude

is also a good time to renew some relations by online means, relations you keep thinking about but you don’t do anything as it seems stupid to send a message after such a long time (EME21).

Spending time at home with one’s family and very weak bonds before the pandemic; time of obligatory, intense presence of one’s parents but also the renaissance of former relations – this is what an EME24 student writes very emotionally about. This very personal account is almost completely dedicated to the genesis of the metamorphosis of her relationship with her mother. “Before the quarantine, my family was tiring to me”, she writes and adds,

Every time we went out together or were supposed to talk – that was a torture. My contact with her was always cold, she irritated me by her very presence. [...] I missed that bond. The quarantine, closed university [...] I started missing the slightest contact with any human being. I missed human presence. My mum was more often at home, I didn’t go anywhere else. And we started, oh gosh, we started talking. For the first time in years I wanted to hug her. I came to ask what was going on “in the world,” which is further than on my way from home to a parcel machine and back. She asked me how I was doing at school and if I had eaten anything. She told me about her day. More and more often we talked as if that recent time, that time before the quarantine had been more distant than any other reality. Somewhere far away in space. I missed her, missed her in the same way like on my first day in kindergarten when she left me there with my favourite dinosaur. It was as if, during that whole time before the quarantine, I had been standing near the window in the playroom, upset and waiting for her to make a scene when she was back. But when she was back, there was no scene, I threw myself into her arms and hugged her. Hugging her like that I destroyed that wall between us separating us for years (EME24).

In the essays written by the older group, there were only two mentions concerning the importance of relations and their lack due to negligence. PEK10 and PEK3 students remarked on that:

Ruining one’s life and one’s family’s and relatives’ life is that important? Do we have anyone to talk to right now, do we have another person’s support? Or maybe we are alone (as we did not devote enough time to our relatives) and we keep thinking if it could be different had it not been for all this rush and overwhelming stress? (PEK 10).

Of course, people get together as they share the same sense of humour or interests. But is it enough? Nowadays, people face an interpersonal test. And no wonder that some marriages break up now. Partners, more than ever before, notice what their other half is like. Personal norms and values that used to be shared have become completely divergent. There is nothing to talk about and playing on each other's nerves becomes boring (PEK 3).

Thus, the time of the pandemic is a trial for the quality of relations we have developed with our nearest and dearest. Like in Andersen's fairy tale, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, it exposes our weaknesses, superficial relations developed in haste. It also offers an opportunity to mend them. Similar reflections are generated as a result of students' observations of social reality spreading beyond the area of their households.

Social self, i.e. on empathy and criticism of the government

Social self is the second category with the biggest number of attributed phrases in the students' texts (after *subjective self* which is not the subject of interest in that publication), covering the students' remarks, reflections and attitudes concerning their experience of belonging to a bigger community – society, nation, and finally, human species. The phrases belonging to that category contain 134 essay fragments, grouped in four thematic blocks: social change, social sensitivity (empathy), commonality and responsibility (including criticism of the government). This category was represented more strongly in the opinions of the older respondents (44% of all extracted phrases) than younger ones (30%). One could also notice differences in emphases put on particular themes in both groups.

We are acting at two levels simultaneously...

Social change. An important topic frequently occurring in the younger group's reflections are their remarks on change deriving from spatial isolation, and what follows – to a large extent – social one. Space was subject to abrupt implosion, accumulating all human activities within four walls of a given household.

Work, school, family life – all that is found in one, bigger or smaller space. Work and school have entered our family lives. The virus forced us to combine these two worlds that we had separated previously. We are acting at two levels simultaneously,

– writes an EME2 student. This situation inevitably produces fatigue:

The time of the epidemic is really tiring and offers a horrible perspective. Restrictions whose number is growing every day limit our needs to an absolute minimum. Human life is based on a simple functionality of a Tamagotchi toy: eat, drink, sleep... (EME14).

Home, so far being a safe asylum in the life full of rush and affairs, turns into a trap. We are trapped in homes that we have created. The place that was supposed to be our oasis, something safe, turns out to be a space that many of us want to get away from

– writes an EME21 student.

However, a certain group of people is happy with this radical change. These are people who have felt so far that they do not match a socially preferred pattern. These are introverts who barely managed to survive in a noisy, expansive society programmed to pursue success and develop self-promotion both in a real and virtual world.

A human being understood as a product, to sell well, has to stand out in the crowd with their interesting, gaudy packaging. It does not take much to understand that it is easier for people who are insensitive to stress, self-confident, sociable, and full of ambition to develop. The connotation of withdrawal, certain shyness and calmness sounds negative. It is not important that it is inherent to almost a half of our society, as this is the number of introverts according to some data (EME8).

On the other hand, extroverts, setting the rules of the game so far, suffer unimaginably.

The soul of a traveller, extrovert, who needs to contact another human being to survive, has been crashed by the vision of an illness that attacks fast and unexpectedly

– an EME23 student describes her own feelings.

Taking the perspective of isolation, the main axis of the observed change is especially well-visible: the world that had been rushing madly suddenly stopped, slowed down and in that way created a space for reflection for all these rushing people.

The most important thing that I've understood, sitting at home for almost a month right now, is that people lived in neglect. We used to live in the abruptly fast 21st century and due to that fact we have forgotten about small, very simple but very important things

– an EME10 student admits.

This unexpected disillusionment that happened as a result of the world coming to a halt makes the young think there is no coming back to the former reality. This traumatic experience makes it impossible to carry on living like before, without fear.

After all this that has happened to us and will happen to us, nothing is going to be the same like before (EME15);

The world will be trying to come back to normal. We shall bewail the loss of those struck by the pandemic. And nothing is going to be the same (EME10).

An EME5 student presents the situation vividly:

The virus from Wuhan changes our environment, habits, the way we function [...]. We experience living from scratch. It is as if we had to learn how to walk again. Maybe it is exaggerated a little bit but does not a child that makes its first, independent step begin a new stage in its life? Are we not doing exactly the same thing? We change every previous move into a different one.

We are all chasing prosperity, perfect looks, striving for recognition or acceptance. This race can be tiring so maybe it is worth stopping for a while

– an EME16 student remarks.

“I’d like,” writes EME9, “people to find each other once it’s all over and fight only for what can make them happy, and not what satisfies their ambition that is often realized trampling the dead underfoot”. “Let everyone keep their own pace,” agrees an EME8 student, “without any pressure that demands impossible. The cult of greatness, superiority, speed is not achievable for everyone, and it is not desired as success is not an equivalent of fulfilment and happiness”.

Yet, are we strong enough to maintain that change? To give up hurry, multi-tasking, greed with which we devour life? An EME18 student sounds skeptical:

We are not used to such life. Till the beginning of the pandemic, the world was rushing off its feet. [...] Now that we have too much time, we cannot handle it...

The group of students finishing their studies seems less worried about the very contemplation of change. They are more interested in issues concerning the functioning of society at the time of the pandemic. There is a feeling of the end of the world they know, which so strongly accompanies their younger counterparts.

There is one thing which is certain, nothing’s going to come back to normal as a new norm is emerging in front of our very eyes

reckons a PEK1 student. There are also single opinions touching upon the question of uncertainty caused by a sudden change of social life organization.

Everything happened so suddenly, one day everyone got to know that their life would be turned upside down in the nearest future (PEK4).

Nobody expected that such a situation would happen, a situation in which time would stand still and people would have to be locked in their houses. A ban on parks, forests, a limited number of people in shops, keeping social distance, stricter safety measures – obligatory masks and gloves. How long is it going to last? (PEK12).

There is also a chance of a positive evolution of the attitude of societies touched by the pandemic.

If [...] we can come back to ordinary life, what will we start with? Is there going to be too much of everything? [...] This comeback may turn out to be a big change experienced by people who will be finally able to visit their relatives, will appreciate every moment spent with others or surrounded by nature (PEK12).

There may be changes pertaining to the way we work and communicate, to this extraordinary human ability to adjust to changing conditions:

This situation has shown us how we, people, are able to adapt in difficult and sudden situations. In less than two weeks we mastered distant learning and working. I think that due to this situation, this form of performing our duties will significantly develop (PEK4).

Yet, there are more pessimistic voices, emphasizing how superficial these changes in human mentality are, how shallow and ephemeral reflections on the system of values shaping the consumerism culture are.

It might seem that thanks to this situation we shall stop and notice what is important, what escapes our attention

– writes a PEK2 student,

We shall appreciate time spent in open air, in nature, we shall long for it once it has been taken away from us. But all I can see is even more rush for money, shopping, political turmoil.

Her friend echoes her and says that we still miss mindfulness with which we shall treat each other:

The former world created a meritocratic society that has always strived to become wealthy. Achievements, success, money, own prosperity. Have people learned anything from the quarantine period? [...] I am surprised how much people are focused on themselves. Children are running happily in the park, showing their parents with big smiles on their faces what they have discovered in the nearby bushes. And parents? With their phones glued to their ears, they tell them, “Oh, it’s great. And now go and keep playing!” (PEK 3).

So, there is no hope for positive change.

What is our life going to look like?

Social sensitivity. The younger respondents seem to be woken up from a deep dream. They look around and to their amazement discover a surrounding reality and first and foremost people they share their fate with. An EME2 student writes that

We begin to notice things have been invisible before. We begin to notice people that might have been somewhere out of the way. We’re getting immersed into the world we have not appreciated so much before.

This remark provokes questions about the future, going beyond an individual perspective.

What next? What is our life going to look like? How are Poland and the world going to look once it’s all over? (EME16).

Watching TV, the only thing we learn about are new virus victims (EME1),

which generates anxiety about others, especially those less socially privileged than we are. The respondents are, for example, worried about ill children:

How about their parents? How are they supposed to tell a four-year-old they don’t know when they can see them? That their child is going to spend time in hospital surrounded entirely by strangers? (EME11).

Other issues under discussion are e.g. psychological consequences of isolation:

The majority of young people already live in the Internet era, some of them addicted to it. Is the phenomenon of addiction to digital technologies not going to become more serious after the time of an obligatory quarantine? (EME16)

and the fate of the elderly or people “imprisoned” in small flats:

I cannot imagine how the elderly feel when they are sentenced to their own company (EME14).

The respondents are also concerned about the situation of home violence:

How many of these people have been locked in the company of their oppressors? (EME22).

Yet, it is worth emphasising that this concern about individuals turns, to a lesser extent, into a general evaluation of the social and economic situation, like in case of an EME18 student:

Mental diseases, which might lead to suicide or even murder, will be a consequence of the pandemic that no one is ready for – neither the government nor our society. We know that the whole world shall struggle through an economic crisis – that is what we are talking about.

An EME10 student agrees:

Economic consequences will be pitiful – airports do not work, means of public transport and tourism will not recover soon, not to mention small enterprises which shall stay closed no one knows how long. How many people are going to lose their jobs and won't be able to make a living?

Empathy also covers those who risk their health and lives for the sake of others.

How many people are working hard right now, all these nurses, doctors... They would probably give a lot to be home with their families, to rest (EME19).

I go out and I can see the same people like before the pandemic

– writes EME10 –

are they afraid of me? We have become strangers to each other. We do not want any help from a stranger met on the street. We keep as far from each other as possible. We do not trust anyone we have just met.

The respondents are also afraid that lack of trust shall affect foreigners. Like EME 20 says,

The notion of xenophobia will also be important, no doubt like now, after the pandemic this phenomenon will stay with us for a longer time. A foreigner evokes and will evoke a lot of anxiety and fear of being infected with some disease.

However, the situation does not stop the younger students from being altruistic:

Despite the threat, we want to help. As much as we can (EME6).

The older students also appreciate others' sacrifice:

It is these special situations that create everyday heroes who do not have capes, masks or superpowers but do extraordinary things. They sacrifice their health for others, for the benefit of all

– writes a PEK9 student. It is not about heroism of healthcare employees but about measures taken by many people in the name of solidarity:

The presence of the virus made people demonstrate their humanity, [...] ordinary, selfless help. Restaurants distribute meals to hospitals, famous people and foundations donate money for missing equipment so needed to deal with the situation, ordinary people sew masks, volunteers do the shopping for the elderly so that they do not have to leave their houses (PEK9).

The pandemic made people charitable and kind

– echoes a PEK12 student.

I can give an example of my own district. Neighbours have organised shopping for the elderly. Many places like posts, shops, entrances to blocks of flats displayed announcements of people volunteering to do the shopping for the elderly. Almost from one day to the next, in shops people became more polite to each other.

The older students are also worried about the fate of other members of our society.

I am afraid to think about people, those younger and older ones, who suddenly lost their source of income

– writes a PEK1 student. However, their reflections more often take the form of a pessimistic social diagnosis.

The old truth says we're not equal. It's always been and it will be like that and these times only strengthen all inequalities and deepen social stratification, although there are numerous measures taken to ensure equal opportunities, promote help and combat inequalities

– says a PEK10 student bitterly. Wealthy corporation employees working from home do not demonstrate more care about others than before. They have not reflected, in PEK8's opinion, on social order which they co-create.

They are at the peak of their consumerism [...]. They do not think about the fact that their new jeans were sewn in Bangladesh by 13-year-old Goi for a bowl of rice. They only think about what they have in abundance and what they lack. They argue on discussion forums. They post comments on Facebook that suddenly they are disturbed by nearby construction works. They are disturbed by workers hammering, using their tools [...]. They don't care about the very same workers having a hasty, 15-minute meal of some potatoes and buttermilk, sitting on a kerb.

I am tired of this

– confesses a PEK2 student –

I am tired of people. I had an issue about it before the pandemic. The news about keeping a two-metre distance made me happy. Finally, people will learn not to trespass someone else's private zone and notice another human being.

If it is like that, maybe the pandemic is our opportunity sent by nature tormented by human actions? The opportunity paid with the offering of human suffering, which, in the long run, might still turn out to be the only hope for humanity. Taking a wider perspective, it is easier to distinguish imponderables from superficial values. A PEK10 student concludes pertinently:

Reality that surrounded us had to finally slow down – what for? To make many people understand what is really important in life [...]. We thought that money would give us happiness and now we know that we cannot really buy happiness... The illness gave us, humanity, an opportunity to realise that the most important thing in life is our LIFE.

This world at a standstill will finally end...

Community. The young respondents experience especially intensely the feeling of community.

The quarantine, closed university, like me within the four walls of my flat. Apart from everyday activities, walks, friends, I started missing the slightest contact with another human being. I missed human company

– confides an EME24 student –

This world at a standstill will finally end. To survive this, people have to support each other.

The sense of the last sentence resonates quite often in the respondents' utterances:

Let us not divide but unite, as we're all experiencing it together (EME6).

The pandemic constitutes for the younger students an opportunity to come back to communal solidarity which they appeal for:

We are different, yet we are all the same – we are all people. As a population, we should take care of living together in peace (EME3).

We have no influence on where we are born, what our parents are like, whether we have received love and care from the very beginning. Capitalism tells us what the path of our earthly existence should be like, not paying attention to the fact that it is shaped quite differently for every individual. Let everyone keep their own pace, without any pressure demanding impossible (EME8).

There is hope, but whether we emerge victorious from this ordeal of humanity still depends on us. Like EME3 writes,

and when the world is back on the old track, let us hope that we will become better versions of ourselves, [...] that we won't stay indifferent to social injustice and we will be proud of being human.

Due to bitterness discernible in opinions of the respondents finishing their studies, community themes occur in their texts much less frequently. They resurface occasionally in their reflections about human uniqueness, about man as

a social being, the feature which makes it difficult to survive the epidemics without the presence of other people round us (PEK3, PEK7, PEK12). They also take a form of sporadic appeals for mutual support, like in the words of PEK1:

One has to realise we're all in the same boat and only acting together can bring about a desired effect.

The awareness of suddenly discovered equality in the face of the threat turns out to be essential as well:

And there is a moment when you realise that you're only a human being, surrounded by other human beings, in a sense the same like you, yet different. But we're all equal, enjoying the same rights. Nevertheless, in the face of death all these aspects do not matter (PEK9).

However, the older students are quite skeptical about a deeper social change triggered by the pandemic. Some of them express their huge disappointment and detachment from society with its primitive consumerism. One of the most touching opinions like this comes from a PEK2 student, who cannot agree to the destruction of natural environment executed by people and who makes a dramatic choice, being against human actions:

Maybe I have left the team of humans, betrayed my own kind [...]. But have I chosen a weaker side? It seems to me I have. But if not, I would like it as we're the sum of our choices and decisions, they define us and let us change anything.

Maybe this hard time will teach us something...

Responsibility. The younger students' opinions are dominated by appeals for constructive actions, sometimes simple ones, showing responsibility for the fate of others:

The coronavirus puts us to the hardest test of the 21st century. The key thing for me is responsible behaviour as only it can stop the pandemic (EME11).

Every quarantine day we contribute to better tomorrow. Let us follow the guidelines. Let us help those whose life is at risk as much as we can. Let us stay at home. [...] Let us not give doctors and the rest of the healthcare system more work. [...] The quarantine is a big test of our responsibility. It depends on us if the virus is going to continue to spread. Let us say no to this (EME5).

So, there is a recipe for pandemic responsibility. Yet, not everyone wants to follow the instructions. As an EME7 student remarks,

Someone who does not ignore the problem is not going to go out without any special reason, is going to wear a mask and protective gloves, and coming back from abroad is going to report to the Epidemiological Station for their quarantine. Another person who does not care about the issue will not comply with the rules.

Critical remarks, incidentally occurring in the younger respondents' opinions constitute a large group of phrases belonging to the *responsibility* category, com-

ing from the older students' texts, which coincides with their generally critical attitude towards any communal human relations.

When I look out of the window, I've got mixed feelings

– writes a PEK1 student –

as on the one hand I can see people keeping social distance and complying with safety measures, but on the other hand, I can see people who do not care, stay together in groups and share one cigarette among three of them. It is quite terrifying how reckless and selfish people can be.

In the respondents' opinion, the government also loses the fight with the virus.

Of course, I am quite surprised that such an initiative [providing healthcare employees with meals] must be initiated by society even though it is our government's responsibility. I am outraged about the state's attitude and it seems to me that we're living in two different worlds as far as decisions regarding health protection are concerned (PEK 1).

Regardless of the differences in perceiving social responsibility at the time of the pandemics by the two groups, all the students' reflections contain an important conclusion: social change will not be possible if we do not get rid of social and individual egoism. A PEK12 student comments on it simply and accurately:

Maybe it is worth paying attention to another man and not only to the tip of one's nose? It seems so banal but it is very difficult. Maybe this hard time will teach us something...

Conclusions

The students look at suddenly changed reality, contemplate empty streets and try to deal with their own seclusion within the four walls of their flats. At the same time, giving in to a slowdown of life pace, they try to ponder on the situation in question. They can see that they witness and participate in more profound, irrevocable changes of a social nature. They face the fact that the old world is gone, but they find hope in the fact that they can actively contribute to a better state of the world to come. Especially for the respondents from the younger group the observed change is a source of fascination and anxiety. The older ones are less absorbed by observing the aforesaid changes, and more by participating in them. Their opinions are less vague and geared at action, simple contemplation is not enough for them. They are definitely more critical observers. However, many respondents are of an opinion that this change forced by the pandemic situation can become a catalyst of an intentional, qualitative change of all societies' lifestyle. We will not want to come back to this hectic race that our life has become.

Changes triggered by the pandemic, resulting in slowing down and reflection are becoming a demand and a project to realise. The shock caused by this sudden slowdown of life pace leads the students to more profound observation of the world, which they have overlooked so far, to noticing the fate of other people and

to perceiving themselves as society members. What is interesting is the fact that the younger respondents look at the situation full of emotions, they experience it and internalise it. The older respondents are more distanced, more critical and have a tendency to transfer conclusions from their private pandemic observations to the overall social and economic situation of the world. Their reflection is sincere and in a sense more mature, less passionate. It is definitely more bitter as well. Emotions pertaining to the pandemics turn into a more profound reflection on the state of our civilization, mistakes we have made and we obstinately stick to. The feeling of social injustice seems to be particularly overwhelming in the opinions of both student groups; the young people turn out to be aware of social harm caused by the pandemic.

This shared experience of threat and awareness that in the situation of the pandemic an individual will not manage without others' support accompany the students' reflections all the time. That is why the respondents point to the importance of practical help – medical service, scientists working on new medication, public institutions ensuring safety or a woman working at the greengrocer's. What is also precious, they notice values concerning contact with their nearest and dearest and other people's company in general. They see the point in helping each other in that difficult time. What is more, the students notice this egoistic race for professional and financial success which made it difficult to see humanity as a community. They remind us that we, people, have forgotten that we are so similar, have similar needs and desires, similar fears and the same rights. And that human egotism and self-destruction tendencies destroy the chance to build a community.

What is comforting is the fact that the students from both groups demonstrate responsibility. Responsibility that seems precious in developing young people's identity. Responsibility as a human reflex, always important, but especially indispensable in these difficult times of the pandemic.

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Refleksyjność podmiotowa i społeczna studentów pedagogiki na początku pandemii – w świetle analizy jakościowej

Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi prezentację częściowych rezultatów badań jakościowych dotyczących opinii studentów pedagogiki na temat sytuacji psychologiczno-społecznej, w jakiej znaleźli się ludzie w czasie pandemii COVID-19. Konieczność ograniczenia transmisji wirusa zamknęła w domach całe społeczeństwa, ograniczyła mobilność i kontakty międzyludzkie, zatrzymała świat w miejscu. Dla wielu stała się także inspiracją do refleksji na temat obowiązującej hierarchii wartości. Badaniem objęto 36 studentów pedagogiki z Akademii Pedagogiki Specjalnej w dwóch grupach wiekowych – zaczynających studia i zbliżających się do ich końca. Poproszono ich o przygotowanie krótkich esejów gromadzących refleksje z czasu pierwszej fazy pandemii. Zgromadzone teksty poddano analizie zgodnej z metodologią teorii ugruntowanej w badaniu. Pozwoliło to na wyłonienie w wypowiedziach studentów 4 kluczowych kategorii, a następnie na wskazanie różnic pomiędzy grupami w podejściu do poruszanych kwestii. Młodszy badani wykazywali większą koncentrację na perspektywie osobistej, a ich wypowiedzi cechowała większa emocjonalność i optymizm. Starsi, bardziej zdystansowani wobec rzeczywistości, poddawali ją częściej gorzkiej refleksji ukierunkowanej na kwestie polityki społecznej, konsumpcjonizmu i egoizmu współczesnych społeczeństw, częściej traktując kwestię pandemii nie jako cel sam w sobie, ale jako punkt wyjścia dla szerszej krytyki społecznej.

Słowa kluczowe: pandemia, COVID-19, lockdown, refleksyjność, relacje społeczne, rodzina.