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Articles

Class Clash: Unpacking Conflicts of Class Affiliation in the Bodily Practices of Polish Men Under 35 Years with Working-Class Origins

Anna Wójtewicz　　iD
Nicolaus Copernicus University, Poland

Alicja Jaskulska
Nicolaus Copernicus University, Poland

Łukasz Lutomski-Juryłowicz
Nicolaus Copernicus University, Poland

Abstract: The article examines conflicts of class affiliation in the bodily practices of young Polish men of working-class origin. The empirical basis of the analysis is individual in-depth interviews with biographical elements carried out in 2022 as part of a study on the bodily practices of four generations of Polish men. The article contains the state of research on practices in the context of class affiliation. The theoretical framework is based on the concept of classist phantasm and middle-class hegemony. The study shows the critical importance of working-class backgrounds in shaping and controlling the body throughout the lifespan. The piggy bank ethos is one of the key categories emerging from the analysis, and research participants remain trapped in negotiating class identity reflected in bodily practices. In negotiating their class affiliation, men experience conflict with the values of the family of origin from their early teenage years. As they study and strive for advancement, they pay a hidden emotional cost, as they must authenticate themselves as deserving of their place in the middle class. Even if they are upgrading to the middle class (as working adults), they remain in the power of the piggy bank ethos. The study's main conclusion is that social advancement is only partly achievable. Climbing up the social ladder, the study participants still balance middle-class practices and working-class values, which become apparent in what they do about the body.

Anna Wójtewicz is a sociologist and an assistant professor at the Institute of Sociology of the Nicolaus Copernicus University, Poland. Her main research interests lie in the sociology of the body, the sociology of consumption and consumer culture, and gender studies. She also deals with qualitative research methodology, particularly in-depth and biographical interviews. Currently, she is conducting research financed by the National Center of Science on men's everyday practices connected with the body.

email address: wojtewicz@umk.pl

Alicja Jaskulska has a master's degree in sociology from Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun. Her research focuses on qualitative sociology, particularly social class and higher education issues.

email address: kontakt.jaskulska@gmail.com

Łukasz Lutomski-Juryłowicz graduated in sociology from Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun. His research interests focus on qualitative sociology, particularly social class and economics.

email address: lukas.lutomski@gmail.com

The direct inspiration for this article was the preliminary analysis of individual in-depth interviews with biographical elements.[1] Some of the data revealed the potential of analyzing body practices through the lens of young men's working-class social background. The theoretical framework of the project was social practices theories. At the same time, the analysis presented here is based on the part of the data revealed in the study that surprised us. The research team considered the topic worth exploring. An adequate theoretical framework was searched for this part of the data. We were looking for a way that would allow us to inspect class and what individuals do about their bodies more nuancedly—taking into account the aspirations, dilemmas, and conflicts accompanying participants of the study from childhood to adulthood. The article is divided into five parts. The first part reviews the literature on bodily practices in class-related contexts. In the second part, we propose the concept of classist phantasm (also discuss the advantages of phantasm as an analytical tool). The methodology of the project and technical aspects of the data analysis are presented in the third part. The fourth most extensive part of the article focuses on the research results. The first part of the analysis shows how working-class families instill cleanliness and presentability in boys, emphasizing stringent hygiene practices enforced mainly by maternal figures. It introduces the concept of a "piggy bank ethos," highlighting the role of practicality and financial responsibility in the future life of boys. These practices shape attitudes toward hygiene and economic management, revealing internal conflicts that will accompany the study participants throughout their lives. In the second part of the analysis, we present

how working-class teenagers use aspirational capital to strive for a middle-class lifestyle despite economic constraints. It highlights the influence of external reference points like peers, romantic interests, and the internet on their cultural capital and aspirations. This part of the analysis also addresses the conflicts between family practices and the desire to conform to middle-class norms. Then, we introduce the challenges faced by young working-class men attending university, focusing on their financial struggles, identity negotiation in a middle-class-dominated environment, and adaptive strategies in consumption and lifestyle choices. This part presents how study participants manage precarious jobs and urban living costs while navigating cultural and economic disparities. In the last two sections of the analysis, we look at the practices of adult study participants who have and have not experienced social advancement. Regarding men who have experienced social mobility, we show how they experience and negotiate upward social mobility in urban settings. This part highlights the influence of middle-class norms on their appearance, consumption habits, and health practices, emphasizing the role of female partners in shaping these changes. We also discuss internal conflicts and external pressures these men face as they strive to balance their saving heritage with the expectations and aspirations associated with their new social status. The last part of the analysis introduces the lifestyle and cultural practices of working-class men who have yet to experience upward mobility, focusing on their occupations, attitudes toward middle-class norms, and conflicts between practicality and aspiration. It details their dietary habits, hygiene practices, shopping behaviors, and attitudes toward health and physical activity, highlighting how economic constraints shape their choices and lifestyles. The section also explores their perspectives on the body image.

In the *Conclusions and Discussion* section, we present a focus on the most ground-breaking findings of the study and discuss possible research directions.

Literature Review

The body serves as a visible marker of class distinctions. By examining bodily practices and the meanings individuals assign to them, we can gain insight into how class relations are perpetuated. This literature review[2] is organized into several key categories: family and parenting practices, education and occupation, nutrition and food, and romantic relationships. The studies had little focus on Poland.

Family & Fitness: Inheriting Health through Body Reproduction

The social class of parents vehemently shapes the life trajectory of children. That is evident in how parents prioritize a child's development. A study on vacation time organization found that parents across classes want to develop their children's skills and talents. However, their actions depend on their cultural, economic, and social capital. Middle-class families can afford tailored sports camps, while working-class families opt for cheaper, nearby camps, often sharing summer childcare with relatives (Chin and Phillips 2004). Despite similar activities, this results in varied experiences, highlighting class inequalities that affect children's life trajectories and social mobility (Colagrossi, d'Hombres, and Schnepf 2019).

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[2] In the studies presented in the literature review, social class is conceptualized through at least one (typically the intersection of a few) of the three types of capital: economic, cultural, and social. Economic capital involves financial resources such as income and wealth. Cultural capital includes knowledge and skills, with education as a key factor. Social capital is based on relationships and networks, affecting support and social mobility.

Research on children's physical activity and social class indicates salient differences between classes—upper-class parents consciously choose physical activities for their children and want a sense of agency in this regard.[3] Whereas working-class parents question the idea of healthism and sports that have to be paid for are negated and treated as an unnecessary life luxury (Vincent 2001; Bodovski 2010; Organista and Lenartowicz 2019). Similar differences can be identified in the meanings attributed to specific physical activities—cycling can be seen as an expression of freedom and independence in the upper class, in the working class, it is a practical skill (e.g., enabling one to get to school) (Organista and Lenartowicz 2019) and in the middle-class, it is a sign of prestige presented through the prism of branding (Gdula and Sadura 2012).

Upper-class children engage in meticulously organized physical activities within private settings, where every session is designed with a long-term vision that encompasses not only physical fitness but also character development and discipline. Parents and professional coaches closely supervise these practices. In contrast, working-class children often enjoy spontaneous play in public spaces, with minimal parental oversight. Middle-class kids typically participate in accessible group activities, frequently involving team sports, where the focus is on camaraderie and collective effort (Organista and Lenartowicz 2019). Once again, we observe distinct meanings behind children's activities—ranging from deliberate personality-shaping endeavors to practical time management aimed at nurturing

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[3] Education and conscious parenting (usually at a later age) affect the engagement of middle-class parents in the development and control of the sports interests of their offspring (Organista and Lenartowicz 2019).

physical development. Unsurprisingly, a child's social class often influences their physical capital, such as height, weight, fitness, or propensity for obesity. Notably, obesity is more closely tied to social class than to individual psychological factors, with children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds facing a higher risk of obesity in adulthood (Lasker and Mascie-Taylor 1989).

Having a socially acceptable body or lacking one is a salient factor concerning perspectives on health policy (De Pian 2012). In this context, the vital assets appear to be the economic, cultural, and social capital possessed by middle-class parents, which enables the implementation of healthy eating practices. Shaping and controlling adolescents' eating habits and tastes are top priorities as parents understand that future taste preferences hold significant social and cultural importance. Despite sometimes compromising on other aspects of family life, parents view managing their adolescents' diets as a crucial element of good parenting. It is vital to emphasize the evident moral foundation of such practice—the control and orientation toward the future signify being a good parent (Wills et al. 2011).

The phenomenon of social exclusion associated with normative bodily standards can be traced back to the family of origin. It involves the widespread acceptance and promotion of specific behavioral and appearance norms, leading to the accumulation of high "physical capital." Conversely, individuals whose bodies deviate from these norms experience reduced physical capital and may face social exclusion, identifying themselves as "others" due to not complying. That results in perceptions of incompleteness or deficiency, both internally and externally.

Body & Bucks: Unveiling the Economic and Cultural Gymnastics

Education significantly influences body-related practices. The combination of higher education and maintenance of socially acceptable body weight leads individuals to embrace healthy lifestyle recommendations—not only for personal enjoyment but also due to the recognized importance of health in both family and professional spheres. Conversely, individuals with lower levels of education who are overweight or obese often view these same healthy lifestyle practices as misaligned with their preferences. They see them as unnecessary, stressful, and even detrimental to their health as they conflict with their social and family norms (Smith and Holm 2010).

Simultaneously, pursuing a university education offers members of the lower classes a pathway for social mobility (Bufton 2003). Social mobility signifies a lasting upward shift in social status, marked by improved material circumstances and the acquisition of new cultural capital. This transformative journey not only alters an individual's social standing but also redefines their relationships with both their social class and family (Ferenc 2012). For instance, students from working-class backgrounds often struggle to balance their academic identity with their class identity. As they immerse themselves in middle-class cultural norms to succeed academically, they may experience a sense of being caught between two worlds, leading to feelings of alienation (Bufton 2003; Merrill 2011).

Occupation is pivotal in shaping body practices, extending beyond mere economic capital. Employment dictates the quantity and quality of leisure time, daily routines, and access to health-enhanc-ing resources within the workplace—moreover, occupational prestige consistently barometers social class across industrialized societies (Kohn, Scotch, and Glick 1979). Dorota Olko underscores the emergence of a predominant narrative regarding body care, synonymous with middle-class values. This narrative, bolstered by the cultural hegemony of the middle class, permeates working-class communities, resulting in the marginalization of irregular physical activities that do not align with the middle-class ethos of rational recreation and disciplined self-care. However, the working class places significant emphasis on movement associated with labor—whether physical or in caregiving roles—a practice that could be interpreted as a subtle resistance to the dominant discourse, fostering its narrative surrounding physical activity and healthcare (Olko 2018).

Additionally, time management exhibits a distinct class bias, with higher-ranking individuals declaring less leisure time as we ascend the class hierarchy. Being busy is positively valorized and associated with higher morality and discipline (e.g., submitting to bodily regimes) (Tarkowska 2016). Even passive leisure activities are not immune to class influence, as those with more significant cultural and economic capital spend less time watching television, rejecting entertainment programs in favor of educational or artistic ones (Cebula 2015).

The current state of research indicates that the upper classes, and to some extent the middle classes, engage in practices that transcend mere practicality, embodying loftier ideals such as intellectual and self-development or discipline. Moreover, the widespread stigmatization of bodily traits associated with the working class—deemed excessive, repulsive, or immoral—reinforces middle-class

norms and upholds the prevailing symbolic order (Olko 2018). For instance, the strong association of specific practices with the working class, like smoking, has led to a growing societal aversion to such behaviors (Graham 2012). However, it is imperative to approach conclusions regarding working-class practices with caution, given the conspicuous lack of comprehensive research focusing solely on the working class rather than as a mere complement to narratives centered around the upper or middle classes. This omission perpetuates dualistic notions of high/low, mind/body, reason/emotion (Rampton 2003).

Plate & Privilege: Navigating Social Class through Food

The topic of eating practices merits special attention due to its extensive literature. A study focusing on British teenage girls revealed that those from higher social strata exhibited a heightened inclination toward restrictive eating, body dissatisfaction, and distorted body image (Ogden and Thomas 1999). This trend finds an extension in research examining the prevalence of anorexia among British women. Here, parallels can be drawn between the "anorexic ethos" and the values espoused by the upper and middle classes. Notably, both emphasize stringent body control, contrasting sharply with the more resigned acceptance of the body prevalent among working-class individuals (Darmon 2009).

The interplay of cultural and economic capital distinctly shapes eating habits across social classes. Middle-class diets often showcase diversity, featuring a range of costly, low-calorie options like fresh produce and multicultural dishes. Here, aesthetics and food presentation hold as much significance as the nutritional value itself. Conversely, the working

class tends to prioritize simplicity and convenience, opting for quick meals to satiate hunger and fuel daily activities, sometimes overlooking long-term health benefits. Traditional cuisine holds sway, serving as a symbol of cultural belonging and fostering a sense of familiarity (Wills et al. 2011). It is essential to recognize that these tendencies are generalized and can vary depending on individual family dynamics and local socio-cultural contexts. Moreover, class divisions and dietary practices are nuanced; distinctions between classes are not always stark. In Poland, for instance, the upper class exhibits seemingly contradictory patterns—omnivorism, embracing food variety, and univorism, restricting oneself to select sophisticated culinary choices, hinting at the presence of multidimensional stratification (Domański 2016).

The practices of joint feasting, whether through hosting guests, being invited, or dining out with others, correlate closely with individuals' economic and cultural capitals, being more prevalent among those occupying higher positions in the social hierarchy (Cebula 2020). For the middle class, organizing social dinners serves as a means of showcasing cultural proficiency and bolstering social connections (Mellor, Blake, and Crane 2010). Notably, those with significant cultural, economic, and social capital levels often challenge established norms and roles, including traditional gender roles associated with hosting duties (Skowrońska 2020). Furthermore, social capital plays a pivotal role in shaping the diversity of social circles, leading to varied cultural preferences and consumption patterns—individuals from higher social strata tend to boast more diverse networks, resulting in a more comprehensive array of contacts and an enriched cultural repertoire (Cebula 2011). This distinction is reflected notably in eating out, where expansive social networks, cou-

pled with high cultural and economic capital, often lead to dining experiences being intertwined with acquaintance and friendship gatherings rather than solely familial occasions. Such outings frequently serve as avenues for work-related, social, or cultural engagements (Cebula 2017).

Heart & Hierarchy: The Social Classes Tango of Love

Romantic relationships operate within a remarkably homogeneous marriage market, where individuals' choices of partners are heavily influenced by their societal position, as gauged by various forms of capital (Domański and Przybysz 2007). Moreover, "habitus compatibility" emerges as a crucial factor in shaping intimate connections, with cultural capital serving as a marker of class disparities, compounded by moral values utilized in evaluating potential partners (Johnson and Lawler 2005). The body, often regarded as the most overt reflection of class tastes (Bourdieu 1986), assumes a significant role in romantic entanglements. For instance, the upper class places a premium on meticulously caring for the body, often subjecting it to rigorous aesthetic treatments. In contrast, the middle class, embodying a blend of romanticism and pragmatism, strives toward a universal ideal of male beauty aligned with prevailing aesthetic norms (Kamecka 2019).

Beyond the Body: Unpacking Class Disparities

The literature review underscores a crucial finding—social class, along with its accompanying habitus, remains pivotal in molding and perpetuating distinct lifestyles across various domains, notably in realms of body-related practices. Values, dietary preferences, and body perceptions are not merely individual choices but are deeply entrenched in and perpetuated by one's social class affiliation (Olko 2018). Furthermore, these practices hold profound moral and cultural significance as markers differentiating approaches to the body across social classes.

However, at the same time, significant gaps exist in the literature concerning the relationship between body practices and social class, which, in the researchers' view, renders the characterization of the area under analysis incomplete.

Firstly, most research focuses on describing differences between social classes and attributes these differences to varying levels of capital members of different classes possess. More in-depth analysis is needed regarding the differences in the sources of practice. Additionally, body-related practices are often characterized (usually unintentionally) as distinct from the class structure rather than as interconnected elements that strongly influence the reproduction of the class structure. That is evident in the inadequate characterization and analysis of tension and conflict between body-related practices (and consequently tensions between classes), which frequently emerge in the literature review. Therefore, there is a need to analyze body-related practices through the lens of social class to highlight how the body-related practices of specific social classes impact existing class inequalities.

The Concept of the Classist Phantasm

Research on social class and body practices often needs a comprehensive analysis of the intersecting practices of different classes and the accompanying conflicts. Introducing an analytical tool in the form of a classist phantasm can help focus research on these relationships while leaving room for empirical research. Phantasms are creative imaginings

based on actual events that serve to sustain world order (Pietkiewicz 1997). They help individuals and groups simplify complex social reality by displacing uncomfortable elements and justifying attitudes and behaviors. The mechanism for creating phantasms is not fully understood (Polak and Polak 2011), but it has salient implications for social research and the analysis of body and social class practices.

Malgorzata Jacyno, referring to Bourdieu's theory, notes that classism stems from a deep-seated, often unconscious belief in the incomplete and defective humanity of others.[4] The origins of such understanding are phantasmagorical ideas and emotions, such as aversion and revulsion toward those perceived as lower in the hierarchy. The individual perceives others through feelings and reflexes ingrained in the body.[5] Thus, we can speak of an embodied social hierarchy and the bodily basis of class conflicts. The body and its accompanying practices in food, hygiene, and physical activity form the foundation over which other characteristics of individuals, invisible to the eye, such as character traits, predispositions, and impairments, are overwritten. Jacyno (2017:5 [trans. AW, AJ, and ŁLJ]) concludes that "inequality in access to power and goods manifests itself in cultural practices and everyday choices that are a bone in the throat of civi-

lized people." Thus, the classist phantasm influences the reproduction of social inequality.

Jacyno (2017) attributes a crucial role to the middle class in attempting to change class affiliation. The position of the middle class between the working class and the upper class makes the middle class the referent for social advancement or degradation for the other classes. In addition, today, there is a middle-class hegemony dogging the organization of society through a shared culture that gives certain social groups an advantage over others. The concept of hegemony helps us to understand how culture and values influence relations between social classes and the dynamics of class conflict. It gives us a tool for analyzing processes of domination and conflict, showing that relations between classes are complex and changeable. Hegemony also creates an atmosphere in which certain groups feel superior. It should be noted that the privilege of the upper class is realized despite the hegemony of the middle class (Gdula and Sadura 2012).

Social advancement requires specific rituals (receiving an adequate education, gaining financial capital, and adjusting appearance, lifestyle, and relationships to meet class requirements). These rituals alter this essence, substantially bringing about a qualitative change in an individual. However, their very existence only allows for remembering one's class background. It remains the basis for questioning a new identity by the individual and their environment. Within this framework, the process of democratization in modern societies, influenced by the anxieties and aspirations of the middle class stemming from its hegemonic position, is characterized by the necessity of undergoing reclassification. This process only underscores their differences and distinctiveness (Jacyno 2017).

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[4] Jacyno refers to Bourdieu (2005:125) describing a monkey that, although trained to imitate human behavior, was still influenced by internal, uncontrolled reactions, indicating the primacy of nature over its body. As a counterpoint, humans, as culture creators, can control their reflexes and behavior, which is a manifestation of rightful humanity. An individual who demonstrates the ability to control their body is seen as a more "complete" person in society. That causes individuals who display less control over their physical reflexes, such as burping, clucking, or laughing aloud, to be placed lower in the social hierarchy.

[5] An example is the automatic nose wrinkling at someone with an unpleasant body odor and shabby clothes on public transportation. This reaction is reinforced by a moral judgment, categorizing the person as incompetent or lazy, justifying the lack of empathy toward their situation.

As an analytical tool, the classist phantasm unifies the concept of habitus by adding a psychological and imaginative element, which enables a better understanding that the behavior of individuals is not only the result of objective material conditions but also of the perceptions and aspirations associated with social class. In addition, it broadens the interpretation of body practices, considering the relationship of the mental component to practices, and allows for a class analysis through the lens of perceptions to understand the background of the practices of individuals from different classes. The classist phantasm is also a tool for identifying mechanisms of maintaining social inequality by analyzing the perceptions and prejudices associated with social class and enabling us to understand the process of reproducing inequality.

Methodology of the Study

The analysis employed qualitative data generated by the project titled *Cultural Practices Related to the Body in Everyday Life of Four Generations of Polish Men. A Sociological Analysis* as part of a grant from the National Science Center in the Sonata 14 competition. The project's main aim was to identify and analyze everyday cultural practices related to the body among men representing generations: the so-called *Baby Boomers* (born between 1946 and 1969), generation X (born between 1970 and 1979), generation Y (born between 1980 and 1995), and generation Z (born after 1995, of legal age at the time of the study).[6] Various types of

qualitative research techniques were applied in the project, including individual in-depth interviews with representatives of four generations, with biographical interview elements on everyday body practices. The qualitative interview dispositions were divided into three main parts: (1) the biographical story, (2) the questions based on the biographical part, and (3) the in-depth interview. In the biographical part, research participants were asked to tell the story of their lives in the context of the body and the practices that relate to it. The second part asked them to complete the biographical story. In the IDI part, the following topics were discussed: practices related to hygiene, physical activity, health, clothing, nutrition, and the requirements for the male body. The biographical part of the interviews was crucial in the context of analyses related to the impact of the family of origin, the piggy bank ethos, or the motivations for current bodily practices. There are methodological risks associated with retrospectives. However, in this article, we analyze the memories of relatively young people. In addition, by the interview dispositions, biographical threads were developed and verified in subsequent parts of the interview (e.g., through questions about details of practices, specific activities, or artifacts). Despite the efforts made, it cannot be assumed that we have gained complete knowledge of the study participants' personalities, experiences, and practices. This fact should be recognized as a limitation of the method adopted to implement the study.

A total of 60 interviews were conducted in the project (14 with men of the *Baby Boomers* generation, 13 from Generation X, 16 from Generation Y, and 17 from

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[6] The literature on the subject identifies weaknesses in the practice-oriented approach (Nicolini 2017; Smagacz-Poziemska, Bukowski, and Kurnicki 2018; Kopczyńska 2021). Research on practices emphasizes their performative nature. That does not imply a break with other perspectives (cultural, psychological) because they somehow impose themselves on the research situation. Participants in the study often attempted to re-establish a perspective based on "ego." They sought to push away the perspective of "doing" in favor of sharing opinions and emotions.

Kopczyńska (2021:36 [trans. AW, AJ, ŁLJ]) states, "This perspective involves shifts in problematization and conceptualization toward doing and saying as that from which social life is woven." It should be considered challenging, both from the point of view of the researcher and the participants in the study, but also opening up to new depictions of everyday human life.

Generation Z). Eight research participants declared rural origin, with three currently living in rural areas and the rest in urban areas. There was a predominance of working subjects with secondary education (15) and higher education (11). The majority of interviewees were heterosexual, while two men declared themselves as homosexual and three as bisexual. The health status of the interviewees ranged from people declaring themselves healthy to those with disabilities and those with experience of chronic illness, both physical and mental.

The present analyses are based on data from these interviews with men up to the age of 35. The sample was selected non-randomly—partly purposive (men meeting the selection criteria were interviewed) and partly based on self-reports of men meeting the selection criteria. The sample demonstrates variation regarding place of origin and residence, education level, occupational status, and psychosexual orientation (Gill, Henwood, and McLean 2005). Interviews were conducted nationwide between January and June 2022. Before the interview, preferences concerning the gender of the interviewer were established. With the consent of the participants, the interviews were recorded and transcribed by an external contractor. The researchers verified the quality of the transcription and identified passages for anonymization. If men so wished, they were provided with a transcription and asked to indicate passages requiring anonymization from their perspective, correct incorrectly transcribed information, and possibly make brief additions to their statements (Flick 2011; Surmiak 2018).

Twenty-six men under the age of 35 took part in the entire project.[7] During the initial analysis stage, we excluded 5 participants from the study group as they were identified as being of middle-class origin. The remaining 21 men were classified as having working-class backgrounds, which is the focus of our study.

We determined class affiliation based on economic and cultural factors, such as occupation, income sources, and education, gathered from participants. Additionally, we considered their social environment, body-related practices, and overall lifestyle.[8]

Various factors influenced the participants' lifestyles, including consumption patterns, leisure activities, and sports engagement. Preferences in cuisine, eating habits, openness to culinary experiences, and fashion trends also played a role. Health approaches, medical visits, body care, and hygiene practices were also considered.

Given the length of the interviews and the amount of data collected relating to both the past and current situation of the participants, economic-cultural indicators, along with indicators related to the social environment and lifestyle, allowed for the allocation of participants within specific classes, both in terms of their class origin and current class position.

The transcriptions were coded and compiled using MAXQDA software. The coding process was done using a pre-prepared code list in an open system. The first coding cycle was based on specific research objectives, and a literature review was conducted.

[7] The literature review provided indicators of class position and the practices of specific classes within a capitalist society. Consequently, it is justified to limit the analysis to individuals up to

35 years old—generations Y and Z are the first to fully function within this capitalist system, which in Poland dates back to 1989.

[8] Indicators of social context are characterized by a high degree of ambiguity. The characteristics of the participants' bodily practices that interest us are mainly manifested in consumption and spending patterns. Lifestyle privileges determine status and the roles available to individuals (Piotrowska 2000).

The codes were, after that, grouped, considering the interviewees' social class affiliation. Based on Polish research on bodily practices (Gdula and Sadura 2012; Cebula 2020; Skowrońska 2020), differences can be identified between the practices of working-class individuals and those of the middle-class (which are also reflected in a review of foreign literature). Within the working class, aspects of independence, irregularity of practice, orientation to the present, and lack of emphasis on health were highlighted. The middle class, on the other hand, focused on categories relating to control, regularity, planning, and emphasis on health. Based on open coding, contextualizing codes were extracted concerning aspirations, family influence, external points of reference, and areas of class conflict.

A pair of codes were also introduced on the values of practicality (simplicity) and sophistication. Consecutive coding cycles enabled the identification of relevant phenomena, the generation of new codes, and the deletion or combination of codes describing the same phenomena. The authors systematically revisited the coded documents, recoding them as the code tree developed. In the final stages of the coding process, the coded contextualizing fragments were described with a code relating to the values. The implementation of this approach significantly facilitated the subsequent categorization of information during analysis, enabling more precise and comprehensive inferences about the collected data.

Results of the Study

Cleanliness & Conflict: Family of Origin

Family serves as a source of economic and cultural capital. For men from the working class, both forms of capital in their childhood are at a low level com-pared to later stages of their lives. Simultaneously, the conditions associated with childhood in the working class, with its specific living conditions, produce their original habitus, which will undergo more or less subtle changes throughout their life trajectory. However, at this stage, the conflict is already evident.

Childhood is characterized by stringent control over the body and body-related practices with particular emphasis on cleanliness, typically enforced by mothers or other maternal figures in the participants' lives. That stems from a phantasmatic conception of individuals lower in the social hierarchy as dirty and unkempt, unable to adequately utilize their resources to maintain cleanliness and grooming. It is important to note that such an appearance is simultaneously associated with character traits such as immorality and laziness. Moreover, due to the lack of capital necessary to adopt a middle-class lifestyle, the hegemony of the middle class is recognized through a strong negation of middle-class values (e.g., disdain for impractical clothing that expresses individuality).

Concerning working-class interviewees, the controlling influence of the family manifests itself primarily in memories of inculcating principles of hygiene, nutrition, and food preparation (not necessarily objectively healthy, but considered appropriate by the family), and rules regarding external appearance (both clothing and hairstyle or form of beard) and body care. Control over the practices of working-class men was or still is exercised by almost all family members. They are mainly women (with a predominantly maternal role) and siblings (of both sexes). In this account, the father rarely appears as the one who taught or controlled his son's bodily practices.

A unique place is occupied by shaving, among the hygiene practices indicated by working-class men. Research participants often recall when they learned to do this and emphasize the importance of doing it accurately to look good. That is one of the few practices in which the father intervenes.

> The first person to show me anything at all, in terms of hygiene, was my older brother. He then, I don't know, at eighteen, seventeen years old, showed me how to shave. Y28(1) - [W-W][9]

Research participants were particularly scrutinized when it came to body cleanliness. As children, for example, the fear of appearing dirty was inculcated in them, mainly when it involved contact with other people—representatives of significant others (family, school). Improper hygiene habits, in the family's view, were attempted to be corrected. However, some of the interviewees, now adult men, questioned the model brought up from home.

> I was brought up by my parents with instructions that you have to wash every day, and lately, I feel like I've also been thinking more and more about whether it's really necessary to wash fully every day or at least whether you have to fully soap yourself. Y35(2) - [W-M]

Working-class interviewees have brought from home a strong belief in the importance of how others perceive one. The need to be clean but also neat and tidy (Polish *schludny*) was inculcated in them. It is worth clarifying the word's meaning as it has a strong class connotation. In Polish, the word usu-

ally appears in descriptions of people, objects, or spaces that are relatively poor but give the impression of being well-kept. Being neat and tidy is a trait that makes a person look clean and modest (*Schludność* [Neatness]).

> When we went out to my grandparents for some kind of family celebration, I always remember my parents ironing our shirts, getting dressed, checking we looked good, and then letting us go as if together. Y35(2) - [W-M]

The clean and tidy appearance is perceived in contrast to such elements of working class everyday life as so-called dirty work, manual labor, and farm work. Washing off the smell and dirt and putting on clean and fine clothes is a kind of ritual of physical separation from the difficult daily work and is supposed to help be like others (implicitly, those who do not work physically). Being neat and tidy, as inculcated at home, is subject to confrontation in ever-new interactions. One of the experiences cited by interviewees from a working-class background is comparing the practices imposed by the family with those of children from other classes. That usually happens after entry into the education system. A man from a rural area is surprised that his parents are overly concerned with his clean and tidy appearance, more than the parents of middle-class children:

> [...] my clothes, it was also as if you could see that they're tidier, they're neater, they've got their clothes ironed, for example, and it's like that practically every day, where I was surprised that why would anyone do that, and they were also cleaner by the way. Z21(2) - [W-S]

Working-class men believe that many body practices should be carried out at home (e.g., shaving,

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[9] The marks at the end of the citations should read as follows: Y, Z—generation affiliation, age; information in square brackets—the first letter denotes class background, the second letter denotes current class affiliation, where W denotes working class, M denotes middle class, UM denotes upper-middle class, and S denotes students.

haircutting). Knowing how to care for yourself in the comfort of your home is essential because the cost is lower than an external service. According to some interviewees, the customary simplicity of men's haircuts also favors homemade haircuts. Some men have continued the habit of self-cutting in adulthood, while others have begun to recognize the drawbacks (mainly aesthetic) of this solution:

> For most of my life, I was actually shaved at home. When I was a kid, my dad would just shave my head with a hair clipper to zero, well, I mean to a few millimeters. Z21(1) - [W-W]

Piggy Bank Ethos

The source of conflict is the threat of being perceived as unclean or dirty in the eyes of significant others in the participant's family. In this case, these significant others are teachers (school), extended family (social gatherings), and the community in the place of residence (shopping, church[10]). There is tension between the low economic capital available to the family and the need to appear presentable in the eyes of others. As a result, strategies to cope with this conflict develop, such as cultivating and maintaining a piggy bank ethos. It is worth noting that while the participants may not have been aware of all the nuances of the conflict their family experienced during childhood, it was imposed on them through the control of their bodies and body-related practices, as well as the teaching of the piggy bank ethos.

The piggy bank ethos manifests itself as practicality, simplicity, and a focus on the material aspects associated with everyday functioning, the present. It is

an integral part of a way of thinking and behaving, passed down from generation to generation in this class as a tool for adaptation to economic conditions. Through the saving ethos, adults teach children independence, enabling them to make adequate decisions on their own, in line with available material resources. The practice is committed to a stable future. Parents try to teach self-reliance and financial responsibility by emphasizing the need to make rational choices in line with material conditions.

The piggy bank ethos covers five areas in the interviewees' childhood experience—clothing, food, hygiene, shopping, and health. The piggy bank ethos in clothing manifests itself in the practice of choosing cheaper things, wearing siblings' clothes, and shopping at the marketplace or from second-hand shops. Clothing decisions are an impulse to create an attitude of simplicity, steering toward having only necessary and valuable items of clothing, and emphasizing moderation in consumption.

Saving in clothing is economically essential, and values related to practicality, durability, and a prudent approach to clothing choices are shaped. At the same time, it is a manifestation of a practical approach, where the value of choice is more critical than mere possession, and the purchasing decision is accompanied by reflection, checking prices in different shops, and looking for special offers.

> In my opinion, the financial issue was important because I was always sort of older than my brother, and my parents also communicated to me that there was no money for this, no money for that, and that you have to save money on everything. So, if some new clothes had to be bought, I didn't even look around for some branded clothes because I knew there was no money for that. Y35(2) - [W-M]

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[10] The Catholic Church plays a significant role in Poland's religious and social life, with over 90% of Poles consistently declaring affiliation with the Catholic faith since the 1990s (CBOS 2020).

Saving in the context of food is evident in cooking and eating at home. The mother prepares meals quickly and efficiently (usually) from scratch, using commonly available, cheap ingredients. It is characteristic to choose tried-and-tested, classic dishes that are filling. That shapes a strong preference in the research participants for home-cooked meals (pork chop with potatoes, polish pancakes [*naleśniki*], dumplings [*pierogi*], tomato soup). In contrast, the lack of experimentation in the kitchen limits new flavors, driven by a practical view of food—it is meant to be quick, not necessarily sophisticated, but to satisfy hunger. A reduction in the practice of eating out or ordering takeaway food can also be noted.

> I've never had light food at home either because I was brought up practically, living all my life in ANO-NYMIZATION [a big city]; so, the cuisine was pretty much old Polish, so to speak, and still with Ukrainian influences, just heavy things to eat, tasty but heavy. Y34(1) - [W-M]

Saving in the area of hygiene primarily consists of the practice of minimizing water consumption and focusing on reducing expenditure on beauty care products. Several people bathing in the same water, taking short showers, and forgoing certain hygiene products are all methods to reduce expenditure.

> If, for example, I stayed the entire day at home, my dad would often say that I fought no bullshit fight, so I didn't need a bath. Z21(1) - [W-W]

> Baths were often taken interchangeably; that is, the bathtub was filled with water, and subsequent household members just used the same water. Z21(1) - [W-W]

Another aspect of the piggy bank ethos is postponing the introduction of new hygiene practices, such as shaving or using deodorant. Saving money also means, as mentioned above, minimizing the use of hairdressing or beauty care services.

The piggy bank ethos in shopping is expressed through a significant reduction in the purchase of beauty care products and clothing while emphasizing the need to take care of the things you already own and use them sparingly (including repairing or mending them, if possible). This focus on the rational management of things is an integral part of shaping an approach of thrift to consumption. New things are introduced in moderation, and the purchasing process is usually planned in advance or even postponed.

> I requested a deodorant. Well, my parents said, okay, you'll get deodorant when you get your first hair on your balls. So that's kind of the story of when you start using deodorant. Well, it was similar to the shaving razor. You will get one when you have a beard. Well, I've got a beard. No, it's not a beard yet. Well, that's how it was. Y35(2) - [W-M]

In this context, purchasing decisions, particularly those related to clothes and beauty care products, are often imposed top-down by parents without considering the child's opinion. It indicates concern for sound financial management and a focus on the utility of possessions, reflecting the main dimensions of the working-class piggy bank ethos.

The approach to healthcare is also firmly rooted in the piggy bank ethos. Interviewees see taking care of health in responding to current health problems, indicating a strong focus on the present. In the context of the realities of life for working-class members, there is neither time nor resources for preventive doctor visits—dental care is mainly neglected.

Teeth are often perceived as a part of the body that does not always cause pain, leading to the practice of delaying costly dental visits or parents questioning their child's feeling of pain.

> I was rarely taken to the dentist; then, I had a few visits sometime toward the end of middle school, I think. And since then, I have not practically signed up yet myself. Z21(1) - [W-W]

We can distinguish two dimensions of the piggy bank ethos. **Passive saving** is characterized by practices imposed top-down. The initiative does not come from the child; saving results from an automatic process, independent of the child's will, part of the everyday routine. Examples include wearing second-hand clothes after a sibling, from the market or second-hand clothing retailers, eating traditional, simple dishes, and getting a homemade haircut.

In contrast, **practical financial education** manifests through a reactive approach in response to a child's specific actions, requests, or questions about, for example, buying new things. It is a proactive strategy for parents to make informed decisions, including reducing water consumption, deferring purchases, making children aware of the cost of living, and promoting independent cooking and saving. When exposed to practical financial education, a child begins to inculcate a strong awareness that products and services have a price, which becomes an essential aspect of their worldview. Instead of focusing only on the attractiveness or usefulness of an object or service, a child begins to analyze how much a thing might cost and whether the price is appropriate to the value it provides.

It is the mothers who often play a crucial role in cultivating passive saving practices, usually being the ones who manage the household and finances. Their approach to saving is often geared toward using resources economically and practically. Fathers, often the so-called sole breadwinners, spend time away from home. As work limits their time spent with the family, fathers are involved in the resource management process temporally, for example, during dinner talks on weekends or holidays.

> Well, just a little bit, and then just my dad telling me no, well, you're stupid after all—you're waiting for it, and what, you're going to have to shave? Do you know what the expense is? Do you know what the responsibility is? You're going to have to shave every day. And then it turns out I don't have to shave every day, the expense isn't that great either, but my dad was kind of right. Z21(2) - [W-S]

It is important to emphasize that these approaches are not exclusively the domain of one gender or the other but may reflect cultural roles or accepted patterns of behavior within a particular family.

Puberty & Problems: Negotiating Class Identity During Adolescence

However, economic capital remains unchanged; as teenagers rely on family resources for body-related practices, cultural capital changes. Significant others, as identified by the family, are replaced by significant others for the teenager. We have termed them "external points of reference" to highlight their role in the participants' lives so far. It is important to note that external points of reference are associated with adolescence, a period characterized by literal (physical) and metaphorical (mental) distancing from the family. Simultaneously, class identity is negotiated, as the original identity does not fully align with their aspirations. A crucial strategy to note is

that teenagers from working-class backgrounds acquire aspirational capital. Aspirational capital refers to the ability to uphold aspirations and dreams for the future, even when confronted with actual or perceived obstacles (Yosso 2005; Łuczaj 2022). It embodies a coping strategy in response to deficiencies in conventional and desired forms of capital, thereby influencing a shift in perspective. Aspirational capital serves as a reservoir of resilience, enabling individuals to pursue their goals despite challenges, thus fostering adaptability and transformative outlooks.

The negotiation of class identity, a process that begins with teenagers becoming aware of societal differences and social hierarchies, leads them to identify their place within the social hierarchy and recognize its inadequacy in their aspirations. As a result, teenagers make aspirational efforts to align themselves with the middle-class hegemony despite being constrained by insufficient economic capital associated with the middle class.

Instead of the family, external points of reference control the body and body-related practices associated with the expansion of teenagers' cultural capital. Simultaneously, there is a shift in perspective. Influenced by external points of reference, teenagers inadvertently and unconsciously adopt a vision of the working class marked by phantasmatic imagery. In this vision, the working class is perceived as individuals constrained by material resources, concerned with cleanliness and orderliness, simplistic, and possessing limited knowledge about presenting the body. Concurrently, they are seen as simple, tasteless, unimaginative, naive, and uninteresting. As a result, teenagers from the working class no longer want to distance themselves from the "dirty" but rather from those who feel the need to distance

themselves from the "dirty." They do not want to legitimize the working-class habitus through their practices. Thus, there is a negotiation of working-class identity, further fuelled by the hegemony of the middle class embedded in the external points of reference.

External reference points are broadly defined spaces and groups outside the local family environment that influence the formation of individuals' aspirations by presenting middle-class practices. Their influence begins between middle and high school when a boy moves from the countryside to the city or a larger town to continue his education. He then has a more socially diverse peer group around him regarding social class.

When adolescents are placed in a more **diverse social environment**, they compare practices and, consequently, shape their aspirations. These aspirations focus on the desire to advance to a more "humane," "middle-class" level by aligning with the characteristics and activities of the middle class and abandoning those associated with the working class.

> I had this feeling of inferiority when it came to fashion. I looked at the B class and the fashion novelties with a certain admiration, simultaneously feeling that I was one of the inferior ones...all over the sweatshirt or all over the T-shirt smiling faces, with different mouth settings there, let's call it. And there was just a couple of months when New Yorker [clothing retailer] was releasing a lot of that, and many people in our school had those T-shirts. I also bought myself a set like that at that point, a sweatshirt and a T-shirt. And that's when I got a very negative reaction because there were just a couple of, I don't know how to describe it, such bullies, not bullies as such, well, very forward lads from that former class B somehow

teased me so much about the fact that I was copying their outfit, and so on. Z25(1) - [W-M]

We can distinguish between two key points of reference during the participants' adolescence—the peer group in the new school environment and the people the men want to please (usually female peers). Additionally, for Generation Z interviewees, the internet is a critical external point of reference that occurs even before the transition from middle to high school.

Internet and social media are widespread, easily accessible sources that shape aspirations and new practices. They enable interactive exploration of desirable lifestyles, fuelling the desire for a better future in the individual. Aspirational trends presented online often clash with the values and practices imbibed by the family, leading to tension and discomfort in the teenager's relationship with the family.

> My father, for example, I can safely say that he would still be happiest living in the days of the good old beautiful communism, where everyone had a job. So, it just wasn't for him to present anything at all, like how you do not eat meat—well, if you didn't have anything to chew, you'd eat anything. Well, and I have heard such comments now and then. Z26(2) - [W-W]

Peer groups and potential romantic relationships significantly influence young men's practices, regardless of age. Older boys tend to identify with the **peer group** as a significant reference point. That is due to the change of school and the metaphorical and sometimes physical distancing from parents. During this period, the patterns brought from home become contested. A teenager begins to compare himself to others—in a more diverse environment,

and there is an awareness of his position in the social hierarchy. During this period, research participants become aware that their practices do not fit in with the peer group they want to be part of, which compounds their class aspirations. The need to conform to the group is initiated by peers who trigger the need for change by, for example, making fun of one's appearance and personally noticing areas for improvement, such as how one dresses. Self-reflection is reinforced by the control imposed by the peer group concerning, among other things, dress, body image, and how they spend their time.

Another external reference point is **people whom teenagers want to please**. As the study involves mainly heterosexual men, their experience will be discussed extensively.

Girls whose interest and approval are a target for young men influence the latter's behavior and choices. Compliments and positive reactions from girls indicate what is attractive and what is not to teenage boys. They rarely question a girl's preferences or opinions and try to realize them unreflectively.

> Once I went, oh, because I've got a sister ten years older, well, my sister's more like that, and I was with my sister in general, and I bought my first shoes there, I remember, somewhere, original Puma shoes. My sister persuaded my parents to buy me original shoes, and I had white Puma shoes... But I generally paid attention, for example, I mean, at school, I generally paid attention to how I dressed, well even, well, there were funny situations where girls would say that always, oh, you're nicely dressed. Y33(1) - [W-W]

During adolescence, the source of conflict lies in the need to distance oneself from practices inherited from the family home by adopting new practices

characteristic of the middle class. This need is conflict-generating due to the teenager's dependence on the family for economic capital and the differing cultural capital between the family and the teenager. The family does not understand why the teenager needs money to look unkempt, which contradicts the phantasmatic image of how a young person should present themselves. Meanwhile, teenagers want to conform to their external reference points but need more economic capital. Consequently, they develop strategies to help them cope with the conflict. Adolescents analyze patterns of middle-class practices represented by external points of reference, which inspires teenagers to change their behaviors and aids in acquiring aspirational capital (they do not have money, but they know what they could do with it). Adolescents challenge parental authority regarding practices as their aspirations grow, expressing a desire for independence and building an identity aligned with these aspirations. Concurrently, they actively communicate their desires to introduce middle-class practices, negotiating changes in family practices. As class aspirations develop, the perception of parental practices shifts from neutral to negative. Adolescents mentally distance themselves from their families, rejecting imposed values in favor of those associated with the middle class. This mental separation allows them to maintain autonomy and independence, aiding in coping with conflicts between aspirations and familial practices. These strategies vary in intensity depending on the individual characteristics of the participants. The desire for middle-class affiliation leads adolescents to perceive family practices as obstacles to their aspirations.

Working-class teenagers are subject to scrutiny from multiple sources. External reference points (internet, peer group, or girls) are related to control

(of the body, appearance, food, and physical activity). The desired response to control by the environment requires financial resources to implement the required practices and to be perceived through the prism of desirable characteristics. The family piggy bank ethos involves control, albeit different—geared toward practicality, simplicity, and not looking ahead. These two types of control—coming from external reference points and the family—overlap.

Although conflict areas are closely linked to adolescence, it is important to note the difference between change in practices during this period and change motivated by aspirations related to the desire to fit into a particular reference group. The analysis shows that hygiene and cosmetics are closely and universally linked to adolescence. In contrast, areas related to food, clothing, and exercise/body control are significant conflict areas.

Studying & Stratification: Budgeting for Bachelor's Degrees

An intriguing subgroup comprises young men who were university students while participating in the study. Despite educational aspirations and growing cultural capital, their situation is often more difficult than at earlier stages of life. This financial strain often arises from the necessity of funding education in large urban centers, leading to careful management of familial support or resorting to temporary, precarious jobs. Consequently, the negotiation of class identity remains an ongoing aspect of these participants' lives, continually shaping their experiences within evolving contexts.

The university serves as another external reference point for the participants. Simultaneously, navigating the higher education system requires young

working-class men to submit to the middle-class's hegemony—either conform to middle-class norms or risk exclusion altogether. They become acutely aware, to varying degrees, of their deficiencies in cultural, physical, and economic capital, solidifying the need for distance from the working class acquired during adolescence (experiencing the impostor syndrome). The university controls the bodies of young men, for instance, through mandatory physical education classes. Here, two levels of control must be distinguished. The first is mental—the imposition of the value of body discipline, indicating its significance in a student's life. The second is physical—gathering young men in changing rooms and fostering comparisons of their bodies' appearances before moving to the field to compare physical fitness. Consequently, negotiating class identity predominantly occurs outside the family sphere at this stage. That implies that the newfound independence from family-imposed practices and the conflicts associated with them clashes with challenging material conditions—insufficient economic capital to engage in practices the participants perceive as desirable (you may have the freedom to pursue your desires, but often lack the financial means to do so).

> I very rarely went for one particular steak and one old-fashioned...I used to go there once a month, and it was just this reward that I survived another month in my job. Z24(3) - [W-W]

As a result, students develop strategies involving compromises related to consuming desired products—utilizing thrift stores for clothing or meticulously seeking out the best promotions at retail stores. An exciting strategy involves adopting a rhetoric of snobbery regarding food products such as alcohol or meat—participants claim to purchase such products rarely. However, when they do, they opt for the highest possible quality despite significant costs. They perceive this as a much better (perhaps more moral?) practice than regularly buying the cheapest beer or meat products. Another strategy involves rationalizing the absence of specific practices that participants perceive as desirable (especially regarding physical activity), resulting in a need to justify oneself.

The romantic partner plays a significant role in the hygiene practices of working-class male students, somewhat replacing the role of the mother in terms of control. Typically, this control pertains to body hair grooming and specific cosmetic products. It is worth noting that young men do not question their partner's control—they submit to her preferences and are guided by them in making choices related to practices.

> On the chest, this shaving appeared once in my life only and for the first time in college because somewhere, well, it bothered my girlfriend. Z23(3) - [W-S]

The irregular weekly schedule powerfully shapes eating practices. Classes at university occur at various times, and the long breaks between them can make it challenging to plan regular meals. Additionally, students often combine studying with work, further complicating their schedule—the lack of a steady routine results in irregular meals.

As a result, some participants rely on ready-made meals such as fast food, milk bars [*bar mleczny*], university cafeterias, or store-bought ready meals to reheat. It is important to note a strong preference for practical solutions—these meals are readily available, inexpensive, and filling. Some, driven by the need to save money, have learned to cook for themselves during their studies.

During the university years, there is a significant increase in the social aspect of eating, especially in the context of consuming alcohol during various social gatherings. Students point out the development of a kind of ritual where, after consuming alcohol until late at night, they participate in shared outings for meals, most often in the form of kebabs,[11] in the company of friends.

Young men often view good health as having a fit, muscular body. Because of this, they try to stay physically active outside of mandatory physical education classes. Those who do not exercise regularly often feel bad about it, noting that they only worked out during required university classes. Interviewees talk about the signals from their environment regarding their need to undertake physical activity or change their eating habits (to lose weight). Feelings of shame are imposed on them because of the belief that they cannot adequately manage their bodies or dietary practices. Moreover, shaming men is considered unproblematic by the men themselves. In a group of men who are acquaintances, the rule is to conform to the rules imposed by the dominant individual.

Analysis reveals strong participants' willingness to change their class affiliation by adopting practices characteristic of the middle class. Despite these aspirations, they need sufficient financial resources to be forced to use adaptive strategies, such as buying second-hand clothes or unique offer products. Further, they save things and care for them (to make them last longer) as part of their conscious manage-

ment. The striving to identify with the middle class is also done through certain tricks (since I cannot afford expensive clothes, but I will at least drink some whiskey). This group of men experiences a strong sense of being between classes.

Adulthood & Ambition: Climbing the Ladder or Stuck at Base

The analysis allowed for the distinction of two types of experiences—men who, according to our established criteria (economic, cultural, and specific practices), experienced class advancement and men who did not experience such advancement.

Pride and the Hidden Costs

Men from the working class who have experienced upward social mobility emigrated from rural areas or small towns to larger urban centers, where they obtained higher or secondary education and entered the workforce. Their occupations often entail significant responsibility and involve supervising others. They are usually managers or entrepreneurs. That means that the people they surround themselves with at work become important external reference points due to the amount of time spent together and the power dynamics requiring the demonstration of professionalism through appearance.

Simultaneously, aside from co-workers, their partners exert control over body-related practices. Female partners (the majority of men identified themselves as heterosexual and described their romantic relationships with women[12]) often wield considerable influence over their partners, steering them

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[11] In Poland, kebab is a widely popular fast food due to its affordability, large portion sizes, and easy accessibility. Despite the prevalence of kebab stands, which constitute approximately one-third of all restaurants in Poland, kebab is often associated with lower social strata, in contrast to other fast food options like pizza (Nowak 2020).

[12] There is a need to recognize the theme of non-heteronormative relationships and their role in shaping body practices in a class context.

toward behaviors associated with middle-class norms: healthier eating habits, more refined fashion choices, the use of higher-quality beauty products or fragrances, and better hair care, among others. However, conflicts occur among research participants and their partners in this area.

> [My wife] knows that I don't know how to dress myself, so it's just up to her. Y34(1) - [W-M]

Entering adulthood also involves internalizing the middle-class disdain toward individuals deemed to lack taste (i.e., refinement, moderation, subtlety, discipline). Simultaneously, most middle-class practices are adopted due to the relevant cultural and economic capital of men from the working class. In this case, we can speak of an assimilated middle class. In this context, the internet serves as an essential reference point and source of standards to which adult participants feel obliged to conform. Men emphasize the role of male internet authorities with many followers on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, or TikTok.

> I generally follow a profile, Gentleman's Time [Czas Gentlemanów] it's called, on YouTube, and that's where the presenter is, whom I identify with a lot, and I get such inspiration from him in terms of clothing. (Z26(3) - [W-UM]

These online creators present themselves as experts in clothing, physical activity, or nutrition. They represent class patterns that the participants aspire to and highlight bodily practices associated with the upper social class, advocating for their adoption and (equally importantly) warning against undesirable practices. Thus, they can be called aspirational experts. Additionally, internet authorities play a reverse parental (fatherly) role, not restrict-

ing their followers but encouraging them to fulfill class aspirations through specific bodily practices. It aligns with middle-class practices, characterized by rigorous adherence to norms and the imitation of authorities to mitigate uncertainties regarding the appropriate balance between various practices (Gdula and Sadura 2012).

The central conflict identified within this group of working-class men is the attempt to reconcile a piggy bank ethos with the current lifestyle characteristic of the middle class. The area of clothing purchases highlights a deep-rooted piggy bank ethos among all surveyed men—they often emphasized the irrationality and absurdity of buying a T-shirt for 100 PLN (which comfortably fits within their financial means) when a T-shirt could fulfill the same aesthetic and practical function for 30 PLN. Consequently, they buy clothes from easily accessible and inexpensive fast fashion stores (such as H&M and Zara). Additionally, shopping is restricted by planning, cautious decision-making, and the practical (one-time!) purchase of multiple of a particular wardrobe item that works well. The choice of such a purchasing strategy by men who have achieved social advancement can be explained by the fact that during adolescence, clothes were one of the most potent sources of conflict between the piggy bank ethos and the desire to implement middle-class practices. The principles learned at home about saving clothes resonate more strongly with participants than others, and such an approach starkly contrasts their current practices in other areas.

> There are still ingrained aspects from [my] childhood, which hurts me personally, sometimes I think that maybe I won't buy that shirt for 200 PLN...once, you know, you respected money because there was

no money for food, you know, it's better to have food than to buy a jacket. Z26(3) - [W-UM]

Although some men declare saving on food, the characteristics of their practices indicate consumption of products perceived as healthier and simultaneously more expensive than those eaten at their family homes—whole grain bread, whole wheat pasta, various "super-foods," "good" coffee, or generally termed "organic" foods. Some identify themselves as being on a diet due to engaging in specific physical activity. However, they all share similar knowledge regarding the importance of regular meals, avoiding sugar, and reading food labels. They practiced dietary catering, cooking at home, and eating out.

Female partners and romantic relationships (including potential ones) are significant external reference points for men regarding hygiene. Even though female partners often exercise oppressive control over the participants, the men do not necessarily see it as problematic. Moreover, they appreciate that their partners are competent in appearance and beauty rules and what is considered attractive in the opinion of women. Leaving aside their partners' guidelines, the participants perceive meticulous care for the hairstyle as necessary. They frequently indicate that hair washing, grooming, and styling are part of their daily routines. That may stem from the need to present a suitable image in a work-related environment that requires a professional (well-groomed) appearance.

Partners also affect the clothing choices of study participants. However, this is less of an influence than in the case of hygiene and beauty practices. Their choices in shopping and clothing areas are mainly dictated by the need to mitigate the conflict between the piggy bank ethos and expectations regarding the current professional and material situation. The professional sphere plays a significant role here because the participants emphasized that they opt for a "smart casual" clothing style to present themselves at work and demonstrate professionalism adequately. However, if they buy expensive clothes for this purpose, they feel bad about it. Therefore, they limit themselves to inexpensive chain stores or online shopping, where finding promotions is easy.

Regarding health, men express a very high level of trust in expert culture. That is manifested in regular consultations with doctors, physiotherapists, and trainers to monitor their health. According to participants, proactive action for a healthy body is essential. They self-educate themselves through online content on health practices published by individuals they perceive as experts. All men who experienced social advancement indicated that they began physical exercises, which they continue to this day. As a result, the current silhouette of the participants is muscular.

Status Quo

The research participants who did not experience upward mobility took up studies, but after graduation or dropping out of university, they returned to their hometown. Consequently, they took up jobs in smaller or medium-sized urban areas. Their occupations correspond to the typology of working-class jobs, as they typically perform manual labor, low-skilled service work, or odd jobs. Therefore, the workplace has a different impact on their practices compared to men who have experienced an advancement to the middle class. Instead of co-workers or a corporate dress code, it is primarily the family that controls the appearance of these men (some of whom live with their parents). This group of study participants, like

those who experienced advancement, share a phantasmatic aversion toward unkempt individuals. They also share with middle-class men a disdain for overweight bodies. They perceive a fat body as a symbol of a lack of discipline and inadequate control of needs while directing contempt toward themselves—some of them are obese.

> If someone is fat and instead of saying, dude, get over yourself, you're fat and get over yourself, right? No, it's society's fault, I don't take care of myself, it's their fault...this degree of shifting normality, masculinity has gone in a strange direction. Y28(1) - [W-W]

The ambiguous attitude of this group of participants toward middle-class hegemony is surprising. On the one hand, they firmly reject middle-class body-controlling practices such as gym training, pointing to their absurdity. On the other hand, they are convinced of the effectiveness of other practices, such as cold showers (which strengthen the body), buying selected brands of clothes (but from second-hand stores), and using perfumes (however, they emphasize the rarity of this practice). The practices listed above are the economically accessible version of middle-class practices. They are mainly related to the body's placement in the public sphere rather than in a work context.

Working-class men who have not experienced social mobility struggle with an intense conflict. This conflict results from the awareness of socially desirable practices and acceptable body appearance associated with the middle class. The study participants know that to pursue middle-class practices, they would have to have more money.

> Other men...can more easily take care of their appearance, hair, beard, and so on, they have more funds to buy better cosmetics for themselves, visit that barber I mentioned...Nevertheless, a big part of taking care of yourself is money. Y29(1) - [W-W]

Class-based values significantly influence conflict areas in men's lives. A notable tension exists between practicality and the aspiration for sophistication. Men often favor straightforward solutions yet aspire to higher standards. Another source of conflict stems from the disparity between a lack of discipline and the desire for organization. While men acknowledge the importance of maintaining their health through exercise, they frequently encounter challenges in practical implementation. Furthermore, a persistent conflict exists between the impulse to save money and the desire for material goods or experiences. These conflicts underscore the continuous negotiation of men's class identities, with tensions between working-class and middle-class values.

A common phenomenon among the studied group of working-class men is the irregularity of eating practices. They emphasize the need to become regular in eating and preparing food but justify themselves by saying that their working conditions are challenging. That entails frequent skipping of meals, especially breakfast, due to irregular working hours and long periods without eating interspersed with episodes of binge eating. Research participants eat fast foods and ready-made meals; they also buy and consume chips, beer, and "junk food," calling this practice stress eating. Challenges associated with irregular work schedules, financial constraints, and stress contribute to unhealthy dietary habits in this group of men despite occasional efforts to adopt healthier eating practices.

Within this group of men, a pragmatic and minimalist approach to hygiene practices is observed. They

mainly use cosmetics specifically marketed "for men," which is motivated by the availability and price of these products. Study participants sometimes buy cosmetics themselves and sometimes receive them as gifts. Working-class men have a simple approach to hygiene—they have been using the same proven products for years and do not like changes. Practical considerations also dictate hairstyle and hair care. That approach does not allow for beauty experiments or excessive reflection on one's appearance. Practical aspects outweigh the aesthetic or pleasant aspects of the hygiene practices of this group of men. Not much has changed in the analyzed area since the childhood days of the study participants. The descriptions of the shopping practices of working-class men are dominated by the theme of promotions, low prices, and a typically pragmatic attitude. Promotions are perceived mainly as a way to save money and maximize the value of purchased items. The participants lack spontaneity when buying more expensive products, like perfume or shoes. They find it uncomfortable to make decisions about spending more significant amounts. Purchasing expensive goods is precisely planned and preceded by weeks of research (reading reviews, analyzing forums, comparing products in physical and online shops, and reading expert opinions).

> Looking, reading. All the time, practically already a lady in Douglas, it's already a good morning there. I'm already a regular there, these strips I mark for myself...you'll go to the Douglas site, or Notino in general, that's where, you know, people's opinions, plus there are still some sites there, Fragrantica, I think I remember quite well, and so I look for opinions. Y33 - [W-W]

Spontaneous buying tends to occur when men come across a "good deal" in a product category that is not perceived as expensive, such as T-shirts, socks, or food products with a long shelf life. Working-class participants use newsletters, websites, and apps to aggregate special offers when looking for desirable shopping cheaper goods. They feel pride that they have hunted down the most attractive offer.

A lack of regularity and reliance on therapies outside the field of evidence-based medicine characterizes the health-related practices of working-class men. Participants from this group declare a lack of trust in doctors and therapy. They admit they are ready to choose suffering and so-called natural treatment methods instead of visiting a doctor, even for serious diseases.

Young representatives of the working class ignore preventive health activities. Their practices in this area are rare and irregular. They state that they have a low level of motivation for workouts due to fatigue from work and housework, and walking is an adequate alternative to regular sports. It is worth noting that men from this group are aware of significant (in their opinion) deficiencies in their physical and health condition, such as excessive body weight or low fitness level.

Conclusions and Discussion

Practices discussed in the article relating to childhood, adolescence, time of being a university student, and the current reality of the research participants reveal the relationship between the piggy bank ethos and aspirations in different life stages. The analysis indicates that practices related to conflicts in the lives of individuals change over time or sometimes accompany men throughout their lives.

Family upbringing and socioeconomic contexts heavily influence body practices among work-

ing-class men. Mothers are pivotal in enforcing stringent cleanliness standards, emphasizing presentability and social acceptance through personal appearance. These practices are shaped by economic constraints, leading to pragmatic approaches such as home haircuts and minimal expenditure on grooming products. A notable conflict arises between these familial norms and broader societal expectations in educational and social settings. The conflict highlights tensions as working-class study participants navigate between piggy bank ethos and standards external to their immediate environment.

External reference points, such as peer groups and media representations, heavily influence adolescent men's bodily practices. These influences shape aspirations and perceptions of attractiveness, contributing to conflicts with familial expectations and traditional values. Young men employ various coping strategies to reconcile conflicting influences, aiming to align with peer group norms while negotiating familial expectations. That process of identity formation through bodily practices underscores the dynamic interplay between personal aspirations and external pressures during adolescence.

Working-class university students often rely on familial support and precarious jobs to finance their education, impacting their ability to manage and express cultural and economic capital effectively. To cope with their limited finances, they adopt consumption strategies such as shopping at thrift stores, seeking promotions, and occasionally splurging on high-quality items. The university environment enforces middle-class norms, pressuring working-class students to conform or face exclusion. That pressure heightens study participants' awareness of their cultural and economic capital deficiencies. It often leads to feelings of impostor syndrome, making

it difficult for them to reconcile their working-class identity with university expectations. Romantic partners significantly influence university students' personal hygiene practices, indicating a shift from family to partner in control and decision-making in personal care routines. Irregular university schedules affect students' eating habits, making them rely on convenient, inexpensive meals. Socializing, often involving alcohol, plays a crucial role in their social lives, influencing their eating habits and interactions. There is also significant societal pressure to maintain a fit body image, which can lead to feelings of shame if they fail to meet these expectations. Financial constraints further limit their ability to entirely adopt middle-class consumption patterns related to diet and fitness. Overall, working-class male students navigate a complex interplay of aspirations, societal expectations, and economic realities.

Men experiencing social advancement often transition from rural areas or small towns to urban centers, pursuing higher education and entering managerial or entrepreneurial professions. That shift necessitates adopting middle-class norms and practices. Female partners significantly influence their behaviors toward these norms, encouraging healthier eating habits, refined fashion choices, and better grooming practices. These men internalize middle-class values, such as disdain for lack of taste and a preference for refinement and moderation. They often rely on online sources, including social media influencers and experts, who present aspirational middle-class lifestyles. Despite adopting these practices, they retain a piggy bank ethos, characterized by frugality and careful spending habits. They prefer inexpensive clothing from fast fashion retailers and practical shopping strategies to balance financial prudence with professional appear-

ance expectations. Health and physical fitness are strongly emphasized, with regular physical activity, consultations with health experts, and self-education through online content. Pursuing a healthy lifestyle is both a personal goal and a reflection of middle-class norms related to physical appearance and well-being. Professional identity is crucial, influencing their clothing choices (opting for "smart casual" styles) and grooming routines (meticulous care for hairstyle and appearance). They strive to present a professional image while adhering to financial constraints. Upward social mobility for working-class men involves significant adjustments in lifestyle, consumption patterns, and personal habits. While they adopt middle-class norms in various aspects of life, they often experience tensions between financial prudence and the expectations of their new social and professional environments.

Study participants who did not experience social advancement returned to their places of residence after graduation or never left their family home. They take jobs in smaller urban areas, typically in manual labor, low-skilled services, or odd jobs. That contrasts with those men who experienced upward mobility. Family significantly shapes the lives of that group of participants, influencing appearance and lifestyle choices. These men have a complex attitude toward body image, showing aversion to unkempt appearances while adopting a practical approach to their hygiene and beauty standards. This group of men is skeptical of modern medicine and expert systems in general. Having bad eating habits, the study participants justify themselves with work and household duties. Fast food and ready-made meals are typical diets of this group of participants. They categorize this practice as stress eating. They carefully plan purchases of more expensive items, highlighting a cautious approach to spending and

a preference for practicality over luxury. Men with no experience of social mobility have a nuanced relationship with middle-class values and practices. While they reject certain body-controlling practices associated with the middle class (like gym training), they adopt economically accessible versions of other practices, such as using designer clothes from second-hand stores or using expensive perfumes sparingly. Overall, the lifestyle of working-class men who have not experienced upward social mobility is shaped by economic constraints, family influences, and a pragmatic approach to health and appearance. This group of study participants oscillates between economic frustration, disdain for certain middle-class practices, and acceptance of their situation.

As per the concept of the classist phantasm, class advancement, widely discussed in the social sciences, is often only partially attainable. If individuals aspire to belong to a social class from which they do not originate, they often encounter non-formal difficulties. The men whose practices and experiences are described in this article unintentionally experience the consequences of so-called middle-class hegemony and constantly balance between classes. The incorporation of middle-class practices (to which membership remains a distant dream for many in so-called Western society) may be an attempt to achieve the life stability with which the middle class is associated.

As the study results discussed in this article have demonstrated, working-class men remain in a kind of limbo, trapped, as it were, in a constant process of negotiating class identity, even if they can be formally assigned to the middle class. That condition can be illustrated using the concept of essences, a set of characteristics defining a social class's identity.

Social advancement (although formally confirmed) still requires the interviewees' efforts, which does not allow them to forget their origins in the working class. The purchase of luxury goods typical of the middle class refers study participants to values (the piggy bank ethos) and practices their family accepts, often triggering an avalanche of emotions and reflections on their origins.

The classist phantasm captures the not-fully realized aspirations driving the desire to advance toward being "more human." That approach opens up social research to a broader context concerning the intimate aspects of bodily practices, as well as hidden meanings, extending beyond a simple characterization of the practices of a particular social class.

The findings of this study lead us to questions about the meaning of the idea of social advancement, its social consequences, and its effects on individuals (those who succeeded and those who did not). Working-class men, regardless of whether they experience upward social mobility, constantly navigate and negotiate their class identity throughout their lives. They balance between adopting middle-class practices and retaining their working-class values, often influenced by economic constraints, family upbringing, and societal expectations. That ongoing negotiation underscores the complexities and tensions associated with class advancement and the pursuit of middle-class stability.

The article may contribute to continuing this topic in other research projects, such as longitudinal studies on class identity negotiation to investigate how persistent or changing the piggy bank ethos is and its influence on personal and professional life decisions in the long run; research on the impact of the university environment on conflicts related to class affiliation and the desire for advancement; more detailed studies of the class dimension of selected bodily practices (clothing or eating) using the concept of class phantasm.

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Citation

The "Imperceptibly Narrowing Diamond" Generation—Adaptation Strategies of the Generation X Representatives Toward Their Old Age

Emilia Kramkowska (iD)
University of Bialystok, Poland

Alicja Korzeniecka-Bondar (iD)
University of Bialystok, Poland

Abstract: Population aging is becoming one of society's priority issues. An assumption is that it is beneficial (the benefits for the individual and society are shown in the text) for people currently of working age (representatives of Generation X) to anticipate their old age. In this article, the results of a qualitative study are presented. The aim is to identify the adaptation strategies of representatives of Generation X toward their old age. The theoretical basis was set by reflections on generations, enriched by the metaphor of the "imperceptibly narrowing diamond." The data collection method was an unstructured interview with a standardized list of information sought, conducted with ten people (with higher education) from Generation X. As a result of the thematic analysis, two adaptation strategies toward old age emerged for the representatives of Generation X: proactive and reactive.

Emilia Kramkowska is a sociologist and an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology of Knowledge and Education of the Faculty of Sociology at the University of Bialystok. She has published extensively on sociological and gerontological issues. Her research focuses on several areas within the sociology of old age and older people, the sociology of the body, and the sociology of generation. The subject of her current research and analysis is the perception of old age and older people by representatives of different generations. Her most recent publications include: *"Mi się kojarzy, że starsi ludzie mieszkają na wsi. A ta starość miejska kojarzy mi się z zamknięciem"* – o przeżywaniu

starości w środowisku wiejskim i miejskim perspektywy przedstawicieli różnych pokoleń ["*I Associate Old People with Living in the Countryside. And This Urban Old Age Makes me Think of Being Closed In*"—About Experiencing Old Age in the Rural and Urban Environment from the Perspective of Representatives of Different Generations] (2023 in *Małe miasta. Blaski i cienie* [*Small Towns: Lights and Shadows*], edited by M. Zemło) and "'Old Age? Definition? It Is Complicated…': Around the Understanding of the Concept of Old Age by Representatives of Different Generations" (2022 *Zeszyty Naukowe KUL*).

email address: e.kramkowska@uwb.edu.pl

Alicja Korzeniecka-Bondar works at the Department of General Education and Research Methods in Education of the Faculty of Education of the University of Bialystok. She is a Dean of the Faculty of Education. She served as an Editor-in-Chief of the journal *Parezja. Czasopismo Forum Młodych Pedagogów przy Komitecie Nauk Pedagogicznych PAN* [*Parrhesia. Journal of the Forum of Young Scholars at the Committee of Education Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences* (http://www.parezja.uwb.edu.pl/)]. Her interests concern the following issues: Everyday life worlds of education subjects, Creative combination of pedagogical theory and practice, Temporal dimensions of the functioning of school and education subjects, and Building a scientific community of learners. She is the author and co-author of numerous scientific articles concerning the problem of teacher's daily work and the temporal dimension of everyday school practices. Her last publications include: Korzeniecka-Bondar et al. "Creating Opportunities from the Online Teaching and Learning Challenges of the Pandemic: Improving Teacher Education in a Post-Pandemic World" (2024 in *Pedagogika*), Korzeniecka-Bondar, Kowalczuk-Walędziak, and Kędzierska "Teacher Education in Poland: Contested Terrains between Policy and Practice" (2023 in *The Palgrave Handbook of Teacher Education in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by M. Kowalczuk-Walędziak et al.), Kowalczuk-Walędziak, Kędzierska, and Korzeniecka-Bondar "School-to-School Collaboration in Poland: Mapping (Untapped) Potential" (2022 in *School-to-School Collaboration: Learning across International Contexts*, edited by C. Brown and P. W. Armstrong), Korzeniecka-Bondar and Gajdzica *Czasoprzestrzeń szkoły: co warto wiedzieć o czasie i przestrzeni szkoły* [*School Space-Time: What Is Worth Knowing about School Time and Space*] (2021).

email address: alibon@uwb.edu.pl

P opulation aging is becoming one of society's most pressing issues. The demographics show that the whole world is aging. World Health Organization (WHO) studies (2022) state,

Today, most people can expect to live into their sixties and beyond. Every country in the world is experiencing growth in both the size and the proportion of older persons in the population. By 2030, 1 in 6 people in the world will be aged 60 years or over. At this time, the share of the population aged 60 years and over will increase from 1 billion in 2020 to 1.4 billion. By 2050, the world's population of people aged 60 years and older will double (2.1 billion). The number of persons aged 80 years or older is expected to triple between 2020 and 2050 to reach 426 million.

The process of population aging is occurring at the fastest rate in highly developed countries. By way of illustration, in Japan, 30% of the population is al-

ready over 60 years old. In Poland, which was classified by the World Bank as a high-income country, the demographic situation also gives rise to concern. The results of the National Census conducted in Poland in 2021 indicate significant shifts in the country's population structure. As a consequence of unfavorable demographic trends, the proportion of individuals belonging to the post-working age group has increased significantly, from 16.9% to 22.3%, representing an increase of over 5%. That signifies that the number of individuals aged 60 and above increased by approximately two million over the past decade, indicating that over 20% of Poland's population is currently above the age of 60 (GUS 2022:24-25).

The progressive process of population aging generates numerous challenges (individual and social) worth analyzing in the light of theories of social change. Piotr Sztompka (1994:11 [trans. EK and AKB]) explains that,

> there is no theory of social change "in general," the theory of social change "as such," there are only theories dealing with certain partial processes, aspects, or dimensions of social change. For different authors and different schools of theory, other aspects of social change turn out to be the most important.

Referring to the reflections of Alexis de Tocqueville, the Polish sociologist draws attention to civilizational and cultural changes that relate to the moral and intellectual condition of individuals (Sztompka 1994; Szacki 2003:185-191). This condition, like every aspect of society functioning, is determined by temporal factors, with the category of time being one of the key concepts linking the categories of generation, change, and aging. From the generation's point of view, the assumptions of social change theory are salient, which show that symbols, values, rules, or beliefs shared by groups are linked to time. Those that take root in social consciousness gain normative value, while others are subject to change (Sztompka 2007:58).

In this text, we look at the beliefs/opinions of representatives of Generation X concerning old age (their own), a stage of life that is heterogeneous and diverse in terms of the biological, psychological, and social changes that take place in the functioning of the individual. We recognize the uniqueness of Generation X in the fact that its representatives are at a point in their biography when they do not yet perceive/experience these changes (and their consequences), while they are taking place irreversibly. We formulate the thesis that it is beneficial (these benefits will be highlighted in a later section) for people who are currently of working age (representatives of Generation X) to anticipate their old age (we consider this as thinking about the future). Imagining one's aging involves thinking about the future, which can be difficult on both a personal and social level (Adam 2014). According to the theory of social change (Sztompka 2007) and the theory of time perspective (Gonzalez and Zimbardo 1985), thinking about one's future determines a person's opinion of themselves, the surrounding world, and interpersonal relationships. However, people with a future perspective are characterized by the fact that they plan and organize their time and anticipate responsibilities and dangers standing in the way of their chosen goal (Zimbardo and Boyd 2009).

Barbara E. Adam distinguished two ways in which people imagine the future, which she names "future as fate" and "future as fortune." "The future

as fate" is the belief that the future has been predetermined by the gods or ancestors. This attitude was common in pre-modern societies, but one can still see remnants of this idea in how people talk about the future (e.g., "Well, what is to happen, will happen"). According to this belief, there is little humans can do to influence what will happen (Adam 2014). "The future as fortune" is the belief that people can shape what lies ahead through their present actions and rational plans to make sure they optimize the future to come (Adam 2014).

The article aims to present the adaptation strategies of Generation X representatives toward their old age, which emerged as a result of the analysis of qualitative data collected through an unstructured interview with a standardized list of information sought (Konecki 2000:169-170).

Generation X—The Generation of the "Imperceptibly Narrowing Diamond"

The question of generation and the characteristics of each generation has become an important organizing analytical category in recent years. A thorough conceptualization of the issue of generationality was made by Karl Mannheim. The author pointed to two rudimentary and inseparable elements that constitute a generation. The first is a common position in historical time (*generational positioning*), and the second is an awareness of the distinctiveness of that historical position, shaped by the events and experiences of a given period (*generational style*) (Mannheim 1952). Based on this approach, Krystyna Szafraniec (2022:39) explains that a generation is a group of people born at the same time who develop natural or consciously desired ties, in the formation of which the com-

mensurability of their life experience and a particular type of social location play a key role. Thus, following Ryszard Kapuściński (1996:86 [trans. EK and AKB]), one can state that "a generation is more than a biological community, an identity of age. For it is also a similarity of sensibility, a similar type of imagination." In this approach, the category of generation is used to describe social generations, that is, people born at the same time and growing up in a similar culture, who are thus subject to the influence of certain cultural and social factors. However, it should also be emphasized that individual micro-generations, or cohorts within generations, differ in terms of educational level, income level, lifestyle, et cetera.

The common denominator of the numerous definitions of the term "generation" is the reference to the category of time because it is time in all its manifestations that increasingly structures societies and the life experiences of individuals (Gilleard 2004:110), while at the same time constituting a rudimentary aspect of social change (Sztompka 2021:601-602). On this basis, the classifications of generations are distinguished. A reference point for many sociological analyses is the American classification of generations, which distinguishes between Traditionalists (born between 1918 and 1945), Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), and Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1995) (Wątroba 2017a:32). A general adaptation of this classification into the realities of individual societies is an oversimplification, although the search for counterparts of the American generations in Poland is justified, as the infiltration of trends characteristic of Western culture into Poland is a fact that has been extensively studied by Polish sociology (Grzeszczyk 2004).

The term Generation X was first used in 1965 by Jane Deverson and Charles Hamblett. Yet, it worked its way into popular vernacular after the release of Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. The novel tells the story of twenty-year-olds struggling with "meaningless jobs, unclear expectations, and an uncertain future" (Wątroba 2017a:131 [trans. EK and AKB]). Hence, the "X" used in the naming of the generation signifies the uncertainty of tomorrow and the uncertainty about the course of history. Recalling the social, economic, or political conditions in which the Polish Generation X grew up (the time of the Polish People's Republic [PRL]), this uncertainty was an automatic part of the biography of Poles and Polish women of the time.

Whilst characterizing the generation of people born in Poland between the second half of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1980s, it is necessary to emphasize the great internal heterogeneity, as indicated by researchers, of people from Generation X (Mach 2003:172-175), who today make up almost 28.5% of the Polish population (Local Data Bank 2023). This is also reflected in the nomenclature used. Witold Wrzesień (2005:10), for example, distinguishes three successive generations within the framework of Generation X: the Generation of '89 (people born roughly between 1964 and 1970), the Children of Transformation (born between 1971 and 1976), and the Marauders of the End of the Century (born between 1977 and 1982). The author's classification refers to the significant social changes of the 1970s. However, when describing the different generations, Wrzesień notes that despite their differences, there is a convergence of norms, values, attitudes, or realized patterns of behavior. It is worth describing

the characteristics of the representatives of Generation X in more detail.[1]

Szafraniec (2022:48-50) explains that the ongoing socialization process of the representatives of Generation X took place in essentially poor conditions but with assured access to free education and awakening hope for a better future. Not surprisingly, the young people growing up in the 1970s are characterized by a high level of education. It should also be mentioned that the Polish People's Republic era and the period of transition were conducive to Generation X entering the labor market at the time, treating professional issues as priorities and guaranteeing stability in an uncertain everyday life (Stosik and Leśniewska 2015:186). Representatives of Generation X are also described as those who organize their work activities perfectly (Opalińska 2018:144-145). They are known by some as workaholics with a high work ethic (Smolbik-Jęczmień 2013:230). However, Generation X is also concerned with the quality of their private and family life (Hysa 2016:389). As the results of Bogdan Mach's research show, representatives of Generation X are aware that material and professional success is not enough to make them satisfied with life. The source of their satisfaction is also the quality of their family relationships (Mach 2003:161). Szafraniec's research shows that the relationship between Generation X and their parents is much better now than when Generation X was growing up. The author reports that each generation is now declaratively commit-

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[1] The intention of the authors of the text is to sketch selected aspects of the profile of people from Generation X, through which the reader will be able to see the relationship between the socio-cultural conditions in which the process of primary socialization and growing up of the generation born in 1965-1980 took place, and their perception of the social issues analyzed in the text.

ted to caring for and helping the other and that the frequency of such attitudes outweighs expectant or demanding attitudes (Szafraniec 2022:153-154). The problems of old age (illnesses, widowhood, the feeling of not being needed, and loneliness or low pensions) are a challenge for both the people affected as well as for people from Generation X caring for older persons. Accompanying their aging parents, the younger generations also have the opportunity to imagine their old age, ranging on a continuum from the pessimistic to the optimistic (Jones 2011), shape their knowledge of their life, which constitutes a major part of the self, and constraints what we have been, what we are now, and what we might yet become (Coste et al. 2012; Kramkowska 2022).

People from Generation X—and the moment of life they are in—are perfectly described by the metaphor of the "imperceptibly narrowing diamond," taken from the book *The Lincoln Highway* by Amor Towles. In the book, we read about the older man, Abacus, expressing his belief that everyone's life resembles a diamond lying on its side. Initially, a person develops, increases their capabilities, and grows—the arms of the diamond expand. The first part of life is an all-encompassing, all--present, all-powerful expansion. "Beginning at a fine point, the life…expands outward" (Towles 2022:489), and a person starts to understand their strengths and weaknesses, their relationships with other people. As time passes, "proceeding into the world" (Towles 2022:489), the individual performs a series of deeds independently and merrily with others, gains honors and accolades, but also experiences failures and downfalls. "But at some untold moment, the two rays that define the outer limits of this widening world…simultaneously turn a corner and begin to converge"

(Towles 2022:489). A person's capabilities begin to narrow, they begin to lose, to falter—the arms of the diamond imperceptibly move toward one another. Over the course of a person's life, they may not notice this and may not feel that the process of "narrowing the diamond" has begun. Older Abacus explains,

> The manner in which the convergence takes you by surprise, that is the cruelest part. And yet it's almost unavoidable. For at the moment when the turning begins, the two opposing rays of your life are so far from each other you could never discern the change in their trajectory. And in those first years, as the rays begin to angle inward, the world still seems so open, you have no reason to suspect its diminishment. But one day, one day years after the convergence has begun, you cannot only sense the inward trajectory of the walls, you can begin to see the terminal point in the offing even as the terrain that remains before you begins to shrink at an accelerating pace. [Towles 2022:491]

This may be the moment for those in Generation X—they are experiencing a period of being fully active and open to the world, while at the same time seeing glimpses of their aging. Old age, according to Amos Towles (2022:492), is the phase when life "had shrunk from the world itself, to their country, to their county, to their home, and finally to a single room where…they are destined to end their days."

Old Age and Adaptation to It

Old age is a stage of life that is the culmination of aging processes at the biological, psychological, or social level, resulting in a violation of the biological and mental balance, with no possibility

of counteracting this mechanism[2] (Pędich 1996; Kocemba 2000; Bugajska 2012; Kramkowska 2016). Old age is, therefore, a specific state of the individual, reflecting a significant accumulation of signs of the aging process. However,

> aging and the life course are also social processes because age is a structural feature of societies. The dynamic aspects of aging at both individual and societal levels require our particular attention. That is, new cohorts of people are born, grow up and older together, and move through the age structure of the population. These ideas also heightened the awareness of the need to not only understand the unique characteristics of particular cohorts as they aged, but also to understand the differential effects of social change on adjacent cohorts. [Settersten and Angel 2011:5]

Analyzing the strategies of adaptation to old age among members of Generation X requires an understanding of aging and old age as social phenomena. Moreover, adaptation to old age, understood as how individuals or groups adjust to living in conditions different from those they have previously experienced, is both possible and desirable (Bromley 1969:132-139). Adaptation is a broad concept analyzed in the literature, for example, in cultural (Berry 1997) or migration contexts (Danilewicz 2010; Winiecka 2016). It is process-oriented. Therefore, when analyzing adaptation in old age, the said process should be considered concerning three aspects: biological, in the form of adaptation to physiological changes in the body; psychological, referring to changes in the sphere of psychological processes, personality, and/or subjective experiences; or social, manifested in adaptation to new roles, social, occupational, or economic status (Kucharewicz 2015:228).

Analyzing adaptations to old age undoubtedly makes sense when discussing people who have entered the final stage of life. A common assumption is that the conventional start of old age is entering retirement age, that is, turning 60 or 65. The text applies to younger people who will enter this phase of life in the near or distant future. Representatives of Generation X can, at most, anticipate their old age or adopt adaptive strategies toward their old age, that is, purposeful, spread-out activities aimed at achieving a chosen goal (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001).

Research Design, Sampling, and Ethical Issues

The research was carried out using an unstructured interview with a standardized list of information sought (Konecki 2000:169-170) to answer the research question: *Which adaptation strategies toward their old age do Generation X representatives display?*

The data presented in this article are part of a larger qualitative research project on four genera-

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[2] Due to the variation in the aging process and the subsequent increasing dependency of older persons, old age is divided into the so-called third and fourth age. The third age is a period of active functional independence, whereby individuals can perform the majority of daily activities without assistance. This is accompanied by the ability to enjoy the benefits of retired life and economic dependency, characterized by the receipt of public transfers (pensions, disability pensions, survivors' pensions). The second part is the so-called fourth age, which encompasses the period during which an individual's autonomy and capacity to care for themselves are significantly constrained. During this phase, older persons are compelled to rely on the assistance of others and are also economically dependent. The demarcation between the third and fourth age is most frequently established at 80 years of age in gerontological literature (Gawron, Klimczuk, and Szweda-Lewandowska 2021).

tions' perceptions of old age and older persons.[3] The article only contains statements by the representatives of Generation X, that is, people aged 42 to 57. It is a generation at a peculiar point in its life. Turning the "magical 40," the halfway point in life, the tendency to self-reflection, greater or lesser self-awareness of their needs, reviewing past achievements, and setting goals for the second half of life (Bee 2004; Giddens and Sutton 2020:301-302) appear to postpone "diamond narrowing." It is also typical for members of Generation X to care for relatives (growing children, aging parents) or to face numerous social challenges determined, among other things, by the progressive aging of the society (fluidity of the pension system, economic situation of the country).

During the interviews, without being asked about it (such a question was not included in the interview script), ten of the sixteen interviewees

raised the topic of their aging, their old age, and their preparation for it. The researcher followed this thread by inquiring about the meaning/context of the message (statement), asking, among other things, the question, "Do you think about your old age? If so, what kind of thoughts are those? What do you think about it? What feelings do you experience?" It is this content that informs this article. In addition to the criterion of belonging to the selected generation, other important characteristics determining the selection of all individuals for the study were the gender and place of residence of the participants (urban/rural). Among the ten interviewees who raised the issue of their old age, there were five women and five men; seven were city dwellers, and three lived in the countryside.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of study participants

No.	Sex	Age	Place of residence	Education
1	woman	48	city	higher education
2	woman	44	city	higher education
3	man	44	city	higher education
4	woman	55	city	higher education
5	man	42	village	higher education
6	man	48	city	higher education
7	woman	42	village	higher education
8	man	42	city	higher education
9	woman	45	village	higher education
10	man	57	city	higher education

Source: self-elaboration.

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[3] The research addressed the issue of old age and older persons as remembered by the interviewees from their childhood and their perceptions of contemporary old age and today's older persons. Both temporal perspectives, i.e., the retrospective aspect and the presentist aspect, dealt with three research areas, i.e., the generalized characteristics of old age and older persons (including the qualities of old age and older persons, and their social perception), old age and older persons in the family, as well as the image of old age and the appearance of the aging senior body. The empirical material was collected between January and April 2022. Representatives of four generations were invited to participate in the qualitative research, whose typology was adopted from Wiesław Wątroba (2017b): (1) Traditionalists (born between 1918 and 1945), (2) Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), (3) Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), and (4) Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1995). Sixteen representatives of each generation took part in the research. To estimate the characteristics of the hidden intra-generational relations/networks, the snowball method was used to reach the interviewees, taking into account the assumption that each generation should be represented by eight women and eight men, eight urban residents and eight rural residents (each of the interviewees recommended further individuals for the study). We could say that the principle of variability was invoked. A total of 64 interviews were conducted.

Ethical Issues

Each person who gave informed consent to be interviewed was informed about the aims of the study and how the information provided would be used. In addition, everyone was assured that the anonymity and confidentiality of the research would be maintained. All interviewees agreed to have the interview recorded, transcribed, and excerpts used in academic publications. To ensure confidentiality, the researchers use codes (narrator no. 1, narrator no. 2) during the analysis and the presentation of the data. In presenting the findings, the researchers aimed to ensure that the themes that emerged and their descriptions were documented in the empirical data collected.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006:79), was used to analyze the data collected. In our analysis of themes, we used an inductive approach (Braun and Clarke 2006), deriving the themes from the data. The analysis of the data began with the first researcher selecting excerpts from the transcribed interviews in which the narrators talk about their old age and/or aging. The researchers then read the interview transcripts individually, independently of each other, assigning descriptive codes to the interview excerpts. Afterward, the researchers shared their codes (on a shared disk) and discussed them, establishing categories and assigning them to the initial map of themes related to the research problems (Braun and Clarke 2006). Subsequently, the authors jointly performed the analysis involving continuous back and forth between the entire dataset and the coded data fragments to confirm the validity of the emergence of a given theme, its content, and the documentation of the themes in the empirical data. An integral part of the analysis was the writing of memos (short analytical notes on thoughts, ideas, and questions), which started with noting ideas and potential coding schemes in phase one and continued throughout coding, theme emergence, and text development. Memos were created by each author, with subsequent ones reinforcing the themes and addressing the formulated questions. The analysis of the data by several researchers simultaneously, as well as the joint identification of themes, served to ensure the validity and reliability of the research.

Adaptation of the Representatives of Generation X Toward Their Old Age and the Strategies Resulting from It

The purpose of this article is to identify the adaptation strategies to the old age of the representatives of Generation X, who raised this issue themselves during the interviews. The average age of the participants in the study is 46.7 years, so they are not old. On the contrary, they are fully productive and professionally engaged. However, the diversity and complexity of the old age life stage means that it is possible to prepare for it in a variety of ways. The analysis of the interviewees' statements made it possible to identify two strategies of the narrators' adaptation to their old age: (1) the interviewees' proactive strategy for adapting to their old age and (2) the interviewees' reactive strategy for adapting to their old age. Within each of the key themes, the participants' experiences and insights are discussed under emerging sub--themes (Table 2).

Table 2. The thematic content of interviewees' anticipatory strategies for adapting to their old age

Key themes	Sub-themes
Interviewees' proactive strategies for adapting to their aging	Mindfulness as a strategy for consciously being "here and now"
	Building and maintaining relationships with loved ones
	Concern for their well-being
	Financial security
Interviewees' reactive strategies for adapting to their old age	Passive acceptance of change
	Anxiety and escape response to symptoms of aging

Source: Self-elaboration.

Generation X Representatives' Proactive Strategies for Adapting to Their Old Age

This section reveals the proactive strategy of Generation X representatives to their old age in which four sub-themes emerge: (1) mindfulness as a strategy for consciously being "here and now"; (2) building and maintaining relationships with loved ones; (3) caring for their well-being; and (4) financial security. This proactive strategy is based on the analysis of factors to anticipate/shape their future through their present actions and rational plans to optimize the future or likely scenarios. In the participants' statements, old age appears to be a time for which they can/should prepare themselves by reflecting on their future, which might be prompted, among other things, by the observation of today's older persons.

> I'm not afraid of my own old age. I think I have these observations because I like to watch people, and in my mind, I process everything, like, right?...I look at others, and I have some thoughts. I imagine what it might be like for me. [narrator no. 1]

Mindfulness as a Strategy for Consciously Being "Here and Now"

The ability to stop and see the "here and now" becomes a sign of maturity, resulting from a reflective response to difficult experiences (e.g., Covid-19). The sense of danger and the inevitable rapid passage of time prompts an attentiveness for which the usual, professionally- and family-active representatives of Generation X do not have time. Let us recall the longer statement of narrator no. 9.

> It seems to me, at least I'm at that stage of a more mature life at the moment, that, at least in my case, a lot of it was caused by Covid, that I had the opportunity to stop, to slow down, not just work, work and work. But to stand back, to stop and see that, actually, a lot of time has flown by in my life. I was focused on work, and that work took that time that, for example, I don't know... we have two children, and I didn't even have time to see when they grew up when they grew up, when they became adults. And now, I've actually slowed down in my life... because I need time to be with my family... I have the time at the moment, the kind of maturity to stop and look at my boys and notice how they think, how they talk. [narrator no. 9]

This reflective reference to the inevitability and pace of time passing sensitizes people to the fleetingness of time, contributes to making conscious choices, and clarifies the values people stand for, to which they want to commit themselves.

Mindfulness to the "here and now" also manifests itself in the acceptance of the laws of life, which include passing and aging. One narrator describes it as follows.

> But I don't... I don't know, some people, for example, turn forty and oh... get depressed, oh dear, I'm already forty... And I don't think like that, with categories like that, that this is old age, that I'm already falling apart, that this is the end of my life. It's simple, as long as I live, that's how long I'm going to live, in old age or in this advanced age. [narrator no. 2]

The acceptance of both what is happening now and what will be happening protects people from the anxiety associated with an unknown future and allows them to see life as a holistic process.

Building and Maintaining Relationships with Loved Ones

Anticipating their old age, the participants in the study (mainly women, only one man) emphasized the importance of building and maintaining relationships with their loved ones (children and grandchildren). They want to be a part of their lives in the future, which they see as a source of positive energy and joy (narrator no. 1). The family members that the study participants are thinking about are mainly their future grandchildren, for whom the narrators want to be companions in the process of their growing up and everyday life. This is what one narrator said.

I think I would like to be a "warm" grandmother in my old age. I'd like to look after my grandchildren and spend my old age with my family...Above all, I'd like to be the kind of grandmother that the children not only come to but also enjoy visiting. I would like them to come to me. [narrator no. 7]

Representatives of Generation X, while being fully active, are aware of their numerous commitments and the permanent lack of time for themselves and their loved ones (Wątroba 2022:83), which is why they define future family time as thoughtful, unhurried being together (especially with their grandchildren, to whom they want to show different facets of the world). Another interviewee said,

> I would like to show a lot of things to my grandchildren, you know, and to explain things, right? Because I understand that my children, my daughters, my sons-in-law, they won't have time to do things like, for example, talk about flowers, about beetles, those things that I would love to tell my grandchildren about. [narrator no. 4]

The role of the "warm" grandmother is socially desirable and is often an antidote to the caring problems of busy parents (Przygoda 2015; Wieczorkowska 2017). However, there are women among the participants who want to redefine the role of the "traditional" grandmother to secure their autonomy in their relationships with their children and grandchildren. One interviewee emphatically stated,

> I tell my daughters that they shouldn't think that I am going to babysit their children all the time. I say it straight away. I think I will only be there to add to the upbringing, to show the world because often

parents on the run don't have time to do this. They just think in this way about upbringing: feed, do the homework, put to bed, sleep, and the next day repeat. I would have time to show something different. But I don't want to be a full-time babysitter. No, no! [narrator no. 4]

Concern for Their Well-Being

Concern for their well-being (physical health, spiritual health, mental health, or pursuit of their passions) is an important thematic thread in the process of adapting to their old age. The participants in the study are already taking care of their physical fitness to age as slowly as possible and to be not only motivated to do things but also to enjoy doing them (narrator no. 3). They also see the source and effect of emancipation (Czerepaniak-Walczak 2015) in pursuing their passions, devoting a preferred amount of time to their hobbies, which is sometimes difficult at earlier stages of life (narrator no. 4, narrator no. 9, narrator no.10). Old age is, therefore, associated by interviewees with "time for" hobbies, observing the world, experiencing life, spending time with themselves and others. Nowadays, Generation X, living in a hurry, does not have time for it and even misses it. One woman said,

> I wish that during this old age of ours, that we had more time for ourselves... Because, now, as my husband works, I work...we would like to have an RV and explore the world, enjoy the world, feel that air, feel that breath. [narrator no. 9]

The participants associate the pursuit of their passions with the hope of well-being in old age and a way of counteracting potential boredom (narrator no. 4). While defining passion, Maria Czerepa-

niak-Walczak (2015:57 [trans. EK and AKB]) shows its qualities and emphasizes that it is

> the driving force behind human activity, the will to act, the way to find and give meaning to life, as well as the courage to transcend oneself. It is also a factor in inspiring others, motivating them to take up challenges, and encouraging them to do things they have not done before.

The pursuit of a passion can serve to restore a sense of agency. The act of "holding on" to what is perceived as beneficial or enjoyable contributes to alleviating emerging fears about the prospect of old age (narrator no. 10). The unpredictability of the future is, in fact, a source of anxiety for many individuals. To alleviate this anxiety, participants engage in a variety of activities, including taking care of their personal or spiritual development, which may include praying and entrusting their lives to God (narrator no. 4). One man revealed that faith is a significant value in his life, as it provides him with a sense of respite, instills hope, and offers a form of escape. He also stated that without faith, his outlook on the future would appear more dismal (narrator no. 6).

Financial Security

The last proactive way in which participants anticipate their old age is through utilitarian activities aimed at financially securing life after retirement. This was mentioned by two men aware of the country's socio-economic situation resulting from the progressive aging of the Polish population and rising inflation. The following is a statement from one of them.

> Well, on the other hand, probably in the economic context, because when you think about it, I'm saving

for the future...I wouldn't like to not be able to afford something. Because I know that the country will not be able to provide everything just like that, that this replacement rate is going to get lower and lower. [narrator no. 3]

The other admitted, "I'm financially secure, so, hopefully, this will be a time for me to enjoy life" (narrator no. 8). None of the women reflecting on their old age raised the issue of financial security. It seems, therefore, that social roles, traditionally associated with the representatives of a specific sex, are still present in the consciousness of Poles and Polish women (Giddens 2012:320-322).

Securing finances for the future was seen by the second man quoted as the realization of the conviction that the individual is the master of their destiny, and it is up to them to anticipate potential risks. Undertaking activities that might be a form of mitigating the unpredictability of fate is a sign of a proactive attitude toward life, of which old age is, after all, a part.

> Because I say, you know, old age can surprise you. It's just that you just have to say certain things, these impulses that are out there somewhere, hunting us, you just have to say, I'm in charge, and not someone else. [narrator no. 8]

The Reactive Strategies of Anticipating Their Old Age by the Representatives of Generation X

This section presents the interviewees' reactive strategies for adapting to their old age, based on the assumption that there is little a person can do to influence their future or the course it may take. In other words, reactive strategies entail responding to changes initiated by external factors. Two

sub-themes were identified based on this theme: 1) passive acceptance of the changes taking place and 2) anxiety and escape response to symptoms of aging.

Passive Acceptance of Change

The stress theory of aging posits that a decline in general fitness, loss of previous mobility, or level of bodily functioning (Neugarten, Havighurst, and Tobin 1968) constitute significant stressors that are a part of the everyday life of an aging person. Those who fail to develop constructive responses to change typically accept the consequences of progressive aging processes passively (Kucharewicz 2015:228-229). This way of functioning was indicated by the participants of the study, who mentioned a lack of motivation to act or a sense of boredom with activities that had previously brought them enjoyment. This is what one participant admitted, "I think that I have already started to get older...I think that morally or mentally I'm already wondering if this world view of mine is still expanding" (narrator no. 3). Seeing changes in himself seems to be a difficult truth for the narrator to come to terms with, as he associates his old age with a lack of motivation, joy, and surprise. He is depressed by this narrowing of life's dynamic. The passive acceptance of the consequences of aging by the next interviewee (narrator no. 10) took the form of an awareness of the typical characteristics of old age (health problems, illnesses, and physical infirmities) and the difficulty of predicting the course of events in this particular area. As a result, although he was aware of the situation, the man did not try to introduce behaviors that could help. He let it run its course. Perhaps this is because the process of "narrowing the diamond" is not yet acute enough to force activity.

Anxiety and Escape Response to Symptoms of Aging

The social perception of old age is still characterized by the notion of painful loss, encompassing the deterioration of physical and mental health, fitness, vitality, and physical attractiveness. Furthermore, it is linked to emotional distress and existential anguish (Adamczyk 2019:142-143). A review of the literature reveals that attitudes and stereotypes toward older age groups are similar across cultures, with a notable shift toward more negative attitudes toward older persons (Weiss and Zhang 2020:411). The prevalence of these associations leads to fear among people who are at the threshold of old age and who perceive themselves as undergoing aging processes (Straś-Romanowska 2000:270). A man from Generation X displays an anxious attitude when he states, "I often think about my old age, and what bothers me is that in a while I will also be infirm, and what should I do? Who will assume responsibility for my care?" (narrator no. 6). The anxiety reactions expressed by this and other interviewees manifested as concerns about potential dependence on others due to anticipated loss of health or loved ones (narrator no. 4). The narrators described this anxiety as a subconscious phenomenon, an instinctual and involuntary response (narrator no. 10). Therefore, the aforementioned concerns pertain to the biological aspect of the changes that are intrinsic to the aging process. That suggests that this aspect is of greater importance than the psychological or social aspects.

Additionally, the narrators employed a strategy of retreat. One of the narrators articulated this sentiment: "I try to push away my fears, to hide them a little bit deeper somewhere" (narrator no. 4), whi-

le another one said, "The circumstances diverge when children are present and when an individual is unaccompanied. It is evident that the scenarios in question can vary considerably. At this point, I am attempting to disassociate myself from these scenarios" (narrator no. 6). Barbara Adam (2014) posits that one of the reasons why individuals may be reluctant to contemplate their aging is a fatalistic outlook, characterized by the perception that since there is no possibility of action, there is no merit in considering the future. The only recourse is to await the unfolding of events and to attempt to make the best of what occurs.

One form of escapist response to the anticipation of old age is an acceptance of its unpredictability. As one of the men interviewed said,

> for me, at the moment, my old age may be black, it may be pink, it may be whatever because I don't know what it will be like. For me, it is one question mark. I don't know if I will live to see it. Maybe it will be better, maybe it will be worse. It's hard for me to say, to be so precise. [narrator no. 5]

The narrator explains the unpredictability and potentiality of the future by the moment of life he is currently in, as indicated by the words "for me, at this moment." This confirms that the participants belong to the "imperceptibly narrowing diamond" generation who perceive the age range of 40-50 as premature for contemplating their advanced age. Even when such introspection arises, they defer it, assuming that there will still be time for it. To illustrate this further, we cite another statement:

> I think about my old age. I would like to stay healthy, and if I do, I think I will not be bored in my old age...

You know, that's how I think, at least now, having that perspective. Well, I hope it is not so close to that kind of old age yet. [narrator no. 4]

The hope that old age will be kind and active is mixed with a sense of diminishing worldview, aspirations, energy, et cetera.

Discussion and Conclusions

The interviews with Generation X representatives presented above indicate that the issue of their old age is a topic of reflection for them. They are conscious of the intricacies of the aging process and the plethora of difficulties encountered by older persons. During the course of the interviews, the participants were not prompted to consider which stage of old age they were anticipating, whether that be the so-called third or fourth age. In the narrators' statements, old age is presented as a stage of life that comes naturally but is not anticipated due to the inherent narrowing of possibilities, the imperceptible "narrowing of the arms of the diamond." However, each of the planes of change accompanying old age, namely, biological, psychological, and social, was evident in the reminiscences of the interviewees. Additionally, each of the changes associated with aging—biological, psychological, and social—was evident in the statements of those interviewed.

The reactive strategies for adapting to their old age, as evidenced by passivity toward processes occurring or by anxiety reactions, illustrate a narrowing down of old age to the aspect of biological old age. Interviewees expressed concerns about potential physical infirmity as a consequence of wear and tear of the body and the inevitability of the aging process. Only one of the men displaying inactivity

caused by discouragement and a decrease in self-motivation makes reference to the psychological aspect of age-related changes. The uncertainty of the future is one of the aforementioned defining characteristics of Generation X, originating in the conditions of their socialization process (Wątroba 2022:90-92). This is also evident in the statements of several narrators. A larger proportion of the interviewees, however, adopt a different, proactive perspective on their old age.

Proactive strategies for adapting to one's old age, which take the form of paying attention to the "here and now," building and maintaining relationships with loved ones, caring for one's well-being, and financial security, encompass all of the aforementioned aspects of adapting to old age (biological, psychological, and social). The following strategies may be employed to address the need for security at the individual and community levels. These findings are consistent with US analyses of individuals aged 35-64 years, which suggest that Generation X is better prepared for retirement than Millennials in terms of safer portfolio allocations. Income, risk tolerance, and college education are positively associated with retirement preparedness (Qi, Chatterjee, and Liu 2022). The exponential relationship between educational attainment and health status was confirmed by the nationwide PolSenior 2 study (Błędowski et al. 2021), which demonstrates that education is a significant variable influencing the quality of functioning in older age. Individuals with higher education levels tend to exhibit superior health outcomes compared to those with lower levels of education. The Generation X representatives interviewed have all attained higher education, which is likely to influence their attitudes toward old age and their adaptation to it. The participants in the study expressed the

hope that by engaging in conscious preparation for old age, they would be able to avoid the negative consequences that are habitually or stereotypically associated with older people. "Older age groups are perceived as slow, senile, and unattractive" (Weiss and Zhang 2020:410). These findings corroborate those of Mariola Świderska (2014:150 [trans. EK and AKB]) from almost a decade ago, who discovered (through a survey) that when contemplating their future old age, individuals aged 40 years old aspire to

> achieve inner peace and harmony; spend time taking care of themselves and their passions; find time for their loved ones and for themselves (retirement); develop spiritually, which would result in achieving wisdom; continually deepen their understanding of themselves; and build the inner strength needed to act, this constant desire to act. Their greatest hope is that there will still be something interesting to do or experience.

The consideration of one's advanced age, which motivates concern for financial responsibility, was a phenomenon observed exclusively among men (2 individuals), with no evidence of such contemplation among women. It was deemed appropriate for the female narrators to consider the social implications of old age in relation to the role of the grandmother, which has traditionally been associated with older women (it is noteworthy that none of the male participants referenced the role of the grandfather). One of the participants in the study proposed a redefinition of the role of the grandmother, suggesting that it should be viewed as fit, active, and fulfilling her passions rather than solely as a role that involves devoting time to her children and grandchildren (see: Świderska 2014:158).

It can thus be concluded that the surveyed representatives of Generation X, being aware of their current stage of life and the one that lies ahead, observe the lives of older persons and the situations that fill their everyday lives. They are aware of the inevitable narrowing of life opportunities as the years pass. This recognition encourages reflection on the basis of individual decisions and systemic solutions. Such reflection and active adaptation strategies are indicative of maturity and higher education. They contribute to reflection on cultural and civilizational changes (Sztompka 1994) and conscious relationship building, including engagement in a career (Sandeen 2008) and retirement. The anticipation of potential scenarios pertaining to their future old age may potentially yield solutions that would benefit a considerable number of individuals.

What Might the Benefits Be of Thinking about Their Old Age by the Representatives of the "Imperceptibly Narrowing Diamond" Generation, and Who Might Benefit from Them?

In light of the inevitable and initially imperceptible narrowing of the "arms of the diamond" (Towles 2022), we put forth the thesis that it is beneficial for individuals to (1) be aware of the process, (2) anticipate their future, and (3) prepare for it in a conscious manner. The aforementioned research indicates that discussing old age as a social phenomenon, including the aging of loved ones, provides the impetus for individuals to reflect on their aging process. The capacity to anticipate future developments and requirements is crucial for both individual and societal well-being, as it offers advantages to both the individual and the wider society.

Individual Benefits of Anticipating Old Age

The anticipation of their old age by people of working age can become a moment of change in their lives, as well as an inspiration to move toward more responsible thinking about their future (Shirani et al. 2017). As life expectancy continues to increase, there is a growing emphasis on maintaining a high quality of life for as long as possible. This encompasses not only the preservation of physical fitness but also the ability to lead an active lifestyle. One potential solution is the human augmentation sector, which involves technologies designed to enhance human capabilities. The principal objective of these technologies is to boost human performance, health, and quality of life. Notable examples of human augmentation technology include devices such as cochlear implants and robotic limbs (Raisamo et al. 2019). Technological advancement enables individuals to achieve more and more, including enhancing or repairing their senses (via a brain-computer interface), motor functions, activities, or cognitive processes (Zheng et al. 2017; Raisamo et al. 2019). This domain is witnessing rapid and far-reaching developments with both anticipated and unforeseen consequences.

Less invasive and within the reach of most individuals is conscious attention to the quality of their life and health, undertaking regular physical activity, undergoing medical check-ups, as well as practicing mindfulness or positive thinking, which is being popularized today. The WHO (1948) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being of the individual. In addition to the accurate presentation of health in the context of the three related components (physical, mental, and social aspect),

it is salient to recognize the importance of the individual's assessment of their health (well-being aspect). Polish national surveys indicate that 35- to 54-year-olds rate their physical health best compared to other age groups, that is, 55% of them consider it to be very good to good (*Narodowy Test Zdrowia Polaków* [National Test for Poles' Health] 2023:48). The respondents' self-declarations may be indicative of their awareness of health issues and their responsible actions in this regard. It is also possible that they benefit from solutions that were not available to earlier generations (such as care for a healthy diet, easier access to reliable information, or specialized medical care), which positions them in a more favorable position at the outset of the journey toward a healthy old age. Concurrently, the contemporary focus on health can serve as a means of confronting the possibility of an eventual period of dependency or illness in later life. While such an eventuality cannot be eliminated, the probability of its occurrence can be reduced.

Kathleen Riach (2023) posits that contemplating one's advanced age in the context of one's professional pursuits can facilitate introspective reflection on one's identity in the present moment and potential future self. As previously stated, Generation X is adept at managing its professional activities, demonstrating a high level of commitment and engagement (Opalińska 2018:144-145). Concurrently, they prioritize the quality of their family life and the nurturing of their relationships with their aging parents (Szafraniec 2022:153-154). Caring for interpersonal relationships, including family relationships, which are based on mutual understanding, improves the quality of these relationships and increases the likelihood of implementing solutions that ensure that people from

Generation X, who often take on the role of carers, are not deprived of the opportunity to freely manage their time, whether this is related to professional activity or their interests (hobbies, passions), while at the same time fulfilling the expectations placed on them by the representatives of older generations. It is evident that the intricacy of the challenges associated with providing care services and support to older persons to ensure a satisfactory quality of life has a profound impact on the functioning of families (Fihel and Okólski 2018). One potential solution is the establishment of intergenerational relationships founded upon mutual understanding and respect over an extended period. Moreover, this approach can convey a clear message from Generation X to younger generations that a dependent family member should be provided with care. This exemplification of conduct may represent a strategy employed by representatives of Generation X to "secure" their future old age within the familial space of their adult children.

Social Benefits of Anticipating Old Age

The phenomenon of population aging is pervasive and far-reaching, with a multitude of long-term consequences (Błędowski et al. 2021). To address these challenges, it is essential to implement strategies that are proactive and forward-thinking. Our proposed solution is to anticipate the needs of an aging population. One potential consequence of such an approach could be the creation of innovative social solutions for the development of both formal (institutional) and informal (home) care for older persons, or the provision of funding for future care (Jones 2011; Kramkowska 2023). Wiesław Wątroba (2017b:92-93 [trans. EK and AKB]) presents a compelling argument.

The growing cost of living for an increasing number of advanced age groups, with a simultaneous decrease in the number of young, professionally active individuals, who could cover these costs with the products of their work, lead not so much to a growing generational debt as to an economic and, as a result, a social catastrophe with a very strong threat of generational antagonism...Radical institutional changes are necessary. New social institutions are needed that would define the generational obligations of the younger toward the older...Institutional solutions are needed that would promote new family models and a new division of social roles within them.

The current representatives of Generation X, who are fully active in their professional lives, could become agents of positive social change.

Furthermore, individuals must contemplate the future in the context of their advanced age at the earliest possible stage, specifically during their formative years in an educational setting. For example, educators may employ foresight methods[4] to prepare young people to anticipate old age (their own and other people's) through the application of design and systems thinking to understand the changes taking place and to develop action strategies. Heather P. Lacey, Dylan L. Smith, and Peter A. Ubel (2006), and Shimshon M. Neikrug (2003) posit that young people's lack of awareness that they will eventually become old reinforces ageism, intergenerational conflicts, and misunderstandings. If one does not believe that one will ever become old, it is more challenging

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[4] Foresight helps to navigate an uncertain future, analyze actions taken in the present, and identify patterns of change that could have a significant, lasting impact on the future (Foresight Report 2023).

to interact with older individuals in a manner that acknowledges their humanity and complexity. Educators can facilitate the process of envisioning and constructing a future that aligns with the aspirations of young people. The implementation of social innovation approaches across various educational disciplines may have a more profound impact on resilience and sustainability (Foresight Report 2023).

Old age education also has a health aspect. The increasing lifespan of human beings is a fact. It is, therefore, necessary to foster health-conscious attitudes and habits among the youngest generations and create awareness of personal responsibility for the quality of life and health (physical and mental) so that future generations of older persons are fit and self-sufficient for as long as possible (Syrek 2022). As early as 1969, Talcott Parsons argued that public health is a resource that determines the prosperity and development of societies. Anticipating one's old age can be a way of making this a reality. It is likely that healthy,

fit citizens will show an interest in prolonging their professional activity, resulting in the sustainability of the state's pension system, the indicated labor saturation (Szukalski 2023), and, in the broader/longer perspective, an increase in social welfare.

Directions for Further Research

The research was conducted exclusively with individuals who had obtained a higher education qualification. It would be beneficial to conduct further research with a more diverse group of participants, which could contribute to the development of additional strategies for anticipating one's old age. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to conduct research in other regions of Poland and engage in international comparative study in countries with comparable socio-political conditions. That would provide insights into the extent to which the adaptation strategies of Generation X members toward their old age, as outlined in the text, are objectively defined.

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Citation

Game-Based Technique for Studying Identity Change in Disturbed Communities

Elisabeth Kovtiak iD
Charles University, Czech Republic

Abstract: Studying social identity change in non-standard contexts is always challenging. This article presents a new research technique that allows researchers to obtain rich and ethical data even in adverse and fragile conditions. It is based on the popular associative card game and combines projective and game-based data generation methods. The game component adds a playful atmosphere to the research environment and encourages interaction, while the projective aspect allows participants to express identity elements more easily. The features of the new technique presented in this paper are demonstrated through a case study of the post-2020 Belarusian diaspora. In addition to data generation, I describe a coding process that blends deductive and inductive approaches and show how textual and visual data can be analyzed together. Finally, the advantages and disadvantages of this innovative technique are assessed, including creative expression, a safe space for dialogue, and the ability to capture nuanced perspectives.

Elisabeth Kovtiak is a qualitative researcher and a sociologist. She is a PhD candidate at Charles University, Prague. Her doctoral dissertation focuses on the transformation of collective identity in Belarus. She obtained her M.A. from the University of Lancaster, focusing on post-communist nostalgia in her master's thesis. Her academic interests include collective memory and its manifestations in art and public space, the role of art in political activism, and identity in transitional post-socialist societies.

email address: elisabeth.kovtiak@fsv.cuni.cz

Studying social identity transformation requires careful and delicate methodology, even in the most favorable conditions. Identity research in a disturbed authoritarian society such as the Belarusian one, which has undergone horrific and traumatic collisions in recent years, poses a real methodological challenge. Conducting qualitative field research is complicated, as the political environment hinders scholarly inquiry. Apart from that, people are often reluctant to partake in research because, fearing the consequences, they do not trust strangers who want to explore their beliefs and attitudes. They may be apprehensive about talking to researchers, unwilling to disclose their concerns and grievances openly, and, in some cases, they may be accompanied by a minder, concerned they are being watched, or doubting the researcher's lack of affiliation with the regime (Morgenbesser and Weiss 2018); Janenova 2019

Conventional field methods may, thus, not be suitable for studying identity in a divided and traumatized society, urging researchers to develop new methods sensitive to these challenges. It is salient to understand power dynamics and address issues like access to participants, fear of reprisal, and self-censorship (Koch 2013). Those willing to conduct research in such a "closed context" (Koch 2013) have to find gatekeepers and consider building a formal or informal team to help navigate the authoritarian landscape and close the gap between a researcher and potential respondents (Glasius et al. 2018; Morgenbesser and Weiss 2018; Janenova 2019). Authoritarian and conflictual settings also require researchers to be particularly mindful of the ethical implications of conducting their studies. They need to ensure that their methods do not put participants at risk and that they respect their privacy and confidentiality. Thus, being aware of power dynamics,

protecting sources' confidentiality, building relationships with local collaborators, and being transparent about the research methods and findings are essential to successfully conducting the field stage in an authoritarian context (Glasius et al. 2018).

Besides the political and ethical concerns, researchers should also be prepared to adapt their methodologies and data collection techniques to fit the unique circumstances and challenges presented by the actual socio-political situation. In Belarus, for example, the level of repression at the moment is so intense that conducting other than state-sponsored research there puts both researchers and participants at great risk. The only feasible possibility for an independent study of actual Belarusian identity is to focus on the nationals living outside of the country. Due to the high sensitivity of the topic and the fact that even after leaving the country, many refugees do not feel safe and fear that they might be under surveillance by both external and internal security services (Rudnik 2021), conducting research in the refugee diasporas requires similar measures that are needed for the domestic context. The fundamental difference is that the level of fear is lower abroad, and technically, the chance of real consequences is minimal. However, there are additional aspects that make conventional methodology not a fully appropriate tool in such complicated conditions. Employing standard in-depth interviews and focus groups entails a risk of the research participants hesitating to answer some questions, as they may find them disturbing and re-traumatizing.

Another threat is that research participants will struggle to find an authentic yet acceptable answer because the topic discussed may seem too complex for them to articulate their position consistently. For example, asking about the national future can be ir-

ritating for participants because they may not know the answer, even though they have thought hard about it for a long time. Vain guessing would not be entertaining for them, and instead of a saturated answer, a researcher might be left with the remark that it is not worth discussing as no one knows the answer. Or, instead of sharing their thoughts, uneasy participants may reproduce something they read in the media, thoughtlessly repeating someone else's message. Therefore, to ensure the research is both safe and fruitful, we need to employ techniques that enable participants to freely express the whole scale of their opinions and sentiments without being afraid of harmful consequences, for example, revealing their identity or re-traumatizing.

Combining Projective and Gaming Approaches in the Creation of a New Technique

This paper introduces a novel technique of qualitative data generation that has been designed to cope with the challenges of studying identity transformation among the Belarusian diasporas. It combines projective and gaming dimensions. Both are used to capture various manifestations of identity phenomena and to add a playful atmosphere to the research setting, encouraging more open answers. The principle of projective techniques is to use verbal or visual stimuli to reveal internal content, such as subjective theories, emotions, and attitudes, whose expression is constrained by social norms or psychological barriers.

Researchers using projective techniques assume that participants will transfer their unfiltered perceptions, theories, feelings, and desires onto neutral or ambiguous objects to avoid potentially unacceptable outcomes being attributed to them (Branthwaite

2002; Porr et al. 2011). In conventional qualitative research, for example, focus groups, dealing with loaded and controversial topics sometimes leads to conflicts between the participants who have different viewpoints, which ends up in emotional distress for the participants and, at times, results in silencing experiences and opinions that are not shared by the group's dominant voices (Smithson 2000). The game dimension, on the other hand, stimulates active engagement in interactions and reduces interviewer bias, as participants comment on the game process itself rather than focusing on identity differences or conflicts between them (Rowley et al. 2012).

Since people, as individuals, are reflexive beings who perceive themselves, have conceptions of themselves, communicate with themselves, and act toward themselves (Blumer 1986), any research into social identity has to acknowledge its processual and interactive character and devise its methodology to best capture it. Conventional techniques, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, are suitable for situations of liberal, free speech allowed in societies where people can express their attitudes, opinions, or sentiments in a similar manner both within and outside research situations. They can use the same words when talking with the researcher and with their colleagues or friends, and they listen to these words when they watch the news or read magazines. In societies where freedom of expression is perceived as institutionally restricted, people use different linguistic registers when speaking within and outside trusted circles and resort to using euphemisms, jokes, and allegories when talking about sensitive topics (Astapova 2017; Rohava 2018).

Therefore, projective and game techniques have a greater potential to capture this communicative and identity parallelism because they allow the use

of hyperbole, irony, humor, allusion, and imaginary associations to express identity-relevant content that cannot be communicated overtly. Through promoting creative and playful expression, individuals can delve into the depths of their emotions and thoughts, giving voice to the incomprehensible aspects of traumatic events. This allows the research to benefit from using a more sensitive methodological approach, especially on topics that are difficult to verbalize, such as community and identity change issues (Askins and Pain 2011; Coemans and Hannes 2017; Dunn and Mellor 2017; CohenMiller 2018).

Photo-Elicitation and Games as Research Techniques

The new association game relies on a combination of two particular methods of qualitative research—photo-elicitation and games. Photo-elicitation has been extensively used in the study of topics related to memory and identity as visual stimuli "evoke deeper elements of human consciousness that do words" (Harper 2002:13). Images used as props in interviews help think about complex or sensitive topics that cannot be asked directly, either because the researcher does not know what is relevant to the participant or because an explicit question might cause embarrassment, affecting the quality of the interview. It can also be difficult for a participant to reflect on their identity, as this concept can seem abstract and vague to them. It is easier to react to and elaborate on concrete identity-relevant visual representations. Interacting with pictures encourages people to take a stance and perform their identity rather than just speak about it, especially if the discussion takes place in a group (Smith, Thomas, and McGarty 2014).

Reflecting on artistic images as opposed to conventional realistic photographs can reveal new con-

textual and relational meanings that the author of the image or the researcher who selected it may not have initially contemplated (Vila 2013). Last, but not least, as Lee Parker (2009) suggests, photo-elicitation facilitates communication between strangers, which is critical for participant-researcher relationships and group communication. The interpretative openness of artistically modulated images serves as a common ground for collective interaction. When discussing sensitive or even distressing topics, finding common ground is critical. Hence, using visual artifacts during the group interviews aids in the generation of data to shed light on a subject that is hidden from the researcher but obvious to the participants.

Photo-elicitation usually involves participants identifying the content of the images presented, commenting on them, recalling their memories, and, ideally, telling the stories evoked by the images. When the topic is sensitive and complex, participants tend to be cautious, mostly commenting on the visual surface and not engaging in the discussion. Game components were included to address this issue and to make the discussion both more interactive and less centered on the events depicted. The aim was to add an element of entertainment but also to allow for more comprehensive data collection on participants' perceptions and experiences of the art.

In implementing the game elements into photo-elicitation, I was inspired by several studies that employed card-based games to generate data (Barker 1979; Rowley et al. 2012; Hájek et al. 2019; Martin and Strengers 2022). Gamification principles can, generally, significantly increase the richness of spontaneous data and participants' engagement (Bailey, Pritchard, and Kernohan 2015). David

Barker (1979) used traditional African board games to explore local farmers' attitudes and cultural contexts. Such an approach was implemented to ensure the research techniques were appropriate to the community and appealing and entertaining enough to keep the informants' attention throughout the research process.

The main emphasis of David Barker's (1979) work was on the potential benefits of using the activities that are usual for participants' pastimes to help them open up. Thus, by engaging in familiar activities, participants from any community are more likely to feel comfortable and willing to share their experiences and perspectives. This approach fosters a sense of belonging but also creates a conducive environment for building trust with the moderator and within the group. Cards can be used to support semi-structured interviews when the content on the cards is textual and helps focus on a concerned topic (Rowley et al. 2012). Moreover, participants sorted and ordered cards to create groups or sequences, which were subsequently discussed. Custom-designed card games can also be employed in research on neoliberal subjectivities (Hájek et al. 2019) or in raising awareness of renewable energy availability (Martin and Strengers 2022). During the group interview, participants were asked to match cards displaying thematically driven notions with cards bearing various propositions. The aim was to stimulate discussions not only about the correct pairing of notions and propositions but also to encourage participants to search for, to win the game, less obvious or conventional yet plausible arguments.

Inspired by Barker's (1979) board game technique, which creates a conducive environment for building trust between participants and the researcher,

and the gamification approach to exploring participant subjectivity (Hájek et al. 2019), I adapted a popular pictorial card game. The adaptation involved customizing the game cards, introducing specific rules, and creating a unique scoring system to suit the research aims. The game was thus used to generate verbal data from members of the Belarusian diasporas in Poland and Georgia. It allowed for open discussions and provided data on participants' views on the protests, the Lukashenko regime, solidarity, and heroism, as well as perceptions of the country's past and future and other relevant issues in the Belarusian context.

The Creation of a New Game

Dixit® is a popular board game designed by Jean-Louis Roubira and published by Libellud. The game's core concept revolves around shared knowledge and imagination. The players use fantasy-illustrated cards to convey abstract concepts or ideas through verbal clues without explicitly revealing their cards (see: https://boardgamegeek.com/). The game has several accessories, such as a board used to track players' progress or a set of voting tokens for the players to express their guesses. In each round, one player becomes the storyteller or "active player." The active player selects one of their cards from their hand and gives a clue or description related to the image on the card. The clue can be a word, phrase, sound, or even a gesture. The other players then choose one card from their hand that most closely matches the clue given by the storyteller and place it face-down on the table. All the cards are shuffled and revealed anonymously so the players can vote on which card they believe belongs to the storyteller based on the given clue. They accomplish this by selecting their voting token in secret and laying it face-down on the table.

The scoring system is designed in such a way that motivates the storytellers to choose cards and clues that are relatable to many so they will be chosen, but not too directly, so not every player will vote for their card. Thus, this scoring system encourages the storyteller to be creative and thoughtful when providing clues. It also pushes the guessers to think critically and strategically when making their selections. This balance keeps the game engaging and competitive.

The original Dixit game served as a starting point for this study. However, it was significantly modified to support the research aims and make the process easier to minimize distractions for the research participants. Specifically, a set of 54 images and symbols related to Belarusian society, politics, and culture was created. These cards featured artwork by Belarusian artists and nowadays reportage and archive photographs relevant to the Belarusian context. The cards were designed according to "pro-protest," "pro-regime," and "neutral" themes to reflect the scale of opinions. This distribution was applied when selecting the images that should be included in the deck. This logic was internal to the researcher, and there were no markers that would tell the research participants to which category the researcher attributes a card. In the "pro-protest" category were artistic images and reportage photos from the independent media, depicting the protests or symbols of the resistance, such as a white-red-white flag. The "pro-regime" category consisted of photographs taken from official resources depicting police, rallies in support of the regime, and red-green flags. The neutral images were mostly archival photographs of everyday life from the 2000s, 1990s, and the Soviet era, with no obvious connection to protest or regime iconography. All the cards were transformed into paint-looking images using a Prism software filter to make the cards look similar in terms of stylistics and color palette. Additionally, this helped make the images less concrete and more symbolic, making the players pay less attention to the details.

Association games offer a high degree of freedom, so a set of contextual keywords (clues) was provided to guide participants' narratives and maintain focus during the game, covering Belarus' political situation, human rights, democracy, and other relevant topics. The initial set included the following clues: Belarus of the past, Belarus of today, and Belarus of the future; pride of the country and shame of the country; the split of the society and solidarity of the society; a civil feat; patriots of their country. These keywords were selected to encompass various aspects of the political situation in Belarus, including human rights, democracy, and active and obedient citizen positions. However, participants were also encouraged to suggest their keywords. The original voting system of Dixit was also altered—each participant had a unique token (small toys, coins, and stones were used as the tokens) and expressed their guess by placing their token on a selected card. To eliminate the possibility of strategic calculations, everyone voted simultaneously after a signal given by the moderator. Each time a participant's card was chosen, they received a point, and the score was kept by the moderator on a piece of paper. This was done to simplify the process and encourage discussion based on the images presented rather than keep the participant's focus on the scores and competition. In the original game, the explanations of the card choice are not an obligatory part of the game process. Thus, the moderator explicitly asked the participants to elaborate on their choice of the card.

A Combined Analysis of the Generated Visual and Textual Data

The game sessions were recorded, and each card layout was photographed. The recordings were transcribed with the names of the images to which the players were referring, as it was rare for the participants to mention the specific name of a card during the discussions. Atlas.ti software was used for coding, allowing analysis of both textual and visual data. The coded sections of text were also tagged with an indication of the image to which the text was related. Following Jennifer Fereday and Eimear Muir-Cochrane (2006), I coded using a hybrid approach combining deductive and inductive coding. Some codes were created before and during the game, as keywords used in the game also became codes. Participants' choices in the game served as valuable keywords for code generation during the coding process. This approach facilitated a comprehensive analysis of both textual and visual data, which improved the overall understanding of participants' interpretations of the associations evoked by the cards.

The coding process began with deductive coding. To describe how certain phenomena are perceived, I created a codebook that described political and personal positions and assisted in dividing the analyzed material into general modes of "passive/obedient" and "active/obedient," as well as "passive/disobedient" and "active/non-obedient" positions. I also considered and coded the speaker's position when discussing actions or phenomena: "happens to me or us," "I or we do," "people like me do," "others do," and whether these actions are supported or condemned. A nuanced analysis of the speaker's stance and attitudes toward different behaviors is indispensable because players' expressions in association card games are highly contextual, and during the game, they often resort to sarcasm and irony, which makes it misleading to take what was said literally. Thus, it is important to capture these nuances, especially in deductive coding, to ensure that the quotes and their understanding remain intact, preventing any potential distortion or misinterpretation in future analysis.

Apart from that, a set of codes emerged inductively during the coding process to mark important points. For instance, "relationship with the police," "street art," "admiration for protesters," "attitudes to solidarization," "collective action," "individual action," and "clash of epochs." The codes were applied both to the images and the text but in a different manner as only the text contained participants' interpretations. A noteworthy advantage of combining visual and textual data is the ability to analyze the collected data from various perspectives. It is possible to examine which images and statements are associated with the codes and the game's keywords and observe discrepancies between what is depicted and what is said about these images. On the other hand, it allows us to explore what associations and opinions images evoke and how diverse the associations can be. This method also facilitates a deeper understanding of the underlying meanings and interpretations that people may have of the material being discussed.

Analyzing the Ideas about the Past, Present, and the Future of Belarus

In this section, I will show what data are generated by the game and how these can be fruitfully analyzed. I first focus on the temporal dimension of identity that is evident in the data, as this is crucial for understanding identity change. I then turn to

a more complex analysis of the data generated by the interactions between participants.

When prompted with the keyword "Belarus's future," the participants typically selected cards depicting peaceful protests to talk about the positive outcomes of the protest for the future, a picture of a stork behind prison bars as a pessimistic variant of events, and a card with an angel girl as a description of the country's peaceful future. However, the link between the participant's interpretation and the card was not as straightforward as it could seem from such a simple classification. For example, by selecting cards depicting protests, players did not necessarily imply that Belarus will face a new wave of large-scale protests in the future: "Maybe luck will turn that way. Not that the future is in the rallies but rather in these people" (P12). Thus, protests and rallies can be part of the transition to a "brighter future" and more freedom in the country, but the protests can also be interpreted as a sign of the emergence of a new identity—courageous citizens. To put it differently, the picture of the protest symbolizes that the future depends on people with a proactive stance: "Women made this protest, and these women are the future of Belarus" (P6).

The majority of cards the participants linked to the clue "Belarus of the present" depicted the actions of police and army, the work of the housing and utilities sector in destroying protest murals, and propaganda symbols on empty city streets. Based on the selected images, it can be suggested that participants may perceive their present as a time of government repression, censorship, and a visible military and police presence, which could be indicative of a challenging and constrained social and political environment, like in the following quote: "A bunch of cops are clearly trying to squeeze people out of

the square. Of course, this picture is from November 2020, but if we take it allegorically, it is a continuation of the attack on people and civil society" (P4). The participant's expression starts with an identification of the factual content of the picture and transcends it into her political opinion about the regime. The combination of the picture and the interpretation generated in the game allows the authenticity of the participants' opinions to be ascertained. The mere opinion that the regime or the police are attacking civil society may be a partisan cliché. On the other hand, an interpretation of the card limited to a simple description does not imply a personal opinion. Only the combination of a factual description of the specific event evoked by the image and the subsequent general opinion demonstrates the authenticity of the political position expressed.

The cards chosen to represent the "Belarus of the past" were mostly associated with the Soviet era. However, they also contained references to the 1990s as a different era from what the country is plunged into now. The year 2020 is also often seen as something irretrievably gone. Here, the advantage of the association card game for identity research is that participants perceive the cards dually as direct references to the past (the past being the signified) but also as specific representations of the past (the past being the signifier). They have interpretive freedom in choosing one or the other semiotic perspective. The first perspective is taken in the following statement, in which the participant describes his reasoning about what period is depicted on the card based on the helmets of members of special armed forces intervening in public spaces: "Well, this isn't 2020. Look at the helmets, that was a long time ago. They weren't hitting hard back then when the OMON still had white helmets... not bloodied [helmets]" (P13).

The second mode of interpretation can be observed in the statements of another participant who interpreted the images symbolically, where what is depicted is considered by the participant as a symbol of the past: "Again, old architecture and slogans—symbols of violence, on which the Belarus of the past relies" and "Inflating the cult of the Great Patriotic War—it smells... appealing to outdated values from the past" (P4). One and the same card can at one time be interpreted in a primarily factual way. At another time, its status as a document of the past can be deconstructed. It depends on the game situation. The analysis then requires a certain semiotic skill on the part of the analyst.

Unlike in an elicitation interview, which tends to produce a consistent narrative, in the card game, interpretive consistency is not required. The association game format allows the participants to express their ideas even if some thoughts may be contradictory. This does not embarrass the informant, as the game setting removes the responsibility of forming a linear narrative from the informant. Similarly, in the authoritarian context, irony and even sarcasm are quite often ways to express opinion indirectly, keeping interpretative openness for security reasons. In discussing the keyword "Belarusian beauty," one of the participants chose a card depicting a group of soldiers. When explaining her choice, she used the word *krasaucy* [handsome men]. This word was used by Lukashenko (as broadcasted on Current Time) when praising the riot police who protected him in August 2020. Since then, this word has become an ironic nickname for the riot police. If the participant had not demonstrated that she used this card as ironic and used a meme quote to justify her choice, it could have been interpreted that she did indeed think the Belarusian riot police are an embodiment of

Belarusian beauty. A researcher has to be attentive to the informants' intonations and be well aware of the context. If a researcher is unsure about the implied meaning, it is recommended to clarify the situation by asking additional questions. This can be attributed to the limitations of the method, but such sarcastic statements can also occur during interviews, so working with qualitative data in general involves sensitivity to tone and context.

Interactions within the Game and Their Importance for Analyzing Identity Change

When researching a vulnerable population or doing research in an authoritative setting, standard in-depth interviews and focus groups run the risk of the participants being reluctant to answer certain questions because of their disturbing or re-traumatizing effects. The association game, similar to what Barker (1979) observed in his experience with a traditional board game, allows for the creation of a conducive environment for building trust. Trust is not between specific individuals in the real world but between players in the game world. The premise of the game is the mutual recognition of the participants as players and the rules of the game as a framework for mutual trust.

In a sense, the game creates a safe environment for this to happen. In other words, the game environment puts participants who do not know each other on an equal footing so that they can act within their player roles, helping them overcome the fear of expressing inappropriate opinions or sharing challenging experiences. This is also the reason why participants often explained their choices one at a time, without too much interference with others' answers. Also, because their relationships

were horizontal, there was little pressure from authority, and the participants behaved fairly equally. Occasionally, however, some interactions made it possible to observe how attitudes toward certain issues are formed and identities are performed in confrontations. For example, dialogues between the participants were valuable in examining their understanding of the differences between Belarusian and Byelorussian identities and how the aesthetics of Belarus differ from the aesthetics of Byelorussia. Byelorussia (Belorussiya) is an outdated name for Belarus, which is still used in Russia, or even BSSR (Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic), as the country was officially called when it was part of the USSR.

> **P1:** [Interpreting the image of Women in White protest] I would say that this is not the beauty of Belarus but of Byelorussia.
> **P2:** Yes! Yes.
> **P3:** BSSR.
> **P1:** No, not the BSSR. There was no such openness [in demonstrating the violence] in the BSSR.

By using the old names, Byelorussia and BSSR, the research participants indirectly but clearly distance themselves from those they see as members of the out-group. In these interpretive discussions, one can observe how different epochs of Belarusian history are understood, how the boundaries between historical periods are defined, and, more importantly, how they translate into boundaries between social identities and social groups. Thus, it is not primarily about the past but about the constitution of an out-group comprising those Belarusians who cling to the values of the past. It provides an insight into how participants conceptualize what is characteristic of the "new" Belarus.

Figure 1. A card depicting a man with a flag while his shadow resembles an armed policeman
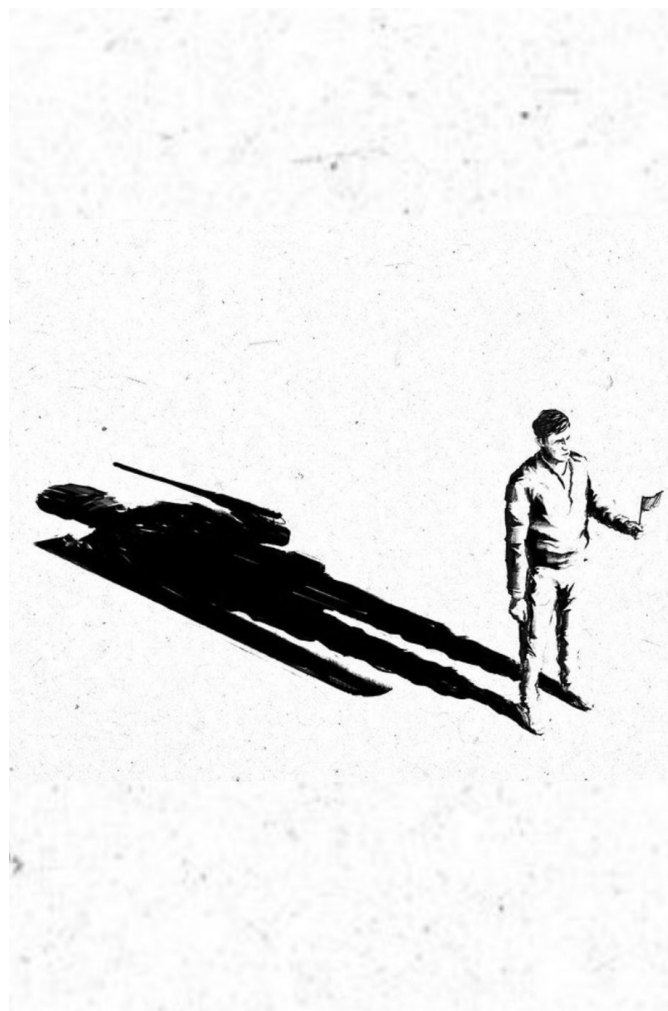
Source: Self-elaboration.

The association games with fantasy images provoked discussions that developed around sensitive topics. This was made possible by a game situation that turned participants into players who could afford to make risky interpretive moves. In the course of conversations about the meaning of the cards, participants sometimes questioned the morality of certain statements or created a consensus vision of new moral rules. For example, the importance of

excluding and not forgiving all people who are in any way connected to power structures was considered, as was the idea of people working for the security forces of the system. The discussions were often inspired by ambiguous images on the cards (see: Figure 1).

> **P6:** It was a mistake [for a friend of mine] to initially go there to study [in the police school] and to be a policeman in our country, in general. It was his mistake.
> **P7:** They lure you there with money and benefits...
> **P6:** Yes, yes, but he had ambitions; he wanted to be a detective...
> **P1:** There is nothing shameful in the profession of a policeman, but, unfortunately, [not] in our country…
> **P6:** But they are students, they were not asked, no matter what they studied. They were put on the bus, and they could not do anything because they would lose a huge amount of money—10,000 [EUR]. It's terrifying for them.

The interview is very morally and personally loaded, as some of the participants may have friends or relatives in state structures. One of the interviewees (P6) even explicitly mentions his friend. The context of the game, however, absolves the participants of much of their personal accountability because what is apparently at stake is, for all practical purposes, a plausible interpretation of a fantasy card depicting a civilian holding a small flag, who has a shadow in the form of a policeman. The card seems highly relevant to the situation in Belarus, but it offers not one but several interpretations. Thus, the game favors interpretive relevance over moral relevance, especially in the case of fantasy cards, which creates an ethically safe research environment if the rules of the game are followed.

Figure 2. A card depicting Alexander Lukashenko standing in front of WWII veterans

Source: Self-elaboration.

Cards with realistic content proved to be a stimulus for controversy, too. A card that depicts Alexander Lukashenko standing in front of WWII veterans (see: Figure 2) sparked a moral debate about respect for people based on their age or status, which was culturally determined in previous stages of Belarusian history.

> **P8:** I've been to conventions like that—these old stumps, one old guy in charge.
> **P9:** Why do you say that about veterans?

P8: It's not the veterans, it happens at all the events, you go there, and it's like you're in a retirement home.

P9: That's ageism!

P8: Ageism?! Have you been to any of these events?

P9: I have.

P8: Didn't it seem like it was all senior citizens? Ageism or not, I felt like I was in a retirement home at a gathering.

P10: Maybe it's to contrast with the leader? He's younger in comparison to them.

P11: But this "young one" [Lukashenko] doesn't listen to the veterans, who are smarter and older.

P8: There is no feeling that they are smarter than you, and you are a fool. The feeling is like you are in a retirement home for the mentally ill at a meeting.

As in the civilian-policeman picture, the game setting makes space for a safe discussion about various actors in Belarusian society. The participants do not search for an interpretation of what is in the picture, but what value to assign to the meeting of Lukashenko with the war veterans from the perspective of the new Belarusian identity. This dialogue reveals that although there is some age-based respect inherited from the past, it nevertheless questions the idea of respecting someone purely on the basis of age. They condemn ageism, but at the same time, articulate the idea that Lukashenko is the president of only the old generation.

Since the "new Belarusian" identity is actively transforming at the moment, contradictions are not surprising. Observing its development or attempts to achieve it can be fruitful for understanding the principles on which identity is formed or, at the very least, valuable in recognizing ambiguous and potentially controversial themes inside the group, preventing the establishment of a homogenous community. Thus, for studying identity, discussing images

that are signs, in a semiotic sense, to the research participants can be more productive than conducting semi-structured interviews. When responding to direct questions, the participant may filter more of what they say by thinking about how they want to be perceived by the interviewer. Reactions to visuals may be more spontaneous since they contribute to the construction of the conversation's logic. In another example, one participant confessed to her situation in response to a picture of soldiers.

P2: *Krasaucy* [handsome men] are the riot police [ironic]. I mean, I know people like that because my dad was always in this structure, because my relatives were there, and he left after compulsory military service and he knows, we constantly had people who are proud to be like that... They're *krasaucy*! How they celebrate Airborne Day! How they show off!

By saying this, she reveals belonging to a family where some are part of the army or the police. She is not proud of this but rather mocks their pride in belonging to the security forces. This partly shows the path she has traveled in transforming her identity and how her views have changed.

Another participant, when seeing the image that depicts people creating protest graffiti on a fence at night, shares her background and activism in 2020.

P1: I live… I lived in Zavodsky district and I have this exactly same fence outside my house, and we used to go and paint it at night. *Shariki, Partizanka* [colloquial names for Minsk districts located in the industrial sector] have a lot of such fences there...There are *stalinkas* [Soviet houses built in the 1950s], 3-5 story houses, and such fences, there are a lot of such fences there next to the private sector. It looks like where I grew up.

The participant responds to the visual stimulus and talks about her neighborhood where she grew up, which gives us an insight into her experience of belonging to a social group—a person from the outskirts of Minsk whose family most likely belongs to the working class. We also learn from her statement, "I live... I lived," about her continued identification of herself as a person from this neighborhood of Minsk despite being in exile.

The memoir of her and her friends creating street art in her neighborhood portrays her as someone who protested by engaging in coordinated art interventions. Thus, from this short excerpt, we learn several important things about the participant's identity, which might have been untold as something that could be considered unimportant or unsafe to share. Thus, the lack of direct questioning and interaction, primarily with images, can prompt the articulation of things that might not have come up in a coherent discussion within the interview. It is documented in the participant's reaction to a picture of a girl hugging a soldier, a photo taken during the protests in August 2020.

> **P1:** These people [riot police]... did you notice that many of them spoke Russian with a Russian accent? Not with our accent?... Those who hugged, for me, it's a no. This is the most important mistake of the protest. [Those girls] should not have approached them at all. They should have known for sure that they were outcasts.

She discursively distanced herself from the representatives of the security forces, calling them "these people," showing that she does not consider them to be like her and separating herself from them even in her speech. Afterward, she suggests that the riot police who scattered the protests were not even Belarusians but Russians. In this way, she not only further alienates them but also indirectly expresses the idea that Belarusians would not be capable of such a level of cruelty toward their fellow citizens. It is another example of when seeing an image stimulates an emotional, albeit controlled, reaction and brings up something that might not have been in focus during a conventional interview.

Ethical Considerations and Methodological Limitations

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations were of the utmost importance. The sensitive nature of the subject, which involves potential risks to participants or their families, can understandably cause hesitations and concerns about disclosing personal information. In general, the concern of people in the Belarusian diaspora about the possible consequences in Belarus or for their families creates a certain level of worry and awareness of the risks, which makes them cautious about openly discussing their political views and participating in activities that concern this sphere (Rudnik 2021). It is essential to respect their need for confidentiality and to protect their identity and personal data throughout the research process.

Verbal informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were maintained to protect the rights and privacy of the participants. Participants were also free to withdraw from the research at any time. In addition, the most provocative visual content on the game cards was evaluated and removed after the test games were completed. To implement safety protection techniques, I adopted principles proposed by Raymond Lee (1993), which involved

"de-jeopardizing" and "de-sensitizing" sensitive topics. "De-jeopardizing" aimed to distance specific responses from the participants' identities, while "de-sensitizing" focused on fostering an atmosphere of openness and trust. Thus, the research had limitations concerning gaining systematic knowledge of participants' backgrounds and experiences, as the participants were reluctant to share personal background details due to the political focus of the research. For example, I could not use a questionnaire to gather personal information about the participants on the recruitment stage, nor could I interview them about their backgrounds before the game sessions. Instead, I had to rely on information they freely shared during the game sessions, which did not provide a complete picture of their backgrounds and views. These circumstances influenced the interpretation of the data. Instead of relying heavily on the backgrounds of the participants, the emphasis is more on the insights they provided during the game sessions.

In addition to the safety measures, the participants' emotional reactions to the memories and images were a major concern. During the sessions, I remained attentive to any signs of tension, distress, or discomfort and offered participants the option to leave the discussions if they felt overwhelmed. Despite intentionally choosing the most non-violent images to avoid the risk of triggering the participants, some visuals, such as official state symbols and mere depictions of police, caused distress in some participants. Some confessed that looking at these images was not easy for them, and they expressed difficulty processing such content. On the other hand, several participants reported positive outcomes, and in post-game conversations, they shared that they felt some therapeutic effect and ease at the end of a game session.

Some participants expressed that, despite the initial distress caused by the images, they gradually began to feel more at ease as the session progressed. Indeed, the research's interactive and supportive environment seems to have enabled them to gradually overcome the overwhelming emotions evoked by the images. The process of playing and discussing the games provided them with a safe space to process their emotions and thoughts. In this research, it was especially important to acknowledge the sensitivity of the subject matter and the potential emotional impact it may have had on the participants. Thus, the research approach, which included game-based methods and emphasized participants' freedom to share at their pace, contributed to the creation of an environment in which the emotional aspect was respected.

Attitudes and personal experiences of participants were discussed concerning political and social conflicts and the transformation of social norms and behaviors that the Lukashenko regime considers illegal. In addition, issues related to personal and collective trauma often came up in the discussions. The use of a game-based approach, rather than traditional interviews and focus groups, avoided direct questioning that might have made participants uncomfortable or anxious. This allowed participants to share their experiences and perspectives through a medium that provided some distance and comfort. At any point when I wanted to clarify their accounts because I did not fully understand their point, I emphasized that they were under no obligation to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable and that they could only share as much as they felt comfortable. Furthermore, this discussion was easier for the participants because they were asked to comment on their choices within the game rather than commenting on real situations or opposing the

views of their teammates. This aspect is important to bear in mind when analyzing the interviews, as participants in a projective research game may hide their opinions behind their player role. This means more freedom of expression but also the possibility of game-biased statements. Therefore, when analyzing, it is necessary to interpret the interview as a whole or as a set of significant components rather than dissecting it into statements that could be made for the sole purpose of the game without any transcendence.

Methodological Limitations

The game technique presented in this article has several advantages for studying sensitive topics in challenging political contexts. However, there are some methodological limitations that are important to discuss, as well as provide some transparency about the card creation process.

The most evident research limitation is that research participants do not share deep emotions, personal recollections, and their ideas as elaborately as they could in the setting of in-depth interviews, which makes the findings somewhat shallow. However, this is a price that has to be paid to talk about topics many Belarusians avoid unfolding. Also, it was balanced by the flexibility and spontaneity of the answers that the game-based research technique has brought.

Another limitation of this technique is related to a potential bias of a researcher in the selection and creation of images in the card deck. The cards can influence participants' responses and shape the direction of the discussion as they have to choose from the images selected by the researcher and reflect on them as well. It is important to acknowledge

that complete neutrality in image selection is almost impossible to achieve, and the final deck is affected by the curatorial decision-making I did as a researcher. To minimize the risk of having a severe level of influence, I conducted a series of pilot games with a preliminary set of cards. This experimental deck was tested within several pilot sessions. Feedback from these sessions was used to refine the set of cards and to make decisions about removing images that were seen as provocative, triggering, or offensive and adding several topics that some pilot research participants said they were missing.

Another problematic issue of this methodological approach is facing superficial or "strategic" responses in the game instead of genuine ideas and personal recollections. I observed that some participants focused more on "winning" the game without deep engagement with the keywords. To address this problem, I kept emphasizing the importance of meaningful discussion during the game and invited deeper reflection on participants' card choices after each round.

Conclusion

The use of an association card game as a research methodology has proven to be a valuable and innovative approach in the context of a repressive political regime and the challenges associated with studying sensitive topics. From the customization of the game deck to the careful consideration of ethical concerns, this article has highlighted the key elements of this methodology. One of the approach's distinguishing characteristics is its ability to foster discussions on sensitive and complex topics such as identity transformation and political change. The methodology respects participants' need for confidentiality while also encouraging them to explore

their thoughts and emotions through creative means by creating a safe and engaging space for them to share their perspectives. Due to their engaging and interactive nature, card games, and association games in particular, can be a valuable alternative to traditional research methods, for example, focus groups, when studying highly sensitive topics.

The game setting creates a relaxed and enjoyable environment for participants, making them feel more comfortable and open to expressing themselves, which leads to richer and more authentic responses, providing valuable insights. Research games are also helpful in reducing potential biases and social desirability effects, as they allow research participants to hide behind the player's role and talk more openly without being afraid of being judged for their attitudes and beliefs. The researcher's influence is limited, as the approach allows the discussion to be mostly moderated by the game itself, and the pressure from the researcher's direct inquiries is minimized by the game environment. Thus, this research methodology, based on an association card game, provides a novel and effective approach to studying sensitive topics in a difficult political context. It not only provides useful insights into participants' experiences and perspectives, but it also serves as a model for conducting research that prioritizes ethical considerations and participants' well-being.

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Citation

Strengths and Limitations of an Online Qualitative Survey in Times of Social Crisis: Example of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Beata Bielska
Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland

Katarzyna Kalinowska
Collegium Civitas, Poland
Educational Research Institute, Warsaw, Poland

Sylwia Męcfal
University of Lodz, Poland

Adrianna Surmiak
University of Warsaw, Poland

Abstract: The aim of the article is to argue that an online qualitative survey (OQS) is a useful research technique that is feasible to apply during a social crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. An OQS has an unclear status in the spectrum of research techniques, as it combines features of quantitative and qualitative research, and there is little recognition in the literature of its advantages and disadvantages in the context of other research techniques used during a social crisis. We describe our research experiences of using this technique and the experiences of our survey participants. We also compare the strengths and limitations of using an OQS during the COVID-19 pandemic against other techniques used at the time.

Beata Bielska is a sociologist conducting qualitative and quantitative research, an assistant professor, and has an M.A. in management studies. Her research interests include plagiarism and cheating in higher education, methodological and ethical aspects of social sciences, and the sociology of sexuality.
email address: bielska.beata@umk.pl

Katarzyna Kalinowska is a sociologist doing qualitative research and an assistant professor. Her research interests include the sociology of love and emotions, youth studies, and research integrity and ethics.

email address: katarzyna.kalinowska@civitas.edu.pl

Sylwia Męcfal is a sociologist and an assistant professor. Her interests focus on methods of social research (particularly qualitative), research ethics, and media studies.

email address: sylwia.mecfal@uni.lodz.pl

Adrianna Surmiak is a sociologist and social anthropologist and an assistant professor. She is interested in research ethics, qualitative social methodology, the sociology of emotions, and the sociology of morality.

email address: a.surmiak@uw.edu.pl

In this article, we argue that an online qualitative survey (OQS) is a useful research method during a social crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, especially its first wave. The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic was distinguished by the strict lockdown, and it caused organizational chaos in academic institutions, where we could observe a lack of solutions and strategies for adaptation to the new and highly unpredictable social reality. In some universities in Poland, it was forbidden to conduct face-to-face research, which was problematic, especially for qualitative researchers. Our solution in those turbulent times was a qualitative survey. This technique[1] "consists of a series of open-ended questions, crafted by a researcher and centred on a particular topic (...), self-administered, with questions presented in a fixed and standard order to all participants" (Braun et al. 2020:1), where qualitative data and qualitative analysis are prioritized (Braun, Clarke, and Gray 2017) and open questions dominate in numbers (lower level of standardization com-

pared to computer-assisted web interview [CAWI]). To analyze the data from an OQS, researchers usually use thematic analysis, that is, multiple reading, coding, and categorization (cf. Peel 2010; Terry and Braun 2013; Braun et al. 2020). To date, it has been argued that OQS is useful, for example, in research with vulnerable people (Braun et al. 2020), the analysis of public policies in international comparative studies (Seixas, Smith, and Mitton 2018), and studies on ethics and spirituality in social work (Canda, Nakashima, and Furman 2004). A number of examples of the use of this technique, although referred to as a qualitative questionnaire, are also found in health research (Daniels, Arden-Close, and Mayers 2020; Fernholm et al. 2020; Hanna and Gough 2020; Grung et al. 2022).

Our literature review shows that during the COVID-19 social crisis, this research method became more popular than it had been before, but it was still rarely used compared to other research methods. Between 2020 and 2024, according to data collected from Scopus, 45 articles published in the field of social sciences applied OQS. Before the pandemic years, there were only 13 texts using

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[1] In this article, we do not distinguish between research technique and method, although we are aware that they are sometimes defined differently in the methodological literature.

this technique. Just to give a brief comparison: there are over 40,000 articles that are based on in-depth interviews—one of the most popular research techniques among qualitative social researchers; over 1500 articles were published during this time with the use of a type of quantitative online survey (e.g., CAWI). Altogether, between 2020 and 2024, only 14 articles have a pandemic context (out of 45), and the pandemic crisis effect is mostly visible in 2022, with 7 pandemic OQS articles published that year. There are only two articles published during this time based on OQS by the Polish authors (both written by the Authors of this manuscript [Kalinowska et al. 2022; Surmiak, Bielska, and Kalinowska 2022]).

Following Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen Douglas (2017:323), we understand the social crisis "as impactful and rapid societal change that calls existing power structures, norms of conduct, or even the existence of specific people or groups into question." During the global social crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, social researchers opted for various forms of online research, including synchronous and asynchronous qualitative interviews (e.g., among many others, 't Hart 2021; Howlett 2022; Lawrence 2022; Estrada-Jaramillo, Michael, and Farrimond 2023), quantitative surveys (Krajewski et al. 2021), and non-standardized written statements (Łukianow et al. 2021; Radzińska 2022). Some researchers decided to use creative forms of conducting research, such as collaborative autoethnography (Roy and Uekusa 2020), synchronous deliberative processes (Willis et al. 2023), smellwalks (Allen 2023), remote participatory video (Marzi 2023), or remote participatory action research (Börner, Kraftl, and Giatti 2023). These new or renewed forms of research were not so rarely "forcibly" applied—as one researcher wrote in an honest way: "many of us have been forced to change our research plans"

and apply "new armchair approaches" (Howlett 2022:388; cf. Eggeling 2023).

In our view, the limited use of OQSs during social crises is due to two issues. First, an OQS has an unclear status in the spectrum of research techniques, as it crosses the divide between qualitative and quantitative forms of data acquisition. Second, there is not much recognition in the literature of its advantages and disadvantages in the context of other research techniques (except, e.g., Braun et al. 2017; Braun et al. 2020; Thomas et al. 2024).

Relying on our research experience in using OQSs during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, we indicate how and why OQSs can be used during social crises. We also compare OQSs to other qualitative and quantitative techniques to show its advantages when conducting research during a social crisis.

OQSs[2] in the Social Science Literature[3]

Vagueness of OQS Classification

First, the limited use of OQSs during social crises is because it has an unclear status in the spectrum of research techniques. OQS combines features of quantitative and qualitative research. For example, similarly to the quantitative approach, there is a standardized (uniform) list of questions that every participant is supposed to answer, and the questions are asked in the same order and form (Terry and Braun 2017). Concurrently, as in most qualitative ap-

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[2] In the following section, we do not distinguish between online and offline qualitative surveys, as they are treated similarly in the context of classification in the analyzed literature.

[3] The literature review was based on the keywords 'qualitative survey' and 'qualitative questionnaire' in the Google Scholar and Scopus databases.

proaches, participants can give an in-depth answer (in writing) using their words (access to participants' language and terminology). Sometimes the quantitative data are collected during the process; however, the qualitative data and the qualitative analysis are prioritized (Braun et al. 2017). In social research, qualitative and quantitative approaches are often seen and presented as contradictory ways of analyzing social phenomena, despite the increasing significance of mixed-method research (Creswell and Plano Clark 2017; Timans, Wouters, and Heilbron 2019) and advocacy research that finds this dichotomy irrelevant (Denzin and Giardina 2012). Perhaps because of this ambiguous status of OQSs in social research methodology—a technique that meets the requirements of neither qualitative nor quantitative research—they are relatively rarely used in social research, especially in sociology[4] (Jansen 2010; Thomas et al. 2024).

Furthermore, in the tradition of sociological research, the term "survey" is reserved for quantitative research (Groves et al. 2004). Using it in juxtaposition with the word "qualitative" may be perceived as incorrect by social researchers. Survey techniques with a structured questionnaire are defined as (highly) standardized and based on indirect communication (response is given in writing, not within direct face-to-face communication) (Groves et al. 2004). A qualitative survey was presented by Virginia Braun and colleagues (2017) as one of the innovations in qualitative methods, one that "has been released from their *quantitative* moorings" (Braun et al. 2017:245). It is worth noting that an OQS is referred to in some articles

as a qualitative questionnaire (understood as a research technique, not only a research tool). It may be assumed that this term is somehow safer for researchers. They thus avoid the connotation of survey techniques—a term specific to quantitative research (Groves et al. 2004).

The difference in terminology may also be related to the traditions of ethnologists' use of qualitative questionnaires to collect factual data, a kind of inventory of a place created by the inhabitants of the area. Over time, this type of ethnological research has changed its direction: from positivist fact-gathering to collecting the individual experiences of those surveyed, yet the name of this technique has remained the same (Rivano Eckerdal and Hagström 2017). However, Gareth Terry and Virginia Braun (2017:17) state that using the term "questionnaire" may not be accurate; they claim that "only survey refers to the process of sampling a population for information, opinions, experiences, or practices," not just to a research tool. They also underline that in psychology, questionnaires usually include questions based on quantitative scales, which need to be validated and tested in terms of their reliability (positivists' empiricist research paradigm). Surveys, according to these authors, do not require this, and they can be more open and explorative (Terry and Braun 2017). Having this in mind, when analyzing the examples of the application of a qualitative survey in social research, we found various terms used in reference to this technique: semi-structured questionnaires sent by e-mail and post (Turner and Coyle 2000), open-ended survey (Whelan 2007), qualitative online survey (Jowett and Peel 2009; Peel 2010), and online mix-methods survey (Terry and Braun 2013). What is more, Terry and Braun (2017:18) not only place OQSs as one of the modes of qualitative sur-

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[4] There are more publications based on the results of an OQS and other modes of the qualitative survey in critical social psychology (cf. Braun, Tricklebank, and Clarke 2013; Braun et al. 2017; Braun et. al 2020; Terry and Braun 2017, etc.).

vey (next to a paper and an e-mail mode), but also present a classification of different types of qualitative survey techniques from "more to less qualitative surveys": a) the fully qualitative survey: with only open-ended questions, relatively less popular; b) the mixed (qualitative dominated) survey: with open-ended and closed questions (supportive role: yes/no questions, demographics), more often used; c) the fully mixed survey: with balanced qualitative and quantitative components when research questions need both types of data; and d) the mixed (quantitative dominated) survey: used most often, with a minor role of qualitative questions (which might be utilized to add "depth" of response or to encourage responses the researchers might not have expected). The OQS conducted by the authors and described in further parts of this manuscript represents the second type of this classification.

As stated by Harrie Jansen (2010), in many classifications of qualitative research to date, an OQS does not appear as a separate research technique. Jansen gives a brief consideration of its position within qualitative research, analyzing it in relation to five research traditions: biographical, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic, and case study. However, he fails to give a clear answer as to within which tradition he would see OQSs and, indeed, locates it as a method that can be used within each of these traditions.

Advantages and Disadvantages of OQSs

We propose the following discussion written from the perspective of the classical epistemology of qualitative research, placing the well-being of both the participants and the research process at the center of interest. In this sense, the following subsection does not capture all qualitative research

traditions, for example, ethnomethodological or conversation analysis, and only partially reflects the values behind advocacy research.

Virginia Braun and colleagues (2020), whilst analyzing the online version of a qualitative survey, point out that it is in line with the tradition and values of qualitative research, as it places participants at the center of the research. The researcher gives up much of the control over the research process—the participants can write as much as they want and when they want.

Merran Toerien and Sue Wilkinson (2004:70-71) emphasize that an OQS "provides a balance between structure and openness" because a qualitative survey allows for the standardization of questions and their easy comparison (as in quantitative research) while obtaining in-depth[5] answers (as in most qualitative research). Braun and colleagues (2020) share a similar opinion and argue that by analyzing the entire dataset (i.e., the answers to research questions are reached by analysis of all the responses; Toerien and Wilkinson 2004:73: "across questions, rather than for each open-ended question individually"), an OQS provides rich and in-depth data, even though individual contributions might be very short or very long. Similarly, Samantha Thomas and colleagues (2024:12) claim that "While online qualitative surveys engage participants in a different type of conversation, they have design features that enable the collection of rich data." Also, according to Johanna Rivano Eckerdal and Charlotte Hagström (2017), "qualitative questionnaires" make it possible to generate rich material on many aspects of daily life, past and present. The authors compare the data obtained from such

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[5] Understood as Clifford Geertz's thick description.

questionnaires to diary entries. In both cases, we are dealing with memories, opinions, and experiences. However, in the case of a questionnaire, we have a specific situation, since the statements are formulated in response to questions posed by the researcher and additional instructions (e.g., which period participants are to refer to or which aspects they should pay special attention to).

Furthermore, an OQS allows for quick and cheap data collection, reaching geographically diverse populations. The online format and rather short time commitment may result in some people participating who otherwise would not have due to location or time constraints (Davey, Clarke, and Jenkinson 2019; Smith et al. 2022). An OQS also allows for the possibility of reaching larger groups of people than is typical of (most) qualitative research, such as interviews (Toerien and Wilkinson 2004), and to reach populations defined as professionals: academics, STEM professions, educators, or therapists (e.g., Bouziane et al. 2020; Feijt et al. 2020; Aluko and Ooko 2022; Tackie 2022; Gallant, Watermeyer, and Sawasawa 2023; Tripp and Liu 2024). A larger sample, as Emily Opperman and colleagues (2014) point out, can give access to a sense of wider patterning of meaning, while Virginia Braun, Gemma Tricklebank, and Victoria Clarke (2013) argue that the self-recruitment sample may lack the votes of marginalized and minority groups or people with limited computer access, so the picture obtained is partial.

The high degree of anonymity could also enable disclosure, especially if the research topic is sensitive (e.g., body image after mastectomy) (Grogan and Mechan 2017) and/or the research group is vulnerable (e.g., adult children of lesbian, gay, or transgender parents) (Clarke and Demetriou 2016;

Boulton and Clarke 2024).[6] Thus, according to many scholars, it is a very useful technique for study of sensitive topics (Toerien and Wilkinson 2004; Terry and Braun 2017; Daniels et al. 2020).

Many scholars indicate other limitations of OQSs, especially the lack of opportunity to ask additional questions, which is provided, for example, by an in-depth interview (IDI) (Frith and Gleeson 2008; Braun et al. 2013). Gareth Terry and Virginia Braun (2017) also argue that in this technique, follow-up data collection and sending reminders are less possible than in other qualitative methods. However, Mirko Prosen (2022) notes that by using this technique, the person surveyed has the chance to reflect and elaborate on their responses before submitting them. Similar considerations are found in the article by Emily Daniels and colleagues (2020), who reiterate Prosen's conclusion about the impossibility of questioning further. However, they also point out that the OQS technique is a good basis for selecting people with specific experiences in the next stage of research (e.g., based on IDIs). Although the collection of contact details makes the survey non-anonymous, the participants' data are confidential and protected. It is also important to emphasize to the participants that the provision of their data is voluntary.

The experience of these authors may also indicate that surveys conducted using the OQS technique should not be too extensive. In their study, it took about an hour to complete the survey, resulting in as many as 140 people starting the questionnaire but

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[6] Our literature review based on the Scopus database shows that among 45 articles applying OQS published between 2020 and 2024, there are 21 texts that may be classified as concerning sensitive topics or vulnerable groups (e.g., LaMarre, Gilbert, and Scalise 2023; Harvey et al. 2024; Hayfield, Moore, and Terry 2024).

not completing it. In addition, such a lengthy survey of sensitive topics might also cause additional stress to the participants. Similar recommendations are made by Braun and colleagues (2020).

Daniels and colleagues (2020) also draw attention to "recall bias"[7] and warn against using such research techniques to collect experiences from the distant past, although the authors do not mention that this is not only characteristic of qualitative surveys but also other methods, such as IDIs.

Terry and Braun (2017) warn against "trolling" and "zingers" (short, witty statements created to gain likes on social media, usually artificial and impersonal), which may reduce the quality of an OQS.

Research Methodology

OQS

OQS [the online mixed (qualitative dominated) survey, Terry and Braun 2017:18] was conducted by three authors of this article between 21 April and 30 May 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic in Poland. A total of 193 people took part in the survey. The OQS was conducted by women with a doctoral degree and several years of experience in conducting qualitative and quantitative research, sociologists and ethnologists, employed at public universities, a research institute, and a private university in research and teaching positions.

We sought to address two main research questions: How have social researchers responded to the emerging methodological and research ethics prob-

lems in their research projects (actions/practices)? How have social researchers perceived methodology and research ethics during COVID-19 (perception/evaluation)?

The OQS was aimed at social scientists and humanities researchers from public, private, and non-governmental institutions. It included open-ended questions on their experiences in conducting research (problems and solutions) and ethical and methodological reflections, as well as their demographics. Most of the participants worked in public (N=157) and/or private institutions (132), both as leaders and members of research teams. The sample was dominated by those with doctoral (76) and post-doctoral (42) degrees; early-stage researchers (PhD students, postdoctoral fellows, and assistants) numbered 24. More than half of the participants (106) carried out statutory research (funded by university funds), 72 indicated grants as a source of funding, 60 were self-funded, and 23 carried out commercial research. The participants included 147 from the social sciences and 83 from the humanities, as well as 109 women and 81 men.[8]

The OQS was prepared using the LimeSurvey software. We used three types of sampling: purposive (people from the social sciences and humanities maximally diverse in terms of gender, stage of academic career, and place of work), snowballing (using the social networks of researchers and participants), and availability-based (Babbie 2014; cf. Patton 2014). We shared the OQS on social media (Facebook and LinkedIn), emailed it to institutions

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[7] Recall bias is bias caused by inaccurate or incomplete recollection of events by the research participant. It is a particular concern for retrospective survey questions (*Recall bias* n.d.).

[8] Questions on gender, discipline, and stage of academic career were open, and questions on place of work and source of research funding were closed multiple choice. Whenever data did not add up to 193, other response categories were given or there were missing data.

and associations, and forwarded it to researcher acquaintances.

The survey was exploratory (the participants were informed of this) and was the basis (pilot) for designing IDIs. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data (the whole dataset, not individual responses, was taken into consideration to find answers to research questions) following the dominant analytical method used by researchers applying OQS (see Introduction). Researchers read the entire dataset multiple times. Then all answers (participants often included mixed and broader information in an answer to a particular question than we expected) were organized by themes found in the empirical material and later categorized. This analysis was then used to construct typologies of ethical strategies and approaches to research methods during the first wave of the pandemic. The analysis process is described in detail in other texts (Kalinowska et al. 2022; Surmiak, Bielska, and Kalinowska 2022).

We did not encourage participants' feedback; however, we received their spontaneous comments via email and telephone calls. We use these data in the Findings section. The approval of an ethics committee was not required; however, the study was conducted according to the rules of "The Sociologist's Code of Ethics" of the Polish Sociological Association (2012).

Other Sources

In November 2022, all four authors wrote up their experiences of the OQS technique. The three researchers who conducted the study in 2020 described their experiences of conducting the study, and the fourth author, who joined the team later, described her re-

flections on her participation in this study (she had completed the survey before she became one of the members of our research team). We also included the analyzed email and telephone exchanges with survey participants within additional sources. All of these written accounts totaled 15 standardized pages and were subjected to thematic analysis.

Application of the OQS during the Pandemic Crisis: Ethical, Methodological, and Practical Dimensions

Authors' Experiences: Choosing OQS

The decision to conduct research with social scientists and humanities researchers in the first wave of the pandemic using an OQS was a two-step process.

First, in the spirit of rapid methodology/hot sociology[9]/urgent anthropology, we decided that it was worthwhile conducting a survey with researchers to document research and ethical changes during this period. We recognized that the time of the pandemic was conducive to testing unusual ways of doing research (see Kalinowska et al. 2022; Surmiak, Bielska, and Kalinowska 2022). Investigating these changes seemed important and necessary, and we were also simply humanly curious about the research work of our fellow researchers. Conducting OQS would allow for a fast speed of reaction to these changes.

However, due to ethical and practical considerations on our personal academic and family burdens at the

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[9] In Polish sociology, "hot" sociology (*socjologia gorąca*) is used more often, which could also be translated as "instant," "topical," or "engaged sociology." It is a rather intuitive term since there is no formal definition in sociological literature. We understand it as conducting research on atypical phenomena taking place at the same time as the research is being conducted, very often in crisis circumstances.

time (conducting research started before the pandemic or related to the pandemic, online teaching, and childcare), as well as the complex emotions prevailing among researchers, we had qualms about involving people in research in a situation similar to ours. Ultimately, we recognized that carrying out research during a time of crisis could be of therapeutic value to the participants by providing an opportunity to share difficult experiences, opinions, and emotions.

In the second step, we had to decide on a specific research technique. Firstly, we did not want to expose the participants to the risk of harm (compromising health due to potential COVID-19 infection), so we immediately abandoned the idea of conducting contact research (offline interviews). Secondly, we wanted to ensure that participation in the planned study did not require extensive time and logistical commitment from the participants, causing discomfort (cf. Clarke and Demetriou 2016; Davey et al. 2019). Therefore, for practical reasons, we opted out of online interviews, which require equipment, good internet connection, digital competence, and the organization of an intimate space in flats by researchers and participants (cf. Rahman et al. 2021). Thirdly, we had no external funding, and our time resources were limited.

We were also concerned about the critical reception of the survey form by future participants. We expected our survey to be one of the many links sent to researchers' emails at a time of increased communication in the online space (cf. Meskell, Houghton, and Biesty 2021). The above concerns were compounded by the fact that we all tend to use interaction-based methods (IDIs, ethnographic observations) in our daily research work, the foundation of which is prolonged, direct contact with participants, which

makes research interactions unique and allows for greater influence on the research situation.

At the time, we did not know how long the pandemic would last. Wishing to avoid a lengthy conceptualization and operationalization phase, we rejected the option of a quantitative survey. The exploratory purpose of the research was also in favor of choosing an OQS. It required a flexible technique oriented toward a broad view of the phenomenon under study. An OQS—structured to a small extent, consisting of open-ended questions involving a broad spectrum of experiences—seemed to meet these conditions (cf. Braun et al. 2020; Toerien and Wilkinson 2004).

OQS was rarely used in Polish academic sociology as a research technique but was used in social and market research. Before the pandemic, one of us had had experience using an OQS as an effective research technique in application research (diagnostic and evaluation) in the field of culture and education. This was research subordinated to practical considerations (short timetables, small budgets), carried out without in-depth conceptualization (exploratory, predictive, and evaluative objectives), and aimed at developing practical recommendations. The conditions for conducting rapid and relatively low-cost evaluative research seemed to resemble the uncertain and rapid-response circumstances of a pandemic crisis.

Beyond ethical and practical arguments, our greatest concerns were related to the fact that the qualitative survey is perceived in the sociological community as an illegitimate research technique—neither qualitative nor quantitative. We have diverse epistemological approaches in our research team, which is due to our different professional backgrounds: we have a background in sociology or sociology and

anthropology; we come from different academic centers (oriented toward academic sociology or interdisciplinary, oriented toward applied research); we have different embedding in the academic world (the three of us have combined academia with applied and market research); we work in different qualitative paradigms (mainly symbolic-interactionist and feminist, but each of us also has experience in quantitative research). Nonetheless, our concerns about the adoption of research using the OQS technique in the sociological community were shared, as we perceive the sociological community in Poland as methodologically conservative (cf. Konecki 2020), having repeatedly encountered in our careers the depreciation of qualitative research, the use of quantitative criteria to evaluate it, and distrust of research techniques that deviate from accepted definitions or borrow from applied research. In deciding on the OQS, we were therefore oriented toward the need to use arguments from the repertoire of both qualitative and quantitative research to justify the value of this technique for academic sociology, as is reflected in the argumentation that follows.

Authors' Experiences: Collecting Data via OQS

Data collection was safe and comfortable for both us and the participants (no one was exposed to COVID-19 infection or much interference in their daily lives through the survey). Thus, we minimized the risk of harm to research participants, which is one of the key goals of research ethics.

Giving study participants power over the extent of information they would share with us was, we felt, a step toward equalizing the power position in the researcher-participant relationship (cf. Toerien and Wilkinson 2004; Frith and Gleeson 2008).

The OQS proved to be a technique that allowed for anonymity (cf. Toerien and Wilkinson 2004; Grogan and Mechan 2017; Terry and Braun 2017), which is important in the context of surveying one's professional group to obtain reliable data and a sense of security. During analysis, our colleague was unable to recognize her statements in the dataset. She noticed that many of the responses were similar to each other, and she was unable to recall the specific words in which she described her experience at that time. The feelings written down in the heat of the moment were, according to her, characterized by brevity, little reflection, disorder, and the use of common, uncharacteristic phrases. The answers given were taken out of the context of the biography and, after some time, even their author found it difficult to identify with them (the software did not allow participants to keep a copy of their responses). At the same time, they were given a new context—that of other statements in the collection—which, on the one hand, ensured the anonymity of the individual narratives and, on the other hand, allowed for a thematic analysis of the materials as a whole.

The qualitative survey contained three simple open-ended questions and was easy to fill in. Moreover, the survey was to be conducted among social scientists and humanities researchers working in academic institutions and research agencies, that is, among the intellectual elite with the linguistic competence to freely provide longer written statements (cf. Doliński and Żurko 2016).

The weakness of the chosen technique was the lack of control over the selection process sampling (we had no knowledge of who took part in our study) (cf. Braun et al. 2013). From the analytical point of view, it would be valuable to get as diverse a sample as possible in terms of the academic career stage of the

participants, their place of employment, and their discipline to reach different people with potentially diverse experiences. In the end, 193 people participated in the survey, which we consider a satisfactory result, given that we recorded 569 clicks on the questionnaire link. Moreover, 109 people left their contact details and expressed willingness to participate in the next stage of the research, resigning from their anonymity (cf. Daniels et al. 2020). However, the structure of the sample shows that men were more motivated to fill in the questionnaire than women; there were more representatives of public institutions than private entities; scholars with PhD constituted 39% of the sample; the sample was also dominated by social scientists. This structure may also be proof that the survey was filled in mostly by people of similar professional status to us, who came from our circles of colleagues and whose academic careers resembled ours. It seems that we might not have reached many people whose experiences are very different from ours.

The weakest element of the tool was the demographics, which included open and closed questions. Whilst analyzing the filled-in answers, we realized that information about demographics may have been more useful if asked as closed and standardized questions. Our decision to leave them as open-ended questions caused problems in characterizing the sample. In one question, we asked study participants to self-describe their position in the academic world using various characteristics: "Career/academic stage (e.g., degree/title/ profession, position/function in team, seniority)." This resulted in obtaining data that were difficult to compare and aggregate, as some people gave their professional degree or academic title here, while others gave the name of the position or function held. These data were used to characterize

the sample and were not intended to be analyzed qualitatively (although they may be). At the further stage of the research, incomplete data from the demographics made it difficult to recruit people for the IDIs. For example, it was not always possible to deduce from the available information what stage of career a person was at,[10] and this was, along with gender, one of the main criteria for sample selection for the interviews.

We were able to execute the study expeditiously. It took only two months from its original conception to the completion of the data collection phase. The first partial results were presented at the end of the first wave of the pandemic (see Męcfal et al. 2020). The choice of an OQS as a research technique proved practical. The research was feasible during social isolation; it could be started without delay; and required no financial support (cf. Clarke 2016; Terry and Braun 2016).

Despite all the challenges mentioned above, OQS proved to have great analytical value. It allowed us to construct typologies of ethical strategies (nothing has changed, opportunity-oriented, and precautionary) and research methods approaches (resignation, suspension, continuation, and research (re)construction), which occurred during the first phase of the pandemic. The analytical unit in these analyses was a research project, not an individual researcher—as researchers applied different strategies in different projects (Kalinowska et al. 2022; Surmiak, Bielska, and Kalinowska 2022).

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[10] As evidenced by the sample self-descriptive characteristics of survey participants: 'senior lecturer, so a non-research position' (ID148), 'market researcher' (ID194), 'account manager' (ID196), 'Project manager' (ID227), 'Director, member of the governing body' (ID329), 'Formerly manager of large major projects, mainly in the public sector, now freelancer' (ID370), 'Advanced' (ID484).

Some contributions were lengthy, illustrated with examples, with thoughtful composition, and were similar in nature to the data obtained in journal or diary studies. An example of this type of in-depth material is the following response to a question about the problems of implementing research in a pandemic.

> In December of the previous year [2019], I had scheduled my dissertation research for March-April 2020, unknowingly, at an epidemiological peak. My dissertation schedule was very tight, and postponing the completion of the research would have posed a serious risk of the whole plan crashing. This tension stemmed from the changes introduced by the new Higher Education Act on those who had opened a dissertation procedure under the "previous system." In a word, if the scientific council does not approve my PhD defense before 31.12.2021, my PhD procedure will be closed with negative consequences—no one knows what will happen next, the world will end and the ships will fall into the abyss from the border of the flat seas. To prevent this drama, I had to make changes to the formula for the planned research. I decided to try to conduct biographical interviews online. The biographical method presupposes very precise rules of conduct at every stage of implementation (from material collection to analysis and interpretation), and online activities are not among these rules. This may also be due to the fact that the formula originated in the second half of the 20th century and has remained essentially unchanged since, protected by a scientific community that diligently guards its purity. The decision to conduct online research was therefore fraught with some risk of encountering criticism of rule violations. However, I had made the assumption that the epidemiological situation could drag on for many months, and I did not have the option of changing the biographical interviews to other research

> solutions (...), so action had to be taken if I wanted to write a PhD at all. At first, I envisaged doing just a little exploratory work—doing 1-2 interviews to embrace whether such a formula could work. [ID95]

Some people answered the same question in shorter but specific terms, as in these quotes.

> In our project, we planned qualitative research, strictly semi-structured face-to-face interviews. An epidemic situation forced us to carry them out through a telephone interview. [ID87]

> Lack of opportunity for direct contact with respondents. [ID1]

> Lack of access to libraries, which was a place to work and a source of literature. [ID55]

Other contributions were brief, not in-depth, or provided fragmentary information that could not be deepened due to the one-off, asynchronous nature of the contact with the participants (e.g., numerous contributions such as "Change in methodology," "Nothing has changed" regarding the impact of the pandemic on the research) (cf. Opperman et al. 2014). Some contributions indicated a misunderstanding of the question by the participants or provided answers that were difficult to interpret clearly, for example, in the statement by a professor of pedagogy: "Since I am conducting qualitative research, COVID-19 did not prevent me from doing it."

We also noted missing responses in a few surveys, which is also a risk characteristic of quantitative surveys. We initially struggled to decide how to analyze such a heterogeneous dataset but were helped by the instructions in Braun and col-

leagues' (2020) text on strategies for analyzing OQS data as an *entire* dataset.

Participants' Experiences

In the second phase of the study, we were joined by the fourth researcher, who had completed our survey. When we invited the new team member, we did not know that she had been an OQS participant. From the point of view of the participant, a sociologist teaching social sciences methodology, the research tool seemed disappointing, flawed, and chaotic. The three short open-ended questions seemed to her clearly insufficient to investigate such a complex and new social situation as the pandemic. This discouraged her from taking the survey seriously and resulted in her completing it unenthusiastically, failing to elaborate or leave her contact details. At the same time, she noted that taking the survey was possible despite the many teaching and emotional burdens she experienced at the start of the pandemic, as it required relatively little involvement in formulating the responses. The unobliging form of the survey helped her to overcome initial ethical doubts about conducting research with people in the first wave of the pandemic.

There were also other critical reactions to our survey. Several participants did not address the questions in the answer boxes. This is exemplified by these entries posted by participants in response to a question about thoughts on conducting research during a pandemic.

> It is not good to invent artificial problems. [ID484]

> The scientific system should take a better look at the topics of the funded work (some, pardon the pun,

bullshit about 'gender on Mexican television'). Why waste money on that? [ID273]

The format of the questions discouraged some participants from giving an honest, comprehensive, and thoughtful answer. One person gave us email feedback that they had expected more detailed questions. Another posted a comment directly on the form regarding our research, rating a survey containing only open-ended questions as uncomfortable. In this entry by a psychologist, the critique of the tool was formulated from the perspective of a quantitative researcher working in a positivist paradigm, treated as the default way of doing research.

> I have spent a lot of time making sure that my research (those related to the pandemic, but also those I have done before and now continue to do) is of good quality, with the following main considerations:
> 1. A form that will be as easy as possible for the respondents (because I think it is a sign of respect for them. It's also making sure that, having taken part in my research, they want to take part in the research of others, too).
> 2. When planning a study, I always try to know how I am going to analyze the data (this is probably obvious to you, too—because making hypotheses is done by everyone) and what I want to test, to describe.
> In my opinion, giving people open-ended questions alone doesn't meet any of these criteria. But I don't know, maybe there's a survey further down the line rather than blanks for an online qualitative interview. [ID65]

There were few such critical reactions. However, it can be argued that these participants had a sense of wasted time and effort. On the other hand, the survey was so short that this individual 'cost' can be considered small.

However, we each also received a lot of positive feedback via email or phone calls, in which the researchers wished us well and expressed gratitude that they were able to share their perspectives.

To sum up, the experience of the Authors and Participants shows the specificity of the use of the OQS during the social crisis in the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in three dimensions: ethical, methodological, and practical.

In the ethical dimension, OQS was beneficial to the ethical conduct of research because it did not generate a risk of COVID-19 infection, gave participants control over the research process, although with limited freedom of expression, and a high sense of comfort and anonymity with no face-to-face contact and simple logistics. In the methodological dimension, OQS was characterized by a low level of difficulty and a small burden on participants and allowed responses to be collected from a diverse and fairly large group. It was suitable for this particular group of participants (researchers able to construct complex written statements). We had, however, limited control over the selection process, as the survey was based on indirect communication with participants, and there was no possibility for data deepening. On a practical level, the OQS allowed for rapid conceptualization and data collection, involved very little organizational effort, and did not require fundraising. The legitimation of the technique in the sociological community was also questioned.

OQS and Other Techniques Applied during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Comparison

To more accurately capture the specificity of the application of the OQS in the pandemic crisis, we decided to make a comparison with other sociological research techniques. We chose some qualitative and quantitative techniques, similar to an OQS, which appeared in the literature about research conducted during the pandemic. It was also important for us to include in the comparison techniques based on direct and indirect communication with participants; therefore, we excluded collaborative autoethnography. We started from Lutyński's (1969]) classification of research techniques, but we also selected for our comparison those techniques that are popular in Polish sociology and have some characteristics similar to the qualitative survey (such as non-standardized written statements). As a result, we proposed a comparative description of the OQS with CAWI (quantitative survey), IDIs, and non-standardized written statements (e.g., diaries) in terms of ethical, methodological, and practical criteria.

We used criteria developed in two analytical stages: first, we compared the selected techniques according to research process phases; second, we additionally applied the empirical categories used in the description of our experiences. Some of the criteria we applied for the purpose of this comparison were relevant to the research participants (P), some to the researchers (R), and others to both sides involved in the research (B).

Firstly, OQS use is ethical because, unlike, for example, more intrusive online interviews, the participant has a great deal of control over the extent of the information provided. In an OQS, the researcher and the participant share control over the research process, which may reduce power imbalances in the research interaction. This seems particularly important during social crises, which, due to their unpredictability and the breakdown of the known social order, can cause great stress and emotional strain, as in the case of the

first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a crisis context, it may be one of the principal ethical solutions to pay attention to such a social research design in which the individual has a sense of agency. In addition, an OQS, like other forms of research based on indirect communication (e.g., diaries, quantitative survey; e.g., Krajewski et al. 2021; Łukianow et al. 2021), ensures comfort for both participants and researchers, as there is no need for a face-to-face encounter in a mutually convenient setting—an issue that is difficult to achieve in a social crisis involving, among other things, the risk of infection with a deadly disease. Avoiding the risk of harm is, therefore, indicative of the ethicality of the OQS from the point of view of both sides participating in the research. Moreover, compared to diaries or online IDIs (with the use of software for video calls), in an OQS, it is also difficult to identify the participant, which may give those completing the survey a sense of security (see Table 1 for a summary of the ethical dimension).

Table 1. Ethical dimension of selected techniques available in the pandemic crisis

Feature	Online Qualitative Survey (OQS)	Online Quantitative Survey (CAWI)	Non-standardized written statements (e.g., diaries)	Online in-depth interview (IDI)
Risk of harm (COVID-19) - B	none	none	none	none
Relations of power and control over the research process - B	Participants' control over the research process. Limited freedom of expression for the participant.	Researcher's control over the research process. No participant influence on the research tool (no freedom of expression).	Participants' control over the research process. Freedom of expression.	Researcher's control over the research process. Freedom of expression.
Comfort - B	High sense of comfort. No face-to-face contact. Simple logistics.	High sense of comfort. No face-to-face contact. Simple logistics.	High sense of comfort. No face-to-face contact. Simple logistics.	Low sense of comfort. Technical, logistic, and interaction limitations.
Sense of anonymity - P	High sense of anonymity	High sense of anonymity	Medium sense of anonymity	Low sense of anonymity

Source: Self-elaboration. B—from both sides, R—researcher's side, P—participant's side.

Secondly, an OQS is advantageous in times of social crisis for methodological reasons, as it is a smaller burden for participants than diaries or online IDIs. Not every participant is able to produce an elaborate narrative, especially at a time of high social uncertainty and high stress. Then, an OQS is an easy technique from the point of view of the participants, although it seems to be more effective for those able to build complex written statements. Moreover, an OQS allows for reaching a geographically diverse and larger number

of potential survey participants—an advantage also often highlighted in the literature (Braun et al. 2020; Prosen 2022). Furthermore, as with CAWI, an OQS allows for rapid data collection, which is crucial when trying to capture a phenomenon or opinion in a dynamically changing social reality. On the other hand, the researcher has limited control over sample selection, which is a methodological limitation of an OQS. In addition, due to the indirect contact between the two sides involved in the research, the researchers do not have the opportunity to ask follow-up questions (a standard practice whilst conducting IDIs and a major advantage of the direct contact with a participant). At the same time, an OQS differs from a CAWI in its level of standardization (open versus closed questions) (cf. Terry and Braun 2017; Thomas et al. 2024), which is its strength in the case of crisis research. In times of the pandemic social crisis, and especially in its first phases, it can be difficult for participants to find themselves in closed conceptual categories created by researchers, so an OQS with open questions seems to be a more suitable technique for almost any category of participants than CAWIs. Moreover, researchers themselves may find it difficult to create such a standardized research tool that is adapted to a new and unpredictable social phenomenon (see Table 2 for a summary of the methodological dimension).

The third argument for the use of an OQS in times of social crises is practicality, which is particularly important from the point of view of researchers. An OQS allows quick research responses because it does not require, like an online IDI, a lengthy process of conceptualization and creating research tools. Research using an OQS can be launched and implemented quickly. Furthermore, such a technique is inexpensive, as it can be used without external resources, which is a major advantage over other techniques involving written statements or IDIs. In addition,

it proves effective in situations of social isolation, provided that potential participants have access to a computer and the internet and have basic digital competencies. An OQS can also, as Daniels and colleagues (2020) write, provide a good basis for further research, such as IDIs. However, in our experience, to use an OQS in this way, the demographics need to be standardized so that we know exactly who participated in the study and had the possibility to leave their contact details (the practical dimension is summarized in Table 3).

Despite the mentioned ethical, methodological, and practical advantages, we also recognize the limitations of OQSs. For example, the lack of knowledge of the direct responses to the questions asked, as in the case of an online IDI, means that it is often difficult to fully interpret the obtained statements. We agree with the opinions that this technique could provide rich data, but not always does (cf. Rivano Eckerdal and Hagström 2017; Braun et al. 2020). One of the obstacles to obtaining in-depth statements is the lack of possibility, mentioned in the literature, to question participants about issues of interest, which means that the information obtained may differ significantly in length and degree of depth (Daniels et al. 2020; Prosen 2022). In our experience, there is also a risk that the inclusion of only a few open-ended questions in the questionnaire, rather than encouraging free and thoughtful statements (Braun et al. 2020; Daniels et al. 2020), will result in little commitment to participating in the survey and brief answers. In our opinion, this technique allows not so much for deep insights but for a broad view/overview of the phenomena under investigation, that is, for capturing certain impressions and emotions and collecting general reflections, especially in the initial phases of a crisis when other ways of contact with potential participants are much more challenging.

Table 2. Methodological dimension of selected techniques available in the pandemic crisis

Feature	Online Qualitative Survey (OQS)	Online Quantitative Survey (CAWI)	Non-standardized written statements (e.g., diaries)	Online in-depth interview (IDI)
Research tool – level of difficulty, burden on participants - P	Easy to fill in research tool, few questions, small burden	Easy to fill in research tool, many questions, medium burden	General instructions from researchers; freedom of the participant's form of expression; burden under participant's control	Interview script: questions asked by the researcher, big burden due to lengthy research process
Sample – diversity and size - R	Possibility of reaching a diverse group of people, also geographically; large sample in a short time	Possibility of reaching a diverse group of people, also geographically; large sample in a short time	Possibility of reaching a diverse group of people, also geographically; possibility of reaching large sample, but over a long time	Possibility of reaching geographically diverse group; small sample over a longer time
Sample – availability of the technique for participants, conditions of participation - P	Suitable for most groups of participants; more effective in case of people able to build complex written statements	Suitable for most groups of participants	More suitable for people able to build narration	More suitable for people able to build narration
Sample – control over selection process - R	Limited control over the sample selection process; social media/ internet	Limited control over the sample selection process; social media/ internet	Sample selection based on availability; sampling by ads on social media, on websites, or in the press	Purposive sampling, or following 'sample theoretical saturation,' greater control over sampling
Type of researcher –participant contact - B	Indirect communication; no contact	Indirect communication; no contact	Indirect communication; no contact	Direct communication, synchronic contact
Influence on the research situation - R	None; no possibility for data deepening	None; no possibility for data deepening	None; no possibility for data deepening	Big influence; possibility for data deepening

Source: Self-elaboration. B—from both sides, R—researcher's side, P—participant's side.

Table 3. Practical dimension of selected techniques available in the pandemic crisis

Feature	Online Qualitative Survey (OQS)	Online Quantitative Survey (CAWI)	Non-standardized written statements (e.g., diaries)	Online in-depth interview (IDI)
Time – speed of conceptualization - R	fast	slow	fast	slow
Time – speed of reaction - R	fast	fast	slow	slow
Time – duration of research - B	short	short	long	long
Organizational issues, e.g., software, internet connection, equipment - B	Low logistic requirements	Low logistic requirements	Low logistic requirements	High logistic requirements
Organizational issues – funds - R	Low cost of research	Low cost of research	Medium cost of research (organization and development may be costly)	High cost of research

Source: Self-elaboration. B—from both sides, R—researcher's side, P—participant's side.

Discussion

Our article reinforces the position expressed by Norman Denzin and Michael Giardina (2012), among others, according to whom the opposition of qualitative research-quantitative research is unfounded. Therefore, although OQS has an unclear status in the spectrum of research techniques, its mixed "nature" could be its advantage. The analysis of our experience confirms the advantages and disadvantages of OQS mentioned in the literature, supplementing them with features of the OQS rarely referred to. Additional disadvantages of OQS include: not understanding the question by participants, getting vague and difficult to analyze answers, feeling uncomfortable by participants, and weak legitimization in the community of researchers from a given discipline (in our case, Polish sociologists). The last of the mentioned disadvantages depends, to an extent, on an individual researcher. However, in the context of the remaining remarks, a question may arise as to whether the listed disadvantages concern the technique in question or rather indicate a lack of our research skills. We believe that this is at least partly related to OQS being applied in a situation of a new and unpredictable social crisis when there is no time for meticulous, long-term preparation of a research tool because the social reality that is being attempted to be captured is changing very quickly. In the case of additional advantages of OQS, rare-

ly mentioned in the literature, we have highlighted ethical issues related to ensuring the comfort and well-being of research participants and researchers. In our opinion, this is one of the reasons for the usefulness of this technique during social crises such as the first wave of the pandemic.

In our opinion, OQS is particularly useful for pilot studies because it not only captures the picture of the phenomenon, allows collecting data that will help design the sample selection, but also allows gathering contacts for conducting further qualitative research.

Limitations of Our Research

As this study concentrated only on researchers in Poland, different responses could have been observed from researchers in other countries. The sample was not typical for social research: the participants were researchers themselves, so they had a better understanding of the research process and were probably highly motivated. As the data were gathered in the first wave of the pandemic (an unfamiliar situation to most), the conclusions could not be directly applied to circumstances in other waves.

Conclusions

Drawing on our experience of using an OQS during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have argued that a qualitative survey is a useful technique during a social crisis since, despite certain limitations, it allows for reaching a selected category of participants quickly, cheaply, and safely for participants as well as for researchers. It is also an inclusive technique: it allows participation even in the situation of location or time constraints, and it offers anonymity for people from hidden populations and comfort while discussing sensitive topics.

An OQS does not overburden the participants and respects their comfort and anonymity.

Additionally, this method creates the possibility of obtaining rich empirical primary data and allows researchers to capture a broad and accurate idea of research phenomena. In our case, an OQS allowed us to understand how differently researchers responded to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, such a method is suited to a situation in which the researcher attempts to capture crisis-related changes. The listed characteristics give OQSs an advantage over other standardized and non-standardized data collection techniques during a social crisis. In our opinion, this applies to social crises where contact research may involve various forms of potential risk of harm, not only physical but also psychological (e.g., due to a high sense of anxiety and threat in potential participants).

To conclude, an OQS is a method suited for a specific purpose (reaching a broad idea of a research phenomenon) in a specific context (rapid unpredicted social change that creates a context in which traditional research methods may harm and/or overburden participants), especially when the possibility of face-to-face contact with participants is limited.

Acknowledgments

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