

RAFAŁ DROZDOWSKI*, MAREK KRAJEWSKI**, PIOTR LUCZYS***,
MAŁGORZATA KUBACKA****

IN BETWEEN: DEFENSIVE REACTIVITY OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS IN POLAND TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC*****

I. INTRODUCTORY NOTES

This study aims to conduct an early assessment of the COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying challenges as a type of stress test for public institutions. However, it does not propose a complete and systematic analysis of the institutional reactions to the current crisis. Instead, we seek to capture the most typical ways in which public institutions have responded to the pandemic. This research is based on seven in-depth, semi-structured, expert interviews (EI) conducted with representatives of public institutions operating in a major Polish city. These interviews are part of the research project titled ‘Everyday Life in Times of a Pandemic’, which has been conducted since March 2020 by a team working at the Faculty of Sociology of Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań. Research data facilitate only a preliminary mapping of such reactions of public institutions. Therefore, an analysis of the interviews is only the first step towards more systematic research on the subject, which will provide an opportunity to create a more empirically grounded issue of such a study. Thus, our paper should be seen primarily as an attempt to indicate the direction of research on public institutions’ responses to the pandemic and as an opportunity to raise certain related research questions.

Moreover, we are not interested in all reactions of public institutions to the pandemic but only want to determine whether the experience of the pandemic

* Rafał Drozdowski, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań,
rafal.drozdowski@amu.edu.pl, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7830-896X>

** Marek Krajewski, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań,
marek.krajewski@amu.edu.pl, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1555-7234>

*** Piotr Luczys, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań,
luczys@amu.edu.pl, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7062-7461>

**** Małgorzata Kubacka, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań,
malgorzata.kubacka@amu.edu.pl, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5301-878X>

***** This work was supported by the Adam Mickiewicz University [grant no. 28/2020].

has translated into new knowledge for the institutions about themselves and whether (and how) these institutions have used this knowledge. When we talk about the way institutions use this knowledge, we refer to both a situation in which the most critical processes that form the everyday life of the targeted institutions can be stabilized, sustaining their relatively normal functioning under the conditions of the pandemic crisis, and the fact that this knowledge can trigger prospective thinking, mobilize and foster innovation and even design the institutional order entirely from scratch.

We are also interested in determining whether public institutions, linked somewhat directly to particular public policies of the state, find themselves under pressure from new claims (both bottom-up and top-down claims, which are formulated for them by public authorities and decision-making bodies at the central level).

II. HOW IT ALL BEGAN

This research involves experts (high-ranking employees of public institutions operating in a large Polish city, who are responsible for the most important public policies, such as those related to health care, housing, public transport, public safety and employment activation) and is an integral part of the research project ‘Everyday Life in Times of a Pandemic’. This project was inaugurated among people associated with the Department of Theory and Research of Social Practices of the Faculty of Sociology of Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, shortly after the first pandemic restrictions were introduced in Poland in March 2020. We are interested in answering the following research questions: (1) What type of changes has the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic introduced into the daily lives of Poles? (2) How are Poles trying to adapt to the changes caused by the coronavirus pandemic in their daily lives? (3) What changes have the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic brought in the daily lives of Poles? The first question has already been surveyed on 19–24 March 2020 by using the computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) method. This survey had a comprehensive scope: we asked about the perception regarding the pandemic restrictions, work-pay situation, emotions, behavioural changes, reorganization of time, avoidance of other people and perception of their actions. The link to the survey was distributed through individuals’ social media accounts, institutions’ fan pages and pandemic-focused online groups. Approximately 2,500 people participated in the survey, which allowed us to sketch a reasonably broad, quantitative picture of the pandemic and how it has been experienced in Poland. Within the framework of this first stage of research, we could establish facts such as (1) most of our respondents have stayed at their permanent residence during the pandemic; (2) nearly half of them have switched to remote working; (3) a vast majority (from sixty to eighty percent, depending on the category) have isolated themselves from relatives and friends, do not shake hands to greet them, and do not travel by public transport; (4) a vast

majority experience severe fatigue and fear for the health and lives of their loved ones, as well as the fear that the pandemic will not end in a foreseeable timeframe (with related concerns of job sustainability and the state of the economy); (5) approximately seventy per cent of the respondents spend more time with their loved ones and talk to them more often (e.g. on phone) and (6) approximately, from forty to fifty per cent spend more time on their hobbies or learn new skills. The report on the first stage was widely distributed and made available in the public domain.¹

The need to complement the purely quantitative picture of the situation with a more 'condensed' picture, including not only a relatively simple descriptive account of everyday life during the pandemic but also how it is lived and reflected upon, and to capture how it forces the reorganization of many practices that were routine until recently prompted us to conduct another CAWI survey (between 31 March and 8 April 2020). This survey solely comprised open-ended questions. Approximately 1,300 people participated in the second stage of this research (including one third of the participants in the first survey). The research sample was dominated by women with higher education, living in cities with over 5,000 inhabitants, relatively well-off and economically active. Thus, one cannot speak here of a sample representative of the entire Polish society; it is merely a representation of the urban middle class. On one hand, this fact can be perceived as a shortcoming of the implemented project, and on the other hand, focusing on one distinct segment of society has its apparent advantages.

The main findings of the second CAWI survey are related to (1) ways of reorganizing everyday life, primarily in spatial and temporal dimensions; (2) strategies and tactics for 'normalizing' everyday life in a pandemic; (3) ways of coping with the deficits and surpluses (e.g. related to time, social contacts and information) caused by the pandemic and (4) ways of reflecting on the experience of the pandemic (including attempts to make it productive: to include it in a purposeful, goal-oriented and rational order of thoughts). Furthermore, a report summarizing the research was widely distributed and made available in the public domain.²

The third stage of the project took the form of a 'mini photograph survey'. At the end of April 2020, we asked people who still wanted to participate in our project to submit up to three photographs depicting their everyday life during the pandemic. This time, we were determined to accomplish the following two goals. First, we decided to see what the setting of daily life during the COVID-19 pandemic is like. Second, we decided to understand how the pandemic experience is visualized, namely the most often invoked symbols and representations. The material collected in the third stage of the project comprised 793 photographs and 115 pages of accompanying descriptions. This material is currently under compilation.

¹ Drozdowski et al. (2020a).

² Drozdowski et al. (2020b).

The fourth, and so far, the final stage of the project ‘Everyday Life in Times of a Pandemic’ was a qualitative investigation. Thirty in-depth interviews (IDIs) and seven expert interviews (which forms the basis of the present study) were conducted between December 2020 and April 2021. In the IDIs, we concentrated on spatial boundaries, disruption of the temporal order, return to conventional modes of coexistence and political claims. In contrast, in the expert interviews, we were primarily interested, as previously noted, in how public institutions have adapted to the COVID-19 reality and in the issue of how they willingly or unwillingly ‘consumed’ the knowledge gained during the pandemic.

The research participants were recruited among those who had participated in the previous stages, whereas the experts were recruited through the research team’s private networks. The experts were professionals working in the departments of labour market and outplacement, housing, palliative care, public safety, urban transport and public space. The expert interviews comprised seven thematic modules. The first module was concerned with seeking innovation in the work of organizations (as an effect of the pandemic). The second and third modules were focused on determining the types of organizations that are dealing better and worse, respectively, under the pandemic’s challenges. The fourth module was dedicated to the expectations of citizens towards the researched institutions. The fifth module focused on the pandemic-related developments that might have occurred in the organizations represented by the experts. The sixth module referred to the new knowledge that institutions might have gained in these exceptional circumstances. The seventh module was devoted to the extent to which the post-pandemic work of the institutions will differ from the pre-pandemic work and that to which this difference will become an immanent feature of their long-term functioning.

III. METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

The circumstances under which the expert interviews were conducted significantly varied from those under which individual IDIs with non-expert respondents were conducted. First, the expert interviews had different durations, which was attributable to the fact that some of them were conducted online and some were conducted in person. Moreover, the experts invited to our research also showed variation in their motivation to engage in the study, which is attributable to the various recruiting strategies adopted.

Second (and more important), the experts participating in the interviews, unlike most of the other research participants in the qualitative phase of the project, tried to ‘rearrange’ the course of the interview, ‘take control over it’ or avoid answering some questions or simply changing the topic. Consequently, in some interviews, two perspectives were conflicted: the one defined by

the researcher (asking questions according to the semi-structured interview scenario) and the other constructed *ad hoc* in the interaction (new structure defined by the respondents). Our interviewees tended to impose their own agenda on the ongoing conversation: to subordinate it to what they perceived as priority issues and to eliminate or marginalize issues that they felt were less vital (or were so sensitive or controversial that they were better left out). We assume that this situation is a result of both our interlocutors' desire to maintain a coherent image and an expression of a deeply ingrained need to administer any situation. Finally, this situation is attributed to the following two simultaneous factors. On one hand, it is attributed to maintaining the impression that the party controlling the situation here is an official: a guarantor of a particular order, legitimized by the institution's authority, whose very presence is expected to have a calming effect. Because they are there and act in their role, it means that any deep institutional crisis is out of question. On the other hand, the aim is probably also to build a comfort zone for oneself or at least to buy time to be better prepared for the anticipated questions, arguments, or traps. If this is the case, it means that the relationship between public institutions and Polish citizens is still founded on limited trust (institution-to-citizen trust or perhaps a mutual trust).³

Third, the expert interviews demonstrated that the experience of remoteness (transition mediated by new technologies such as remote working and learning, remote office, client and business contacts and remote social life and family life) does not have to be perceived as a shared experience of society, which somehow unites and connects its members. The way non-expert respondents mentioned it in the interviews significantly differs from the way experts did. For the former, remoteness is a part of private everyday life, which gradually grows together with them, slowly becoming a tool for maintaining normality. For our interlocutors representing public institutions, the same remoteness seems to be something that should not go beyond the sphere of work and professional relationships. However, a question arises whether this difference in the perception of remoteness will not make it function in two radically different ways: as 'private' and 'public' remoteness. If this were to happen, an opportunity to bring the pragmatics of everyday life and those of officialdom closer would be missed.

Fourth, the course of the expert interviews conducted within our project's framework indicates the tendency to separate the roles of the officials and persons deeply committed to their workplace from those of private individuals and citizens. On one hand, this is understandable. After all, this is the essence of the bureaucratic rationality described by Max Weber.⁴ On the other hand, this situation complicates the cognitive usefulness of the insider perspective, at least in research on organizations. Moreover, let us suppose that this in-

³ CBOS (2020); Sobiech (2017): 61–86; Nowakowski (2008): 213–233; Edelman Trust Barometer (2020).

⁴ Weber (1979): 956–1005.

sider perspective is often an ‘official position of the organization’ rather than an expert view of the situation. This raises the (methodological) question of how and where to look for the latter.

IV. INNOVATIVE INSTITUTIONS

All interviewed representatives of public institutions emphasized that their most important task during the pandemic was (and still is) to ensure that the entities they manage or co-manage function somewhat in the same manner as that before the pandemic (*Now, actually, it is happening as it used to be – remote meetings as before there were ordinary meetings /EI4/; We work as a team. I must say that the nurses work very well. They go to the patients; it has not changed. So, I do not see a big difference /EI7/*).

Such conservativeness of public institutions may be considered symptomatic. On one hand, it is part of the inertia of such organizations and their tendency to persist in fixed ways of thinking and acting, which results from the very essence of institutions as something fixed and solidified.⁵ During crises, which are always imbalanced, attention is focused on attempts to restore the balance.⁶ Additionally, note that we are talking about public institutions carrying out specific legally predefined tasks for the benefit of the community. Their goals cannot change due to the decisions of their staff, as they are defined by the essential legal documents regulating the life of a particular community.⁷

Moreover, as our previous study conducted during the pandemic showed, specific public institutions are not lonely islands but part of formalized networks of such entities.⁸ During the crisis, these institutions produced emergent types of operational knowledge focused precisely on the attempt to return to normality. Normality was precisely understood as the time before the pandemic and the current ways in which such organizations operate.

It quickly became apparent that many of the legislative duties and goals of particular public institutions were no longer feasible despite the pandemic. At the same time, many of these organizations were forced to perform activities that were entirely unfamiliar to them, in an unusual practice and often in a way that raised formal and legal concerns.

The labour market institutions (responsible for unemployment prevention, professional activation of citizens and mediation between employers and employees) may serve as a good example for this. On one hand, with the first lockdown, these institutions ceased much of their regular operations almost overnight (*For a brief time, the job placement service came to a halt. It also*

⁵ Berger, Luckmann (1967); Douglas (1986).

⁶ Weible et al. (2020): 225–241.

⁷ Sanford, Blum, Smith (2020): 47–60.

⁸ Krajewski, Frąckowiak (2021).

came to a halt because, at the [...] first lockdown, the number of job opportunities dropped drastically. As a result, we have nothing to give to the unemployed. /EI1/).

On the other hand, these institutions were burdened with tasks that were entirely unfamiliar to them (*We had to move from [...] an office that worked with the unemployed and employers to an office that distributed funds. In a nutshell, staff who were formerly employment agents became experts in granting [financial] aid. And it all unfolded at a breakneck clip. /EI1/*).

Two issues are worth noting here. First, changes in the way an institution functions are caused by both the loss of its ability to fulfil its former aims and the emergence of new changes imposed on the institution from above (by the state or local government). This change is not spontaneous and its wellspring is external. The second issue is that this change requires the employees taking completely new roles, thus acquiring new types of knowledge and skills.

Such effects of the COVID-19 crisis were also emphasized by participants at other stages of our research. However, they primarily referred to the education, schooling and cultural systems, where lockdown forced an entirely new way of functioning, based on simultaneity and co-presence.⁹ Therefore, change, especially in a crisis, forces intensive processes of learning and acquiring new skills.¹⁰

This suggests that, from the institutions' viewpoint (thinking in conservative terms), focusing on return to normality is the most rational strategy, which does not require the expenditure of new resources and sustains the relative autonomy of the organization. However, it may not be the most rational approach from the perspective of the effectiveness of achieving the goals that the institution was set up to achieve.¹¹

In the interviews, all our experts expressed the belief that remote working will be a lasting legacy of the pandemic (*Partial remote working – this [...] will for sure stay with us. /EI5/*). For the time being, however, remote working evokes mixed feelings. On one hand, its advantages are recognized (e.g. the possibility to save time) (*But these remote meetings also sometimes make work easier. They even often save time on commuting. /EI4/*). It was also indicated that telecommuting favours more substantive business contacts and disciplines the course of meetings (*A remote meeting makes me gain time and the second thing is that it is concrete, that is, we usually talk, this is my experience, about the subject the meeting is devoted to, we end up switching off, and that's it. /EI5/*).

On the other hand, remote working is also accompanied by several doubts and concerns (*We see that remote contact has not replaced face-to-face contact in many areas. /EI6/*). Therefore, new developments lead to new forms of organizational self-knowledge. Finally, it is perceived that there is lack of optimality in how the institution has operated to date and that it wastes resources

⁹ Daniel (2020): 91–96; Onyema et al. (2020): 108–121; Darling-Hammond (2020).

¹⁰ Moyson, Scholten, Weible (2017): 161–177; Kerres (2020).

¹¹ Berger et al. (2021); da Silva (2020).

such as time and attention. However, it is impossible to ignore the fact that they are followed by a type of mechanization of relationships, reducing contacts to the necessary minimum, to that which is 'nitty-gritty' and eliminating from them that which is 'expendable' (e.g. social relations, phatic speech and various forms of politeness). Thus, the experience of remoteness brings new experiences and establishes a perspective from which one can look at what was 'before the pandemic'. It sets new standards for the implementation of some activities of the institution. At the same time, there is a belief about the impossibility of a complete change in these statements, and thus, hope for return to normality, to what was before the crisis.

In addition to remote working, the following novel organizational experience was also indicated by the research participants: simplification of bureaucratic procedures forced by the pandemic (*And what is interesting, in the pre-pandemic reality we had such a penchant for paper, approvals, stamps, signatures and such a bit excessive activity [...]. Now, when we had to speed things up and do our work, maybe not in shortcuts but... differently, we realized that we didn't really need all this. We complicated things for ourselves [...]. [We realized] that we don't need five stamps and approvals on paper, that we can do the same in the form of an electronic document or an e-mail confirmation. /EI1/*).

As in telecommuting, attempts are made here to see the bright side of the crisis caused by the pandemic: its abruptness and the emergence of new tasks prompted the optimization of existing forms of work. Also, in this case, the pandemic brought knowledge about the ineffectiveness of temporary forms of organizational activities. In particular, it revealed excessively developed bureaucratic procedures. Therefore, it appears intriguing that the pandemic and the restrictions related to it forced the purging of public institutions of everything that we usually associate them with (e.g. the bureaucratic ritualization of an activity, which is supposed to give it meaning and equip it with a seriousness that legitimizes the institution itself as a socially significant entity).¹²

In remote working and the simplification of administrative procedures (thus, the *de facto* de-bureaucratization of the institutional order), the increase in social trust seems to be the specific added value.¹³ In fact, both remote working and reduction in the number of official procedures (which is tantamount to replacing the 'culture of certificates' with a 'culture of statements' and to the aim to make as many contacts between the office and applicant/client indirect as possible) enforce, in a way, an increase in mutual trust and the growth of bonding and bridging social capital.¹⁴

This increase in trust between individuals and between individuals and institutions occurs under the influence of external circumstances, and the fact that it is precisely enforced may raise some concerns. It can be assumed, for example, that the trust capital thus generated will be poorly rooted and situ-

¹² Sanford, Blum, Smith (2020): 47–60.

¹³ Sztompka (2007); Putnam, Leonardi, Nanetti (1993).

¹⁴ Putnam (1995): 65–78.

ational rather than generalized. In contrast, many times in the past, the proliferation of trust and the growth of social capital was not so much the result of specific, strongly internalized values as those of purely pragmatic calculations and various external pressures.¹⁵

The critical issue here is that it is unclear whether the end of the pandemic will bring a return to a rigidly hierarchical and bureaucratic organizational culture. Some of our interviewees expect such a scenario to occur (*The pandemic showed where you need to react quickly [...]. In some offices, processes were delegated lower and [...] structures started to flatten out. And it helped to react faster. However, looking at this aspect, the end of the pandemic will probably cause [...] that we will probably return to such a vertical way of functioning. /EI6/*). Nevertheless, the question remains as to whether this contradicts the very idea of public institutions as bureaucratic structures and whether the experience of increasing the efficiency of their functioning by simplifying the procedures or flattening their structures will prove so significant that it will be able to overcome the existing habits, the bureaucratic mentality,¹⁶ the tendency to strongly proceduralize each action,¹⁷ ritualism and the need for hierarchy,¹⁸ much characteristic of all bureaucratic structures, especially those operating within the public sector.¹⁹

Third, our interviewees emphasized that the circumstances of the pandemic forced their employing institutions to be more flexible and act quickly (*The pandemic showed [...] that you can introduce completely new tools, new procedures, associated with completely new legislation, quite rapidly and that you can act very quickly and flexibly and fix certain procedures. Before the pandemic, such activities were very spread out over time and the whole process, from an idea to the introduction of legislation, IT tools and implementation [...] was extremely time-consuming. /EI6/; We had to learn to react very quickly to changes /EI4/*). This last element of the experience resulting from the pandemic is also inconsistent with how we tend to think of bureaucratic organizations as usually associated with slowness, lengthy decision-making and tardiness, which are often not just a result of the way such institutions are structured but rather their very essence.²⁰ The possibility of fast action, rapid creation of new procedures and flexibility also seems to have surprised our interviewees, which is indicated by phrases such as ‘it turned out’, ‘the pandemic showed’ and ‘we had to react quickly’, which indicate the external character of such a transformation and result in increased efficiency, speed and flexibility of public institutions.

¹⁵ Coleman (1988): S95–S120; Fukuyama (1995); Portes (1998): 1–24.

¹⁶ Brol (2013): 46–56; Świdorski (2021): 35–53.

¹⁷ Brodtkin, Majmundar (2008); Kirp (1976): 841–876; Klimek (2020): 2434–2444.

¹⁸ Diefenbach, Todnem (2012); Stull, Maynard-Moody, Mitchell (1988): 215–233.

¹⁹ Heywood, Meyer-Sahling (2013): 191–204; Meier et al. (2019): 1576–1605.

²⁰ Nutt (2006): 289–318.

V. MISSED OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

The three abovementioned examples of how public institutions responded to the pandemic (the appreciation of technologies enabling remote working and remote customer service, de-bureaucratization of many official procedures and a faster and more flexible response to the changing needs of the environment) have exhausted the list of pandemic-driven changes and innovations that our interviewees identified, which occurred in the institutions they co-managed.

In reality, we expected to identify more changes and innovations. First, we assumed that the pandemic, by reorganizing not only ‘private everyday life’,²¹ but also the ‘everyday life of institutions’, would force the latter to implement a real avalanche of new (including radically new) organizational solutions. Second, we assumed that the pandemic would be treated as a pretext and an excellent opportunity to provoke (or intensify) discussions on changes that, so far, have been postulated only ‘quietly’ or inconsistently by people within the institutions. In other words, we assumed that the pandemic would provide new arguments confirming many of the previous reform ideas in the intra-organizational ‘informal circulation’. It is challenging to determine what caused this not to happen unequivocally. Perhaps it was caused by the fact that the key role in the struggle of public institutions under the challenges of the pandemic and in the gradual acquisition of resilience, which allowed them to function relatively normally in radically changed circumstances, was played by micro-innovativeness—tens or perhaps hundreds of micro-innovations and minimal and barely noticeable corrections in existing routines (*Here, something is constantly changing. We are constantly introducing new things. /EI7/*). However, this micro-innovation (innovation that can be somewhat dismissively described as ‘retail’ or ‘tactical’) might have been overlooked by our interviewees and deliberately downplayed and depreciated due to the distrust and aversion to innovation perceived as a risky and often troublesome break in the organization’s routine.²² It is also possible that the theme of change and innovation did not get highlighted in the statements of our respondents as strongly as we had hoped. As seen from their perspective, the most crucial task they faced during the pandemic (especially during the weeks of full and partial lockdown) was thoroughly conservative: It was neither a question of seeking new qualities and solutions, nor of ‘running ahead’, but of ensuring that the institutions for which they are responsible function somewhat as they did before the pandemic. What was at stake, then, was not the difference but the similarity. In other words, it was not a change but preserving (or saving) institutional continuity. A third possible explanation for this micro-innovation in the activities of public institutions that emerged from our interviews is a reluctance to share with those who are not part of these organizations information that can harm them and show that they rely on *ad hoc*, insufficiently

²¹ Drozdowski et al. (2020a), (2020b).

²² Agger, Sørensen (2018): 53–73; Koch, Hauknes (2005).

tested and officially approved procedures, or that on account of greater efficiency and faster resolution of problems faced by their clients, institutions act contrary to procedures.

VI. UNDERSTANDING THE PANDEMIC (AND ONESELF)

Our two other initial assumptions also failed to materialize: (1) the fact that the sense of fear, confusion and uncertainty accompanying the pandemic, especially in its first weeks and months,²³ brought a range of new expectations and claims onto public institutions, and (2) the fact that the experience of the pandemic intensified the intra-organizational discussions on how to increase the resilience of those responsible for the implementation of public policies.

The aforementioned lack of both new expectations and grassroots, civic claims directed at public institutions can perhaps most easily be explained by the fact that all institutions we researched are where the state meets its citizens directly. From the viewpoint of the state, these expectations and claims might appear as its administrative periphery. However, from the citizens' viewpoint, they are an integral part of their immediate environment and are associated with stabilizing their everyday lives. Therefore, at critical moments, such as moments of confusion and uncertainty, these public institutions, which are the most deeply rooted in everyday life, are in their way spared as objects of criticism. Of course, they are still the target of various remarks and resentments, as well as complaints. However, these are relatively technical and organizational remarks aimed at improving their work rather than destabilizing them. Therefore, it is vital for these institutions to avoid functioning worse than before the pandemic. In the current circumstances, it is less critical for them to start operating differently, and by implication, better (which, during the pandemic, is hardly a realistic postulate). Therefore, the high degree of citizens' dependence on public institutions means that they are not considered an essential aspect of social reality. The fact that petitioners experience them in their relationships with specific officials makes it possible to realize that the pandemic is a new, critical experience for both parties, which fosters mutual empathy and increases tolerance for actions far diverging from the mutual expectations developed long before the current crisis.

The fact that the managers of the institutions we researched appeared highly reticent in drawing more general conclusions about what should be done to be better prepared for emergencies in the future appears to have the following four reasons.

First, it is most likely that some people participating in the research perceived their employing institutions as entities that are only equipped with executive tasks (*When it comes to new knowledge, we are the kind of institution that has to rely on legislation and only on current legislation. /EI3/*). Under

²³ Drozdowski et al. (2020a), (2020b); Krajewski et al. (2021): S777–S790.

this assumption, the institutional order (or at least its lowest level) is treated as a fragment of a hierarchical structure that will always be designed and never design itself. Second, our interviewees might have felt that it was too early to formulate such conclusions, as we all are still stuck in a pandemic world; thus, the events of the pandemic period cannot be analysed from a sufficient distance. Third, perhaps our interviewees were reluctant to share intra-organizational knowledge with us, believing they were not entitled to do so. This implies certain disloyalty to the institutions they represented. Fourth, the reluctance to discuss what lessons (e.g. organizational, logistical, or legal) should be learned from the pandemic might have a much deeper and more complex psycho-social basis.

Namely, it can be assumed that the most natural and self-reinforcing reaction to the experience of a pandemic is not at all to seek to make it productive and valuable by turning it into a set of inspirations to better cope with future extreme challenges, but precisely the opposite: the deliberate miniaturization of the pandemic experience. This refers to treating pandemic experience as so extreme and exaggerated in its uniqueness that it is useless for designing a social order that should be lighter than the existing one, more flexible, more resilient to disruption, and more effective. In other words, the knowledge of how institutions work that we have been gaining during a pandemic may appear useless.²⁴ This somewhat perverse and paradoxical way of reflecting on individual and collective experiences (primarily organizational and, e.g., emotional) of functioning in a reality reorganized by a pandemic can be considered a defensive reaction. Taming the pandemic by questioning or relativizing its scale is an (almost) impossible task at present. However, taming it by convincing ourselves and others that the vivisection performed on it does not make much sense because the case of the pandemic is so exceptional (or, in any case, unique) that it does not teach us anything for the future seems to be a course of action that is more likely to succeed.

The strategy of taming a pandemic by miniaturizing its possible inspiring and mobilizing consequences can be interpreted in two ways. The first interpretation is sympathetic, which assumes that the caution in treating the pandemic as a reservoir of arguments that can speak in favour of some radical re-evaluation (followed by equally fundamental changes) testifies to a mature view and judgement of the whole situation. The measures of this maturity are coldness and emotional distance. The second, less benevolent interpretation refers to ulterior motives, among which the desire to hold back change and maintain routine looms large.

Regardless of which of the above explanations we consider, we are dealing with a phenomenon called inverted moral panic. One of the features of this panic, as described by Cohen,²⁵ is the inadequacy and redundancy of reactions resulting from a misjudgement of the situation. Here, the result of an incorrect and simplifying diagnosis is an inadequate scarcity of reactions, their

²⁴ Douglas (1986); Spicer (2020): 1737–1740.

²⁵ Cohen (2011).

restraint, or in extreme cases, their absence. In both moral panic and its inverted variant, we are dealing with an unrealistic assessment of the threats posed by a new situation, which is a change in the way the existing order functions. Both cases are followed by working out the startling transformations or severe crises. However, at the same time, this process does not entail a better adaptation to the new framework in which we are functioning. In other words, in both cases, there is hope that, although everything has changed so far, we can still function as we did before.

Interestingly, the theme of (needed and expected) change appears much more often in the context of society. If something should change due to the pandemic, it is rather the society (*I would show you what the incoming correspondence looks like. Fragmented, jumbled sentences, no signatures, we don't know who is writing to us at all, well, intentionally or unconsciously rude addressing, completely incorrect, not even arranged in logical sentences. This is our everyday reality. So, those who write to us really do not recognize, in ninety percent of cases, and I say this with full responsibility [...], that you have to do it in Polish, that you have to keep the standards of communication, that you have to recognize the official as a partner in solving problems, that communication is often used to report problems, but in a usual way, and not immediately with resentment. This is something that brings me down, this is something that brings me down a lot as an official, and unfortunately, I do not see any change here either. I would like the pandemic to cause some kind of adjustment in this area, but there is no such adjustment. /EI5/; I think that if there is no cultural revolution, but a reasonable one, it will not be good. /EI7/; [...] something must be changed in the way people think. /EI2/*).

Meanwhile, it is difficult to reject the idea that an important variable influencing the course of a pandemic and coping strategies (both individual and collective, both 'private', inscribed in the framework of private everyday life, and 'public', inscribed in the framework of the institutional order) is the broadly understood social culture.²⁶ Moreover, we have known for years that, in many cases, it is difficult or even impossible to separate the cultural layer from the issue of institutional performance. This was also indicated by our interviewees (*When I hear people saying that the government is to blame... It's not the government. It's us, who is to blame because if something bad happens, it's not the government who is standing, it's us who are doing a bad job. And people cannot understand this. And this [...] I can see it in various institutions. Not only do you have to wait a very long time for a phone call, but also they almost do you a favour to talk to you. I think this is also a complicated issue. I don't see kindness. /EI7/*).

However, the tendency to make the social side responsible for the functioning of the collective order, including its institutional part, carries at least two risks. First, it may cause almost the entire discussion on the efficiency of public institutions to undergo a deliberate or involuntary depoliticization, in

²⁶ Margraf, Brailovskaia, Schneider (2020); Frey, Chen, Presidente (2020): 222–238; Gokmen, Baskici, Ercil (2021): 1–8.

that it will become much more a discussion about society (e.g. its ‘mentality’, its unvarnished patterns of action and its old and new strategies of adaptation) and less (or not at all) a discussion about the state, its structures and its style or styles of action. Second, it can further antagonize and separate the ‘worlds of private everyday life’ from the ‘public sphere’. This danger was also highlighted by Krastev,²⁷ according to whom this increasing separation of the private and civic public spheres is, in principle, tantamount to the end of liberal democracy.

The conducted interviews do not entitle to a robust and Boolean conclusion that in the eyes of our interviewees, the entire blame and responsibility for the fact that the collective order does not function as well as we would all liked is taken by the society. The second (though significantly less frequent) culprit held responsible for this state of affairs is, of course, the state. This is because only the state has enough power to enforce the law and only the state can legally change the law (*Local governments have to cover (losses) from other expenses, there is simply no support from the government /EI4/; No government has wanted to look for positive solutions for cooperatives for many years now /EI2/*).

Finally, the perspective of experts hired in the researched public institutions is expressed as follows: ‘society’, on one hand, and ‘the state’, on the other hand, are most responsible for what is currently happening in their institutions. The institutional sphere in-between the state and society (developed, justified and functioning both as an extension of the will and interests of ‘society’ and as an extension of the will and interests of ‘the state’) is beyond suspicion. Paradoxically, then, our research participants take on themselves the role of a transparent conduit that mediates between the state and society but, essentially, cannot influence how they function and is somewhat shaped by them. Such renunciation of any agency can be taken as a reaction to a crisis but seems to have its wellsprings in the organizational peculiarities of bureaucratic organizations, whose characteristic is the dispersion of responsibility.²⁸

VII. CONCLUSION

The available research material does not allow us to make any factual statements or draw conclusions about the entire Polish society. At the same time, the research project has provided some significant insights that may serve as a foundation for developing hypotheses for future studies.

Three such hypotheses, or rather research clarifications, appear to be particularly worthy of further research. First, is it reasonable, and to what extent, for us to speak of a certain interpretative (or even adaptive) mechanism,

²⁷ Krastev (2020).

²⁸ Seibel (2020); Zajač, Comfort (1997): 541–570.

which we have referred to in this paper as reverse moral panic? This mechanism can be regarded as yet another mechanism of invalidation which can be supposed to be justified by atypicality and incidentality²⁹ and thus, also by the incompatibility of certain events with the role of events that are informative, from which some conclusions can be drawn for the future.

Second, we assume that the theme of intra-institutional micro-innovations is worth further investigation. One may try to read them, taking inspiration from Giddens,³⁰ as yet another illustration of structure, the quintessence of which is the assumption of simultaneity of processes of reproduction and production of the order. One can also assume that it is another example of a strategy of orienting towards 'normal originality', which tries to reconcile two opposing needs: the need to validate oneself in the eyes of others as a social norm and the need to maintain the image of an individual who refuses to follow horizontal conformism.³¹ However, it is also possible to interpret these micro-innovative practices in a much simpler and perhaps even more accurate way: as both a manifestation and result of tactical (rather than strategic) thinking or even as a sign of a window dressing in which the answer to the objective need for change is, in reality, a conservative attempt to make as few alterations as possible or to change something at the lowest cost possible. It is probably also worth mentioning that these switches can be treated as a result of emergently generated knowledge resulting from interactions between employees hired in the same institution or different institutions facing similar dilemmas or crises.

Third, it is closely analysing the social reception of public institutions situated closest to citizens and forming the lowest level of institutional order in our judgment. Based on the empirical material we have gathered, we can conclude that the researched institutions are associated with the sphere of everyday life, with this Habermasian *Lebenswelt*, rather than with the state. This is attributable to the fact that they primarily serve the needs inscribed in the private sphere (e.g. health, safety, and work). Nevertheless, the status of the institutions closest to ordinary citizens' everyday lives is a fundamental issue, which determines the boundary separating the 'private' from the 'public' and the 'individual' from the 'state'. However, what is probably even more significant, presently, their status decides (and will decide in the nearest future) the shape that individual and collective strategies of dealing with reality take (and will take on). It is a question of how close or distant these strategies will be from the institutions that are supposed to implement public policies, whether and how much they will aim to capture them, and a question regarding these institutions' privatization.

²⁹ Krajewski (2017).

³⁰ Giddens (1984).

³¹ Drozdowski, Krajewski (2008).

- Agger, A., Sørensen, E. (2018). Managing collaborative innovation in public bureaucracies. *Planning Theory* 17(1): 53–73. doi:10.1177/1473095216672500
- Berger, L., Berger, N., Bosetti, V. et al. (2021). Rational policymaking during a pandemic. *PNAS* 118(4): e2012704118. doi:10.1073/pnas.2012704118
- Berger, P.L., Luckmann, T. (1967). *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. London: The Penguin Press.
- Brodkin, E.Z., Majmudar, M. (2008). Organizations and exclusion: an inquiry into bureaucratic proceduralism. National Poverty Center Working Paper Series, University of Michigan. <http://www.npc.umich.edu/publications/working_papers/?publication_id=155&>.
- Brol, M. (2013). Racjonalizacja działalności organizacji zbiurokratyzowanych. *Optimum. Studia Ekonomiczne* 61(1): 46–56. <https://repozytorium.uwb.edu.pl/jspui/bitstream/11320/630/1/04_Marcin%20BROL.pdf>.
- Cohen, S. (2011). *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. London: Routledge.
- Coleman, J.S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology* 94: S95–S120.
- CBOS (2020). Komunikat z badań nr 43, kwiecień 2020 – „Zaufanie społeczne”. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo CBOS.
- Daniel, J. (2020). Education and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Prospects* 49: 91–96.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2020). Learning in the time of COVID-19. *Forbes* Mar 19, 2020. <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/lindadarlinghammond/2020/03/19/learning-in-the-time-of-covid-19/#7693e8967203>>.
- da Silva, L.A.P. (2020). Green swan 2 – climate change and covid-19: reflections on efficiency versus resilience. The Bank for International Settlements. <<https://www.bis.org/speeches/sp200514.htm>>.
- Diefenbach, T., Todnem, R. (2012). Bureaucracy and hierarchy – what else!?, [in:] T. Diefenbach, R. Todnem (eds.), *Reinventing Hierarchy and Bureaucracy – From the Bureau to Network Organizations (Research in the Sociology of Organizations 35)*. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited: 1–27. doi:10.1108/S0733-558X(2012)0000035003
- Drozdowski, R., Frąckowiak, M., Krajewski, M., Kubacka, M., Luczys, P., Modrzyk, A., Rogowski, L., Rura, P., Stamm, A. (2020a). Życie codzienne w czasach pandemii. Raport z pierwszego etapu badań. <https://issuu.com/wydzialsocjologiiuam/docs/_ycie_codzienne_w_czasach_pandemii_-_wydzia_socjo>.
- Drozdowski, R., Frąckowiak, M., Krajewski, M., Kubacka, M., Luczys, P., Modrzyk, A., Rogowski, L., Rura, P., Stamm, A. (2020b). Życie codzienne w czasach pandemii. Raport z drugiego etapu badań <https://issuu.com/wydzialsocjologiiuam/docs/z_ycie_codzienne_w_czasach_pandemii_8a63943c6eb314>.
- Drozdowski, R., Krajewski, M. (2008). *Wyobrażenia społeczna*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM.
- Douglas, M. (1986). *How Institutions Think*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Edelman Trust Barometer (2020). <<https://www.edelman.com/trust/2020-trust-barometer>>.
- Frey, C.B., Chen, C., Presidente, G. (2020). Democracy, culture, and contagion: political regimes and countries responsiveness to Covid-19. *Covid Economics* 18: 222–238. <<https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:06808503-78e4-404f-804f-1f97ab2c7d7e>>.
- Fukuyama, F. (1995). *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*. New York: Free Press.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gokmen, Y., Baskici, C., Ercil, Y. (2021). The impact of national culture on the increase of COVID-19: a cross-country analysis of European countries. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 81: 1–8. doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2020.12.006
- Heywood, P., Meyer-Sahling, J.-H. (2013). Danger zones of corruption: how management of the ministerial bureaucracy affects corruption risks in Poland. *Public Administration & Development* 33(3): 191–204. doi:10.1002/pad.1644
- Kerres, M. (2020). Against all odds: education in Germany coping with Covid-19. *Postdigital Science and Education* 2: 690–694. doi:10.1007/s42438-020-00130-7

- Klimek, J. A. (2020). Multi-criteria assessment of the bureaucracy in Poland – the individual decision-making aspect. *Procedia Computer Science* 176: 2434–2444. doi:10.1016/j.procs.2020.09.321
- Koch, P., Hauknes, J. (2005). On innovation in the public sector – today and beyond, Public Report D20, NIFU Step, Oslo. <<http://www.aviana.com/step/publin/reports/d20-innovation.pdf>>.
- Krajewski, M. (2017). *Incydentologia*. Warszawa: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana.
- Krajewski, M., Frąckowiak, M. (2021). W poszukiwaniu strategii. Działania instytucji teatralnych w czasie pandemii. Raport z badania prowadzonego z osobami kierującymi instytucjami teatralnymi w Polsce. Warszawa: Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego.
- Krajewski, M., Frąckowiak, M., Kubacka, M. et al. (2021). The bright side of the crisis. The positive aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic according to the Poles. *European Societies* 23: S777–S790. doi:10.1080/14616696.2020.1836387
- Krastev, I. (2020). *Is It Tomorrow Yet? Paradoxes of the Pandemic*. London: Penguin Books.
- Kirp, D.L. (1976). Proceduralism and Bureaucracy: Due Process in the School Setting. *Stanford Law Review* 28(5): 841–876. doi:10.2307/1228146
- Margraf, J., Brailovskaia, J., Schneider, S. (2020). Behavioral measures to fight COVID-19: an 8-country study of perceived usefulness, adherence and their predictors. *PLoS One* 15(12): e0243523. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0243523
- Meier, K.J., Compton, M., Polga-Hecimovich, J. et al. (2019). Bureaucracy and the failure of politics: challenges to democratic governance. *Administration & Society* 51(10): 1576–1605. doi:10.1177/0095399719874759
- Moyson, S., Scholten, P., Weible, C.M. (2017). Policy learning and policy change: theorizing their relations from different perspectives. *Policy and Society* 36(2): 161–177.
- Nowakowski, K. (2008). Wymiary zaufania i problem zaufania negatywnego w Polsce. *Ruch Prawniczy, Ekonomiczny i Socjologiczny* 70(1): 213–233.
- Nutt, P.C. (2006). Comparing public and private sector decision-making practices. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 16(2): 289–318. doi:10.1093/jopart/mui041
- Onyema, E. M., Nwafor, N.Ch., Obafemi, F.A. et al. (2020). Impact of Coronavirus Pandemic on Education. *Journal of Education and Practice* 11: 108–121. doi:10.7176/JEP/11-13-12
- Portes, A. (1998). Social capital: its origins and applications in modern sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology* 24: 1–24. doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.24.1.1
- Putnam, R.D. (1995). Bowling alone: America’s declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy* 6(1): 65–78. doi: 10.1353/jod.1995.0002
- Putnam, R., Leonardi, R., Nanetti, R.Y. (1993). *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Sanford A.G., Blum D., Smith S.L. (2020). Seeking stability in unstable Times. COVID-19 and the bureaucratic mindset, [in:] J.M. Ryan (ed.), *COVID-19. Volume 2: Covid-19: Social Consequences and Cultural Adaptations*. London: Routledge: 47–60.
- Seibel, W. (2020). Are public bureaucracies supposed to be high reliability organizations? *Global Perspectives* 1(1): 17643. doi:10.1525/gp.2020.17643
- Sobiech, R. (2017). Zaufanie do władz publicznych. Efekt zaklinania deszczu a instytucjonalizacja nieufności. *Zoon Politikon* 8: 61–86. doi:10.4467/2543408XZOP.17.003.9262
- Spicer, A. (2020). Organizational culture and COVID-19. *Journal of Management Studies* 57(8): 1737–1740. doi:10.1111/joms.12625
- Stull, D.D., Maynard-Moody, S., Mitchell, J. (1988). The ritual of reorganization in a public bureaucracy. *Qualitative Sociology* 11(3): 215–233. doi:10.1007/BF00988956
- Sztompka, P. (2007). *Zaufanie. Fundament społeczeństwa*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak.
- Świderski, K. (2021). Biurokratyczne załatwianie spraw. *Studia Prawa Publicznego* 1(33): 35–53. doi:10.14746/spp.2021.1.33.2
- Zajac, G., Comfort, L.K. (1997). “The Spirit of Watchfulness”: public ethics as organizational learning. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 7(4): 541–570. doi:10.1093/oxfordjournals.jpart.a024365
- Weber, M. (1979). *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*. University of Oakland: California Press.
- Weible, C.M., Nohrstedt, D., Cairney, P. et al. (2020). COVID-19 and the policy sciences: initial reactions and perspectives. *Policy Sciences* 53: 225–241. doi:10.1007/s11077-020-09381-4

IN BETWEEN: DEFENSIVE REACTIVITY OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS
IN POLAND TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Summary

This paper discusses a research project that attempted to examine selected public institutions' response strategies to a pandemic. The most important research question of the project was the relationship between the pandemic and innovativeness of the sector of public institutions (understood as the desire to introduce new ways of operating, new inter-institutional links, new patterns of relations with stakeholders, etc., resulting from the knowledge provided to individual institutions by functioning under the conditions of the pandemic). During qualitative research we found that the researched institutions' predominant reaction to the challenges of the pandemic was not an orientation towards innovation but a striving to maintain a mode of functioning that is as similar as possible to that from before the pandemic. The innovations made (transition to remote working, simplification of some administrative procedures) resulted from external pressure to a greater extent and internal reflexivity to a lesser extent. The narratives captured in the study about the everyday life of public institutions during the pandemic have three common elements. First, they all focus less on large and spectacular innovations and more on micro-innovations (not treated as innovation, but understood as dozens of micro-improvements, minimal adjustments to existing routines). Second, they all miniaturize the experience of the pandemic, regarding it as events so extreme as to be useless for designing a better institutional order. Thirdly, all the reconstructed narratives are situated in an institutional zone of in-between, which means that they perceive themselves as a transparent medium fluctuating between the state and society and as a subject without influence on the shape of its own functioning. On the one hand, this would depend on the level of civic culture and, on the other hand, on the policy created at the highest levels of the state.

Keywords: everyday life sociology; public institutions; expert interviews; Poland; COVID-19