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The Pandemic as an impulse for the reflections of pedagogy students – the point of view of qualitative analysis

Editorial preface

This paper is about how we respond in situations of threat and social, enforced isolation. The results of the qualitative research are about the sense of identity in a threatening situation. From the perspective of transactional analysis, it can be seen as the re-creation of a life script. The re-creation of a self-image altered by an emergency situation. The young people who were included in the research had a renewed appreciation for life and a sense of security. For many, this evolved into an internal integration similar to the development of an Adult Ego State that benefits from access to the other Ego States. Forced isolation proved to be the impetus for positive personality transformation and internal integration of Ego States for many.

Zbigniew Wieczorek

Abstract

The article presents selected extracts of qualitative research results on the psychological and social situation experienced by people during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic in the opinion of pedagogy students. An attempt to prevent the virus from spreading by introducing lockdown

confined millions of people in their homes, limited their freedom and interpersonal contacts. For many, this time was an impulse for a more profound existential reflection. The researchers, interested in the issue of students' reflectiveness, asked a group of them to prepare short essays collecting reflections dating back to the first wave of the pandemic. The research involved 36 students of the Academy of Special Education, in two age groups – those beginning their studies and those heading towards the end. The gathered texts were subject to an analysis complying with the methodology of the grounded theory. The discourse analysis performed from the interpretative perspective allowed for selecting 4 key categories in the students' comments, and then for pointing to differences between the groups as far as the issues discussed were concerned. This article presents the results of the research encompassing two categories: reflections of the subjects on their own subjectivity and reflections concerning their ecological identity. The younger subjects demonstrated a bigger concentration on the personal perspective and their comments were more emotional and optimistic. The older ones, more distanced towards reality, more often reflected bitterly on social policy, consumerism and egotism of modern societies, more frequently treating the pandemic not as a goal on its own but as a starting point for broader social and ecological criticism.

Keywords: the pandemic, COVID-19, lockdown, reflectiveness, subjectivity, nature, environment, the grounded theory.

Introduction

The pandemic of COVID-19, which at the beginning of 2020 spread all over the world, putting even the biggest economies to a halt, forcing partial or total lockdown on further countries, and first and foremost taking a toll of 4.5million of victims (as of 01.09.2021, WHO), undoubtedly shook the civilisation of the 21st century. As time went on, science offered new means of combating the disease, giving hope for coming back to normal life, and societies, at different pace and using various strategies, adapted to new circumstances. However, the very moment of the pandemic outbreak was a real shock for the continuously developing, satiated and self-assured Western community.

The pandemic must have become a unique experience for young people, entering adulthood and collecting first life experiences. The world that was supposed to welcome them with open arms suddenly shut off, locking them in their countries, places they lived, houses. Borders were closed as well as most shops and meeting places or amusement parks, some countries introduced the curfew. Education, administration, trade and social life moved to the Internet. The threat violated the feeling of safety and generated anxiety about one's own and one's relatives' fate and about the future – what it would be like and if there would be any. Anxiety about survival, lying at the foundation of human needs (Maslow, 1986), was accompanied by more complex anxiety about ontological safety, understood by sociologists as a feeling of meaning of one's existence and activity, world continuity and order of events (Giddens, 1990, 2010; Steele, 2008; Bauman, 2006).

One of areas of special social significance, whose functioning had to be completely re-organised at the time of the pandemic was education. Ensuring the continuity of the education process in the situation when school and academic buildings were closed, attempts to maintain the quality of teaching and learning in the conditions of working online, became key tasks for the education system. That is why the selection of teaching tools and methods, preparing the system of education for online learning, and the outcomes of this learning were a key focus of researchers from the field of pedagogical sciences (Buchner, Majchrzak, Wierzbicka, 2020; Jaskulska, Jankowiak, 2020; Pyżalski, 2020; Ptaszek et al., 2020). In this extremely difficult situation, less emphasis was put on the issue of mental health of the most important subjects of the education process – pupils and students. This situation can be explained by, among all, an elementary difficulty of conducting online research on personal matters, requiring special trust of the researched subject in their researcher and openness difficult to achieve in online communication. While in many cases the virtual world was an ally for researchers conducting quantitative research as it gave them access to large groups of respondents (being aware of their non-representativeness for many research topics) or tools facilitating fast data collection and analysis, qualitative researchers were deprived of the possibility of conducting many types of research. It did not mean that such research was not conducted at all – there were qualitative analyses of internet entries content (Damiano, Allen Catellier, 2020; Nowicka 2021; Troszyński et al., 2021; Komuda, Rajda, Szczepkowski, 2020; Halagiera, 2020), quantitative and qualitative research were combined (Tsao, Chen, Tisseverasinghe, Yang, Li, Butt, 2021), ethnographic and auto-ethnographic research developed on the Internet (Roy, Uekusa, 2020).

This report is an inherent part of qualitative research yet it reaches for other sources of data than the Internet. It constitutes the presentation of partial results of the research conducted from the interpretative perspective, concerning reflections of pedagogy students learning at the Academy of Special Education on the psychological and social situation people experienced because of COVID-19. Contrary to the structural orientation, they are based on the observation that, as Mirosława Nowak-Dziemianowicz (2021, pp. 125) writes, "social reality is socially constructed by the same social actors – these are individuals, their groups, different kinds of communities and relations among them create what we traditionally call a social structure or a social world." The respondents' remarks, prepared by them in the form of essays are at the same time an attempt to look into the authors' emotional state, an expression of their reflectiveness encompassing questions about their place in the world, but also about the relevance of the current hierarchy of values, i.e. about what is transient and what is universal. The written responses were prepared by two groups – students beginning and finishing their studies.

Subjectivity, identity, responsibility

The students, in majority belonging to the generation of digital natives (Prensky, 2001), handled the technical intricacies of moving to a digital functioning mode well, yet mentally they found themselves in a very difficult situation. These young people, barely entering their adulthood, have been trained to function in the education system promoting competition, to collect points and occupy better and better places in various rankings, the system that defined goals clearly but left no space for any more profound reflection. Meanwhile, in the situation of the pandemic, they were faced with the perspective of a radical life change, very often experienced alone and accompanied with anxiety. The rushing world came to a halt and young adults had to confront their own thoughts. Reflection was facilitated by isolation that whole societies had to comply with during the first lockdowns in order to limit the number of infections. People locked themselves in their flats and many young people came back to their family homes which they had left not so long ago. In an anthropological meaning we came back to the cave – a primeval shelter of humanity and its earliest temple (Laoupi, 2007). Ethnography, followed by psychology, sees in the cave a symbol of mother's womb – a place where a human being develops safely till they are ready to face the world (Eliade, 2001). In many cultures, beginning with Paleolithic times, an adult man comes back to the cave to seek wisdom, contact with their predecessors, answers to burning questions, to find help or to find themselves (Eliade, 2001, pp. 16 et al.; Laoupi, 2007; Górzyński, 2018). The cave is the place of healing and sacred rites, including the most important ones – rites of passage allowing an individual to be welcome to society or to change their status in it. It constitutes a symbol of change, being an essential element of self-development and self-awareness.[1] Confinement caused by lockdown in combination with the situation of danger accompanying it favours reflection – stopping, being alone, examining the order of the world. Already Leibniz noticed that infinity of information excludes clarity of cognition (cf. Sytnik-Czetwertyński, 2008, pp. 38). Stopping halfway brings back an acute meaning of seeing, enables the man – hermetic Leibnizian monad – to look into oneself, to find internalized needs, rights and obligations (Leibniz, 1969; Senczyszyn, 2015). It is a process that requires concentration, a very intimate one, often touching hidden or forgotten emotions and full of personal reflections. Looking inside it requires mutual trust between the researcher and their subject, which makes it possible to open up

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[1] Sensory deprivation practised in many tribes, where a man closed in a dark cave is exposed to it, is supposed to draw them into a trance in order to, paradoxically, see further and more clearly. Among many examples, Mircea Eliade quotes the one referring to the Greek oracle Pythia who went underground to enter into a trance that would allow her to generate prophecies about the future (Eliade, 1988, pp. 191).

to another human being and let them in one's intimate world, and, on the other hand, to conduct a given research ethically, caring about this subject's well-being. Due to this reason, the researchers decided on a deliberate choice of a sample group and its considerable limitation. Drawing their inspiration from a very personal essay *A New World Through My Window* by Olga Tokarczuk (2020), being an intimate record of her reflections from the beginnings of the pandemic, they asked the students to write their own essays based on their current reflections accompanying lockdown. The research engaged 36 students of pedagogy from the Academy of Special Education – those beginning their studies of the 1st degree in 2019/2020 (their opinions are marked with EME code in the text) and of the 2nd degree (code PEK), studying in two related faculties specializing in pedagogy of media. These students demonstrate a special interest in culture and social issues, are keen observers of reality and its representation in the media. During many meetings, the students participating in the research had an opportunity to get to know the members of the research group and they gave their full consent to complete the task they were given. It made it possible to give a positive answer to the question about the ethics of the research conducted among people in the situation of/ feeling danger (Turton, 1996, p. 96). Some researchers try to avoid this obstacle by focusing their attention on autobiographical and auto-ethnographic research (Roy, Uekusa, 2020). In case of the research presented in this article, the students' trust gained by the researchers guaranteed the research ethicality. The students were informed about the aim of the research, its course and results. The very form of the research, i.e. free written production let the students open up.

In order to avoid looking at the collected texts through the filter of their own expectations, the material was analysed in accordance with the rules of the grounded theory (Glaser, Strauss, 1967; Glaser, Holton, 2004; Konecki, 2018). A looped comparative data analysis resulted in the emergence of codes allowing for precise, not preceded by forming hypotheses, description of key categories. Collected material made it possible to analyse the reflectiveness of the pedagogy students in the face of the global crisis situation, to determine key areas of that reflectiveness and to detect differences in experiencing it, existing between two age groups.

An initial material analysis resulted in 381 coded phases, on the basis of which the researchers selected 16 main subcategories. Out of them, 4 main categories were chosen in the course of the analysis. Due to a personal, nearly intimate nature of the respondents' statements, all the essays had a common denominator – they showed the relation between "I" the writing subject and the world – both the internal and the external one that they look at attentively. Thus, the aforesaid four categories have a relational character and were ordered in accordance with the proximity of the circle composed by various elements to

the writing subject. In this way, four versions of *self* were selected: *subjective self,* self-reflective, focused on the reflection on one's own person, identity and internalized system of values; *self – relatives* – focused on contemplating values and assessing the quality of primary social links (family, friends, neighbours); *social self* – concerning widely-understood social relations and their state in the modern world, covering 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 – the environment* – regarding ecological awareness of the respondents, their attitudes towards nature and man as its part.[2]

This article concentrates on presenting the results regarding two categories, which constitute a certain treshold defining the boundaries of the students' reflections. In *subjective self* – self-reflective and intimate, there emerges the process of auto-narrative creation of one's own identity, an attempt to understand oneself, one's needs and possibilities triggered by the pandemic, including one's influence on one's and others' fate. Remembering one's own and others' subjectivity, looking for universals which decide on an unchangeable nature of an individual – a subject in the course of changing life circumstances – these are indispensable components of the process of constructing and deconstructing an individual's identity (Melosik, 2001, pp. 17) in the situation of an abrupt social change triggered by the pandemic. The other natural pole of this reflection, opposite to this individualized scrutiny of one's internal world is looking at an individual in the global context, perceiving oneself as a member of a human community and continuation of the process of developing one's identity as a member of a bigger group and finally a global citizen worrying about the state of the environment which they inhabit. As Ewa Karmolińska-Jagodzik (2014, pp. 116) remarks, the concept of identity "can be personal, social, can be defined by an individual as well as by people who matter to that individual. What is more, identity can be given from the outside as an individual's identification, which this individual does not have to always agree with, but identity is always the outcome of a multi-factor structure of an individual's interaction with their surroundings."[*] Thus, the process of forming one's identity cannot be completed in social vacuum. Isolation caused by the pandemic can intensify it, giving time and motivation to release an impulse for self-reflection in an individual, yet awareness of belonging to the group is an indispensable element of this process, as well as awareness of being part of nature, a responsible host of the planet shared with other species. Identity is developed not only in the context of sub-

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[2] Two of the selected categories – the relation of "self" of the respondents to their relatives (family, friends) and society ("social self") were presented in the article entitled *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* (Galanciak, Siwicki, 2020).

[*] All translations – E. Haberko.

jectivity, agency, but also in the context of social relations, belonging to a community. It depends on an individual and their experience how they should define this community, where they should look for it and how broadly it should be identified. It can be a local, caste, national community, or in a broader meaning, a community of human species. Globalisation trends in particular (Bauman, 1999) make the world shrink, which makes it easier to look at reality adapting a broader context than the local one. An ecological discourse developing recently, the threat of climate catastrophe make young people perceive reality with broader horizons. They are global citizens and feel responsible for this world. Apart from variants of national discourse, those concerning universal human condition and state of our planet gain significance. These aspects are tackled by the respondents in the category of *self-the environment*, proving the respondents' ecological awareness.

Subjective self

Among the four main categories selected during the analysis, the category of *subjective self* is the first one with regards to the number of phrases attributed to it. All in all, 184 fragments of the respondents' opinions belong there, and they are grouped into the main theme blocks:

Subjective self dominates among coded phrases of the responses of the students from the younger group – 128 phrases, 52% of the total. The respondents entering adult life are still at the stage of developing their own identity so there is a tendency in their responses to focus on themselves and perceive reality in the light of their own subjectivity. The responses of the first year students are more personal than those from the older group, where such opinions are less numerous (56 phrases, 38% of the total).

The young people, **contemplating values**, write about beauty of life, peace and happiness. "I believe that because of the situation nowadays (and maybe thanks to it), people will notice real beauty of life again. They will start noticing what is most important in life, without which nothing else makes any sense," writes an EME1 student. "I feel full of energy again, I can spend more time with my interests and I am happy," adds another EME16 student. An EME9 student, evaluating her behaviour draws her attention to suppressing one's introvert nature – in accordance with culture's expectations. "For a longer period of time, my soul of an introvert has been suffocating with the phenomenon of big parties, artificial crowds, desire to spend time outdoors actively in the biggest group of people possible or to melt in the crowd in cinemas or shopping centres. This addiction of others to work, discos, shopping scared me while I needed calming down, but, at the same time, I was afraid that I would stand out from that

crowd" (EME9). Other respondents, revising their hierarchy of values, write about the fragility of life, losing awareness of real values, which happened as a result of operating in constant rush and striving for mundane goals. "However, people will always look for closeness, acceptance or understanding. Sometimes it is worth asking oneself what is important in life" (EME22). "Our life is fragile like china" (EME13). "People live in neglect. Everyone works a lot. […] We were living in the super fast 21st century and because of it we have completely forgotten about very simple, but very important things. We have forgotten that we should appreciate everything that is in us" (EME22). The students find it harmful when they have to fight their own introversion, postulating their right to individualism, to keep their sense of identity and to stay different among current trends and canons. They negate the narcissism of modern, replete societies, similarly to understanding success as something that an individual's happiness depends on. They also notice an educative dimension of the pandemic and emphasise its value. "We were used to being divided into better and worse ones, but a given personality type does not depend on us" (EME8). "Let everyone keep their own pace, without pressure demanding impossible. The cult of greatness, superiority, speed is not achievable to everyone, and it is not desirable either, as success is not equivalent to fulfillment and happiness. This simple truth, like many others, escaped our notice a long time ago" (EME8). "The current situation in the world gives us an opportunity to get out of the fog and appreciate what we already have, what we have achieved and what we do not have to constantly strive for" (EME9). "I started regretting that I was not born in other times. Far from busy streets, noisy car horns, a spider-web of telephones and skyscrapers that obscure the sky" (EME9). "The pandemic has given me a chance to remember what is important and what is not. Our career and success – it is nothing in our life. It is just a part of us which once is here and once is not" (EME1). Contemplation and calming down, "enforced" by our confinement and emphasized in many coded phrases encourage us to reflect not only on our resentment concerning the influence of the external world on an individual, but they also introduce a thread of hope – thinking positively about the future, dreaming and believing that we will be able to mentally bear the load of the pandemic. "The sun encourages us to go out and experience adventure. I am sitting at home and experiencing my adventure in my boundless imagination" (EME23). "No possibility to go out awakens human imagination. Certainly, many people guess that this confinement shall contribute to more broken homes, divorces, suicides, etc. In fact, it might happen, but why should we accept the worst scenario? If we think in this way, we'll really get crazy" (EME16).

The group of younger respondents asks the biggest number of questions about the "meaning of life", expressing it in numerous phrases which were categorized in the area of reflection on **stagnation and life fragility**. "Let us appre-

ciate what we have" – such an attitude dominates among the students after a dozen or so days of the pandemic, proving their understanding of the severity and seriousness of the situation concerning the virus threat. "We lose so many precious moments when we chase… What do we chase actually?" an EME22 asks rhetorically. "Let us appreciate what we have. A roof above our heads, family, friends. Maybe now people will be more courageous to express themselves, to fulfil their dreams. This world standstill will end one day," an EME22 concludes. An EME14, keeping a distance to herself and life, emphasizes that "Having poor eyesight I don't need glasses to notice that the whole world has slowed down, has come to a halt." An exaggerated pace of life before the pandemic and tiredness, lack of time for oneself and re-scheduled, shortened moratorium on adolescence makes us aware of the meaning of stopping in this rush. "We used to live on a day to day basis, having our duties and no time for ourselves – to vent out, develop our passions or learn something new. We were getting more and more tired and time was marching inexorably on. There was no time for a brief respite" (EME6). "Such things seemed less important to us, as you won't get any prize for sitting in the park in fresh air and it just seems a waste of time" (EME 12). "We are indecisive… When we work hard and live fast, we miss rest and spending time together. And now, when it is almost obligatory, we don't benefit from it but we keep complaining," an EME17 tries to understand. "We don't need pessimistic thoughts now. Personally, I think it is a time of <stopping for a while>, learning humility, a time to think about our conduct" (EME 17). Will the COVID pandemic change us? Maybe, as some respondents' remarks suggest, we should be grateful for this pace of life slowed down by the pandemic? "Finally it dawned on all of us that we are not immortal, that our time might come to an end in the blink of an eye," an EME13 writes. "It is important to draw conclusions from this situation. Everyone should individually think about what the coronavirus made them realise and how to use these conclusions in everyday life. This time seems to be a moment everyone needed. We were given a moment of respite, time to reflect on our life"(EME21). "Probably, in a few months' time, we will look back on the coronavirus period and each day will be something more for us than just a tangle of routine activities, we will appreciate "normality" and conventionality in life. The presence of the virus makes us aware of many other things apart from the nature of everyday life, it is worth paying attention to human fragility, their inner life susceptible to threat" (EME20).

The students' reflections, full of careful but nevertheless clearly expressed **feeling of anxiety** regarding their fear of sickness and death as well as the future are equally frequently and usually coherently pronounced. A note of optimism rarely accompanies them. Fear of sickness and death often equals fear of people, deriving from the fear of getting infected. "Once joyful and smiling. Now somehow stooped, they walk lonely in silence. I look into their eyes and I can

see fear. Are they afraid of me? We have become strangers to one another. We don't want any help from someone met on the street. We keep ourselves to ourselves. We are mistrustful of every person we encounter. Somewhere, at the back of our head, there is that fear of getting infected with the coronavirus," an EME10 student writes. With apprehension, the respondents notice gradual disappearance of human kindness which gave them strength at the beginning of the pandemic. The outcome of this observation is growing distrust, fear, pessimism… The observation of an EME18 student is symptomatic and profound: "People passing us on the street are not our friends any more, there are fewer and fewer smiles, nodding at our neighbours. What if they are infected too? Our minds are not as open as before the pandemic. Now, everyone is our potential enemy. Even we are enemies to ourselves." We do not trust anyone any more. "Thus, I am wondering why no one talks about emotional crises which shall come if they are not there yet. It may turn out in a while that psychoactive drugs shall become to us the so-called pills of happiness that we shall swallow like painkillers," they conclude with concern. The respondents are torn between the belief that the pandemic is just an intermediary stage and the fear of permanence of occurring changes. "The only things you can hear are sounds of nature and police announcements warning us against going out. Is it already new reality? Or maybe just a temporary phase?" an EME15 student asks. Another respondent notes emphatically, "Our time can end in the blink of an eye. We are living in constant fear and panic, we worry about ourselves, our parents, grandparents. No one thought that we would experience the time when going shopping for groceries could make us anxious" (EME13). The respondents do not only reflect on the reaction to the pandemic, their own and their environment's, but they also wonder what its long-term, global consequences might be, which proves their maturity and remarkable perceptiveness of the situation. "Fear of getting ill as well as consequences of the epidemic. The crisis that should affect not only Poland but the whole world's economy. Everyday news that we are bombarded with by the media makes us lock ourselves within the four walls of our flats, not trusting anyone. Maybe it is good? Maybe it is the only solution to control the epidemic? The next issue is uncertainly about what each next day shall bring. How long shall we stay isolated? How much time shall it take? When will there be the epidemic peak? […] Every cloud has a silver lining, we just have to be patient" (EME11). "Our optimism falters a bit," alarms an EME18 student though. Prolonged lockdown makes people worry that the situation will never come back to normal. An EME9 student draws our attention to the growing threat of dehumanization of our civilization due to social isolation, and she conjectures, "We can already replace so many things… So, shall we not get an idea one day to replace human relations, feelings with something else?" (EME9).

Pointing to the inconveniences of **social isolation**, the respondents demonstrate their **longing for the past** – especially early childhood as a kind of lost paradise, the anchor of carefree days and safety. The pandemic and the loss of freedom being its consequence let the respondents appreciate the taste of freedom and independence, unnoticed in the rush of everyday life and taken for granted and transparent as such. "The virus takes our freedom away. People lose their jobs, opportunities to learn, they cannot move freely. And this is what independence is about," an EME5 writes. Social isolation affects the young and triggers a need to talk about the meaning of injustice deriving from the necessity to verify their plans, short-term ones and maybe also life plans too, which arouses the biggest anxiety. Moreover, the world's lockdown is not a good time for extroverts. "Although I am aware we are not guilty of it at all, the time of the pandemic and forced <imprisonment> can be a tiring and horrible perspective. Our plans for the long weekend in May, our flight to the unknown regions of the Pacific Ocean which have always fascinated us and for which we have been collecting money for years got lost together with our dreams. The soul of a traveller, extrovert, who needs contact with other human beings to survive, has been crashed by the vision of the illness," writes an EME23 student. Forced isolation generates aversion to their place of residence, especially in those respondents who particularly need space and contact with other people. In their eyes, their home becomes their trap, prison, confinement which fuels longing for lost normality, and also inspires to appreciate what was underestimated before. "We are closed in our own homes, which we created. The place, which was supposed to be our oasis, something safe, turns out to be a space that many of us would like to run away from," (EME21). "We become aware of the fact how much we miss that routine that we used to complain about," (EME20). Rarely is there a conviction about the provisional character of the crisis, linked with lack of faith in maintaining the reflexive outcome of our thoughts about the pandemic. Yet, it has its good sides too – these reflections are filled with acute fear and uncertainty. "One day, everything will come back to normal. It is not pure guesswork but a fact that there must be no doubt about. The economic crisis will be settled and our minds will come back on the right track despite earlier pessimism and anxiety," an EME18 student states with conviction. The students go back to their childhood and look at deserted streets with nostalgia and sadness. "Kids spent their free time with other kids, meeting them at the playground, playing in fresh air, their time was filled with physical activity. However, it has changed now. They stay at home, most often left to their own devices, which results in more frequent "staying" in the virtual world," an EME17 student worries. Another student, recollecting her childhood pays attention to a difficult situation of children locked at home: "Deprived of my playground, garden and a small pond, I'd feel like in prison" (EME14). However, recollecting one's childhood does not always

refer to the pandemic times. It also gives an opportunity to reflect on the rush of the pre-pandemic life. "I'm thinking how slowly holiday time seemed to flow when we were children, and now years pass in the blink of an eye. We eat fast, sleep and rest ….I wonder how to live slowly nowadays," asks an EME15 student.

Reflections on **"activities for oneself"**, on the other hand, go round the need to make some self-development effort there has been no time for so far. The pandemic is also an opportunity to do something pleasurable, to take care of ourselves. "Maybe there is something you have always wanted to learn? Painting? Maybe, it will turn out it is something that really gives you pleasure. And maybe you've been dreaming about watching a series but you couldn't do that due to lack of time?" an EME6 student suggests to look at lockdown like at an opportunity. In this emotionally difficult situation, it is very important to take care of our mental well-being. "It's not important how you'll spend this quarantine time. It should give you pleasure. Let us not treat it as a kind of 'punishment' for someone's mistake. Let us not blame anyone for this obligation to stay at home," suggests an EME6 student. An EME12 student echoes her: "I am very happy to see on the Internet who and how spends their quarantine." "Maybe it is the moment to catch up and use that time for old/ new passions, to strengthen our bonds with the closest family, to work on ourselves, to relax," suggests an EME16 student. Yet, it is also a time for self-reflection, for expressing one's suppressed feelings freely, which is not common in the culture of success that does not allow us to show weakness. "We can focus on our desires, we can talk to ourselves, listen to ourselves, burst into tears," an EME21 student states with relief.

On the other hand, as a result of **value contemplation, constituting a significant component of the older group's responses**, there is a feeling of anxiety, emotional crisis triggered by isolation, loneliness, disappointment with it. "Even the most optimistic persons have negative and inexplicable thoughts" (PEK3). Yet, there are also good sides of the pandemic-suspended reality. Even if it is just a reflection that one has to look for optimism as only then their life can have any meaning. In her coherent reflection, a PEK3 student combines threads belonging to three main categories: **activities for "oneself"**, reflection on **the meaning of life** and **social isolation**. She combines them and writes that being with oneself during the pandemic is a perspective of boredom and routine, resulting in loneliness. "We can now concentrate on ourselves. Come back to what we wanted to do when we didn't have time. But how long can we get occupied with these very things? Meditation, cooking, reading, wardrobe browsing […] Routine becomes boring and after some time everyone starts feeling lonely in their own flat" (PEK3). The pandemic is also a good time to think about one's life so far, discerning what is important. At the same time, the responses of the older respondents more often and more forcibly demonstrate lack of faith in coming back to life before the pandemic. "Nothing will come back to normal," a PEK1

student writes, "as the norm is being established in our times." However, in the respondents' opinion, people do not always notice even such a big change. Instead of understanding the situation and empathizing with others' needs, they keep chasing "money, shopping trophies and political games" (PEK2). The students' reflections based on their own observations frequently take the form of severe social criticism. "Meritocratic society […] has always striven for wealth. Success, money, own well-being. I am surprised how much people are concentrated on themselves" (PEK3). In their opinion, the pandemic has not taught us anything – we still ooze egotism "…as all that hectic life before the virus put pressure of success on people" (PEK3). We are stuck in the vicious circle instead of breaking free and developing new, better solutions. We shall not come back to a normal "pace of life but we have created a new rhythm, adopting to the situation" (PEK3) and adopting new solutions to old needs.

The time of the pandemic lets the respondents protect their intimacy, even though loneliness may be its side effect. "I feel stronger and calmer. No one will see that I didn't sleep yesterday. No one will ask," a PEK5 student describes his feelings. One can finally give up on the obligation to act and compete, which one is taught from early childhood. "We don't have to rival anyone," states a PEK5 student with relief. "I can calm down, slow down […]," a PEK4 student accompanies him, "At that time, it is a good idea to devote time to one's passions." However, one has to be careful in this area too. Some respondents used to living in constant rush try to fill up their isolation days with intense activities as if they were afraid to face their own thoughts. "I fell into that trap of hyper-productivity. Doing the same every day," confides a PEK6 student. Being with oneself requires courage but also entails a big value, i.e. it allows an individual to listen to their inner self. "Let us think and talk to ourselves, which will make us happy now," appeals a PEK6 student. Writing about the meaning of life, a PEK9 student notices, like others, a sudden slowdown of its pace and in this well-felt pandemic silence reflects uncertainly: "Suddenly, the omnipresent rat race was no longer a priority. There is no hurry and noise. Cities, roads, districts and houses became quiet. One cannot hear children playing outdoors, couples quarreling, neighbours discussing the latest discounts in a nearby shop, cars passing. There is only silence… Peace mixed with fear filled people's hearts. […] "How to live! There is only one answer: I don't know. We've never been in such a situation before. And here panic comes in" (PEK9). In this context it does not come as a surprise that there is a need to deafen one's own thoughts that finally, in this sudden silence, could resurface. These feelings are strengthened by uncertainty concerning the future. "We feel helpless, we feel anxiety and fear of the nearest future. Nothing is certain any more," writes a PEK7 student. The need to deafen one's fear and anxiety triggers defence reactions. "For some it is lying in bed wrapped in a blanket with a laptop for an entire day […], for others it is cooking and baking, and

for someone else it might be cleaning their flat […] None of these activities is bad if they make someone feel better" (PEK6).

The students cope with confinement and anxiety in different ways. Some of them throw themselves into work, whereas others gradually start feeling numb due to the monotony of consecutive days. A PEK11 student accurately describes this state: "The same walls, the same furniture, the same people and even the same clothes that I have been wearing for a few days to maintain monotony. Several times a day I pass every smallest piece of litter on the floor, hair, spider's web, speck of dust and a spider, being "imprisoned" in my own house. This day, one of those in a row, has exhausted my list of planned and invented tasks. When will all this finally end?" (PEK11). Their general attitude is far from apathy though. Keeping a sharp, fascinated eye on events and society's reactions to the sudden crisis makes one draw also positive conclusions. We shall survive as we can adapt to new circumstances. "This situation showed us clearly how we, the humans, are able to adapt in difficult and sudden situations," states a PEK4 student.

The reflections of the students from the older group are characterized by maturity of observations and conclusions, and more interest in a broader context of the pandemic development. Their reflections do not regard current events but use them as a pretext to make more universal observations on the human condition, or a set of values and rules dominating culture. They are aware of the fact that this world standstill, abrupt in their opinion, offered them an opportunity to develop their reflectiveness. "The virus makes it possible now to stop and think – about what is important in life," states a PEK10 student. It is an opportunity to "realise that the most important thing in life is life" (PEK10). "That is why every moment has to be used as if it was the last one," a PEK11 student writes in the conclusion of her essay.

Self – the environment

This category, in comparison with *subjective self* (and *social self*), which from the quantitative point of view turned out to be crucial for the respondents, is not represented numerously in the texts. However, the significance of diagnoses produced within its framework as well as noticeable differences in the approach of students from both age groups to the questions of nature and man as its part make it an area of valuable observations.

The group of *self – the environment* phrases contains 30 fragments described with the help of three main codes: "The beauty of nature," "Ecological identity" and "Ecological criticism." However, the percentage analysis demonstrated that Tokarczuk's essay constituted a much stronger impulse for ecological reflection in the case of the older group. The students in the younger group,

concentrated on their own subjectivity, contemplating still developing identity, mentioned their relation with the environment barely 10 times, which constitutes 2.5% of all selected thematic phrases in their essays. In the case of older students – as the aforesaid analysis showed – more focused on analysing *social self* and general observation of social relations in the reality of globalised digital society touched by the pandemic, ecological threads occur 20 times, which, concerning fewer texts written by this group, translates into 15% of all phrases attributed to them.

What is interesting, differences are also noticeable in the frequency of the occurrence of particular codes categorized as ecological reflection. In the group of younger students, the **"beauty of nature"** code definitely dominates (6 out of 10). The respondents show the beauty of the spring blooming world watched out of the window, emphasizing the discomfort of "imprisonment' in their houses, and paradoxically contrasting the view of nature coming back to life after winter with the fate of people under threat of death. "The beginning of April, spring, everything awakens. In the current situation it is a bit difficult to talk about "awakening" as on TV we keep hearing about more virus victims. It is absurd, contradiction of reality we find ourselves in right now, to nature" (EME1). Thus, nature does not participate in human drama, it is indifferent to it. On the other hand, due to the pandemic, we have time to notice it. "It's the beginning of April, the weather is beautiful, and looking through the window I can see the beautiful, blue and cloud-free sky"(EME15). "Maybe right now we open our eyes and notice all that beauty which was so difficult to notice before?" (EME1). Nature and its beauty help to survive. It is true about those that live close to it and can feel privileged. "I don't look out of the window, as I contemplate the views on the terrace at the back of my house. I sit comfortably, swinging in a garden armchair, and it can be easily said that it's nice stuff, I'm not talking about this piece of garden furniture but about my own garden with the terrace and the view on the forest emerging from the lake's horizon. The weather in the Sejny region is fantastic, the whole garden is coming back to life, there are green leaves on fruit trees in the orchard, one can feel long-awaited summer in the air" (EME14). Others are in a worse situation, one look out of the window makes them notice the change of view, acute emptiness of the street landscape created by people and deserted by them. "The weather outside is gorgeous. There are warm rays of the spring sun penetrating my room. In ordinary circumstances I would be sitting on the river bank, watching people walk by me. And now I'm looking through the window and all I can see are empty streets" (EME23).

The thread of **ecological criticism** is definitely less marked. Few students (5out of 24) conclude that human activity is harmful for the environment, and limiting its expansion brings relief to nature. "The whole world slowed down, came to a halt. An advantage is a definite improvement in air quality" (EME14).

Nature regains territories deserted by man, it can be seen and heard: "The only thing you can hear are sounds of nature and announcements of the police warning us against going out" (EME15). These observations combine with a general, identity reflection on the necessity of changing our attitude to the environment we live in. "The world is beautiful, is waiting for us and our ideas" (EME22), "And when the world regains the old order of things, let's hope […] that we'll be proud of the fact that we are humans and we live on the planet called Earth" (EME3). "We suffocate in our homes. The Earth takes a full breath. Let's hope that once the pandemic is under control, we won't forget about our planet and we'll let it function the way it wants as a lot depends on it, and we have to remember about it above all. There is no other one like this," concludes an EME21 student in her exceptionally mature reflection.

The essays written by the older respondents demonstrate completely different proportions representing particular codes from the *self - the environment* group. It should be mentioned that ecological threads occur in seven out of ten essays, and one of them is almost entirely devoted to that theme (in case of EME, there were 6 essays out of 24). Out of 20 selected phrases, only one is strictly connected with the **nature contemplation** thread. "What is amazing? Even birds began to sing in the morning and you feel like in the countryside, in some forested area. Living on the 14th floor now offers you long sunsets. During these sunsets, there are beautiful colours in the sky and they merge together. The horizon beams with perfect peace that one wants to become immersed in," a PEK3 student describes the change after the world freezing due to the pandemic. As for other essays, even if they contain descriptions of nature, they are just an excuse to criticize human activity or reflect on our place in the world of nature. That is what happens, e.g. in an essay written by a PEK5 student, who describes his view from the window in the following way: "I've started watching the same magpie that my cat saw. I guess it's building a nest in a nearby tree. I know that it's creating something beautiful and functional at the same time. Deserted magpie nests serve other birds as well. In this case, the bird turns out to be a helpful friend. It leaves the fruit of its own beak and talons instead of appropriating it for good. It is an artist that I can watch live and save a bit of this view as my memory exhibit and respect for nature." The magpie's work – beautiful, useful and selfless to some extent becomes a symbol of the direction that human activity should follow. The text finishes with a moving conclusion emphasizing how deceptive our conviction of ruling the Earth is: "Everything depends on nature, and we are only scared guests on a walk" (PEK5).

There are many similar threads mentioning the question of **ecological identity**, the human fate combined with the planet's future. "We are […] fauna, diverse, inhabiting the whole world," a PEK2 student writes. These threads usually also criticize people's approach as the Earth hosts, who exploit and ruin it with-

out any limits, and this category of **ecological criticism** is the most numerously represented in this group of essays (13 out of 20 coded phrases). The same student points out further on, "There has always been too much of the world […]. We could deal with it too well. But it was too well for us only. We moved forward, developing ourselves and our surroundings. But surrounding development is not the right expression here. In fact, we changed it to suit ourselves, to fulfil our expectations, needs and desires" (PEK2). In this light, the pandemic seems to be a natural consequence of human misdeeds towards nature, its excessive, ruthless exploitation, human egotism. What is characteristic, the respondents do not perceive the occurrence of the virus as punishment sent by the world, they do not look at it in terms of an apocalypse. For them, it is rather a logical consequence of disastrous activities undertaken by man. They cannot shoulder responsibility, they are not puppets, they only bear consequences of our own actions. "I'm criticizing us. Including me. I'd be a hypocrite if I didn't mention myself. The world gave us a task to complete, but I have an impression we brought it on us. […] The virus attacks us just like people attack the earth. Can you see that? I can see that clearly and vividly," a PEK2 student writes. Another student's remark shows a similar mood: "The pandemic was an eye-opener, we saw that the planet will manage without people, but people will not survive without the planet. People's egotism has skyrocketed and Mother Nature says STOP! It gives us time to reflect. There is no doubt that this is a draconian lesson but it seems necessary. But, will we, people, great leaders of the world, draw any conclusions from it?" (PEK7) As the students point out, the catastrophe which touches people is nature's rescue. This shows how far we have drifted apart from our natural environment, in some sense, choosing the other side of the barricade. As a PEK9 student writes, "…there is a clear improvement in air quality, less water pollution and nature comes back to life. This enforced standstill, when people had to stay at home, showed their influence on the planet. But thanks to this, the planet got a second chance and the Earth breathed with relief." This touching way in which the human fate is juxtaposed with the fate of the world strongly resonates in the respondents' comments. A PEK7 student writes, "The world of nature takes a deep breath now. When people were locked at home like in a cage, turtles came back to the beaches in India and they lay eggs in great numbers, dolphins came back to Italian ports, and in Venetian canals one can see swans and fish not seen for a long time. Now, we, people, feel like small, defenceless animals, and animals finally feel at home." "It is a paradox that people die and suffer from pulmonary diseases, and at the same time they start to breathe" remarks the same author. The pandemic time is the last call to shake off the frenzy of consumerism and compulsive realization of one's egoistic needs, and to save the planet. "Humanity got the disease it needed – we stopped respecting nature only to learn how priceless it is,"

concludes her essay a PEK10 student. "Maybe it is a sign to start caring just a little bit about the environment we live in? Maybe it's worth thinking before we go shopping once again. Do we really need all those things?" a PEK11 student echoes her friend. Do the students believe in the possibility of change? The opinions are divided. "Everything will be fine, there is still hope! And hope dies the last…" a PEK9 respondent states perversely. Yet, her voice contrasts with a sad remark of an author whose essay was entirely devoted to the theme of ecology: "I am tired of walking my dog, which should be like an oasis on this closed desert. Constantly watching if it hasn't caught any disposable gloves thrown away in front of a shop. There should be fewer people outside. And maybe there are. But they leave more traces than ever…".

There is no doubt that the older respondents dealing with the question of nature take a more critical stance towards human activities concerning nature, which is strongly integrated with the conviction that other species are on a par with the human one. It is a sign of a potential, radical cultural change taking place in Western societies, i.e. moving away from the anthropocentric point of view regarding people's place and role in the world, showing their superiority and emphasising the mission of the message contained in the Biblical appeal to subdue the Earth (also noticeable in the pedagogical reflection in the form of non-anthropocentric pedagogy, emphasizing the significance of natural environment as well as, among all, the world of things for shaping human subjectivity – cf. Chutoriański (2021). In place of this vision, ecological communities propose ecocentrism – the so-called "deep ecology" aiming at environmental protection, ensuring the well-being of species, reflecting on the relation between man and nature (European Green Party, 2014). These issues seem particularly valued by the older respondents, demonstrating their broadened horizons and the way in which they look at the pandemic in comparison with the younger respondents who devote more attention to self-reflection.

Conclusion

"A thought grows in silence, but the world sows it," wrote a great Polish poet and publicist, Feliks Chwalibóg in the 20s of the 20th century (1929, pp.6). Almost a hundred years later, reality illustrated his remark in a surprisingly literal way. Human emotions linked with the occurrence of an unknown disease spreading like fire to other parts of the globe, after a few days of obligatory isolation gradually turned into a reflection – this intimate one concerning the meaning of one's life and personal system of values, and also the one on "the state of the world," order and condition of our civilization. The texts analysed in this article reflect that moment. The students entering adulthood, forced by the situation,

stop in that rush and look at each other and the world, sometimes with awe, sometimes with a big doze of criticism. There are noticeable differences in how both groups perceive the situation. The younger respondents emphasise the value of life, its beauty and beauty of the world where that life goes on. At the same time, they see that their life so far, full of hurry, functioning in the culture promoting extrovert patterns of behaviour resulted in constant, unbearable pressure. Now they postulate to give them back their right to individualism and being introvert, to live at their own pace and in accordance with their needs and choices, to give up socially promoted patterns of successful life. Taking a broader perspective, they also negate narcissism and egotism characterizing modern civilization, together with understanding success as a condition of an individual's happiness. They also notice an educative dimension of the pandemic and emphasise its value. However, they take this broader perspective relatively rarely, concentrating on their own experiences. What is characteristic, their reflections clearly express hope, optimistic thinking about the future and possibility of repairing all the mistakes made by people so far, which have brought them to the edge of the catastrophe.

The younger respondents ask the biggest number of questions about the meaning of life. Almost as often they reflect on anxiety accompanying them, which is linked with their fear of sickness and death, but also of the future. They declare that they miss the past, especially early childhood perceived like a paradise lost, carefree time and a feeling of safety in their parents' arms. They also emphasise that lockdown was their opportunity for self-development, for bringing back their dreams and abandoned plans, for making an attempt to realise them. The pandemic also offers time for pleasures, taking care of oneself, i.e. activities there was no time for so far. However, it should be emphasised that many essay authors try to go beyond the perspective of their own biography and they maturely reflect on global consequences of the pandemic.

On the other hand, the reflections of the older respondents are dominated by the feeling of anxiety, emotional crisis triggered by isolation, loneliness and disappointment with it. Although the students' reflections depart from autobiographical threads or their own observations, quite frequently they take a form of severe social criticism. There is more criticism, anger and disappointment in the observations of the older respondents.

Some respondents, writing about the situation from a personal perspective, emphasise that being used to living in a constant rush, they try to fill up their isolation days with intensive activities as if they were afraid to confront themselves. They try to appease loneliness, filling each moment with new tasks. There are also people who gradually sink into the state of apathy caused by the monotony of passing days.

The reflections of the older students are characterised by high maturity of observations pertinence of drawn conclusions, and more interest in the cultural and social context of the events. Their reflections usually go beyond their personal perspective, and the pandemic itself gives a pretext for presenting universal reflections on human condition or for criticizing the current axionormative order. The older respondents particularly value ecological threads that occur in seven out of ten essays, including one in which ecology is the main topic. The sickness is perceived as a result of mindless exploitation of the Earth, lack of respect for laws of nature, ignoring the needs of other species, and last but not least, overpopulation. Yet, the respondents, with high maturity, avoid looking at the virus in terms of punishment inflicted on humanity, they do not judge the situation in apocalyptic terms. For them, the pandemic is rather a logical consequence of disastrous activities undertaken by people. The thread of ecological criticism is represented in the observations of the older students definitely more numerously than in the other group, where it occurs incidentally, mainly in remarks that human expansion limited by the pandemic brings nature some relief. The reflections of the younger students focus on self-thematic threads, and their perspective is clearly more personal.

Regardless of the respondents' age, their essays clearly demonstrate that the time of the pandemic has constituted an impulse for more profound existential reflection. The maturity of their observations, remarkable insight and readiness to formulate constructive conclusions show how much intellectual work they have done to confront the pandemic which will definitely become a generation experience for them, and maybe even an impulse to make an attempt to deal with the mistakes made by the older generations.

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Pandemia jako impuls dla refleksji studentów pedagogiki – w świetle analizy jakościowej

Streszczenie

W artykule przedstawiono wybrane fragmenty wyników badań jakościowych na temat sytuacji psychologiczno-społecznej, w jakiej znaleźli się ludzie w czasie pandemii COVID-19 w opinii studentów pedagogiki. Próba ograniczenia transmisji wirusa poprzez wprowadzenie lockdownu zamknęła w domach miliony ludzi, ograniczyła ich wolność i kontakty międzyludzkie. Czas ten dla wielu osób stał się impulsem do pogłębionej refleksji egzystencjalnej. Badacze, zainteresowani zagadnieniem refleksyjności studentów, poprosili ich grupę o przygotowanie krótkich esejów gromadzących refleksje z czasu pierwszej fazy pandemii. Badaniem objęto 36 studentów z Akademii Pedagogiki Specjalnej, w dwóch grupach wiekowych – zaczynających studia i zbliżających się do ich końca. Zgromadzone teksty poddano analizie zgodnej z metodologią teorii ugruntowanej w badaniu. Analiza dyskursu, prowadzona w perspektywie interpretatywnej, pozwoliła na wyłonienie w wypowiedziach studentów 4 kluczowych kategorii, a następnie na wskazanie różnic pomiędzy grupami w podejściu do poruszanych kwestii. Niniejszy artykuł prezentuje wyniki badań obejmujące dwie kategorie: refleksję badanych na temat własnej podmiotowości oraz przemyślenia dotyczące ich tożsamości ekologicznej. Młodsi 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 i ekologicznej.

Słowa kluczowe: pandemia, COVID-19, lockdown, refleksyjność, podmiotowość, przyroda, środowisko, teoria ugruntowana.