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# How housing problems affect students: analysis of in-depth interviews with Polish student occupation strike participants

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ABSTRACT: Factors such as the commodification of housing and higher education or the decreasing welfare support offered to students make housing and, thus, higher education less affordable. Growing difficulties can result in social dissatisfaction, manifested through protests calling for more excellent institutional support. Employing a case study method, we use phenomenological style in-depth individual interviews to explore housing experiences and perspectives of students, a group strongly affected by the growing housing issues. Thirty interviews were conducted with participants of a student occupation strike in Poznań (Poland) "Jowita" student dormitory in December 2023. Findings revealed that students struggle with alienation, rental power imbalance, or unmet housing needs. To finance housing during education, they have to work to sacrifice their health or growth. Findings indicate growing housing problems, students' experiences, and various costs associated with continuing their education. Although the study was affected by the sudden nature of the interviews and the specificity of respondents, it shows the importance of exploring the students' perspective of housing experiences to understand their needs better when discussing institutional support. This research contributes to further understanding of the student housing market, presenting various costs students face when managing their accommodation.

KEYWORDS: student housing, higher education, housing market, housing conditions, student dormitories, protest, students

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Affordable housing is crucial for human wellbeing, providing stability and improving mental health (Bond et al., 2012). It is often possible to see the process of changing it into a commodity, focusing on the profit it can provide instead of the importance it brings to people living in it—the process known as the commodification of housing (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). Challenges from the commodification of housing are tough to handle when the group involved is in a difficult position without much bargaining power. One group that holds this status is students—primarily those who do not own their own housing and thus have to rely on their families and other institutions for accommodation.

Students' peculiar life position relates to the transitional nature of the housing they obtain, marking a shift into adulthood (Kenyon, 1999; Clapham, 2005). Not yet being a permanent home, it can often come with a feeling of uncertainty. Students have to secure accommodation in the city where they study, often without stable jobs to sustain themselves. Many of them have to rely on help from family, university, or their incomes, most often from part-time jobs done on the side.

Since the political transformation in 1989, which introduced a market economy in Poland, the functioning of multiple areas of life has changed, also affecting the education sector—the political transformation allowed for the development of private schools and universities. Changes in higher education were strongly related to the progress of neoliberalization processes in Polish society, which arose after the market changes. This was also associated with the massification of higher education, which influenced not only the education itself but also the related sectors, mainly student housing. These conditions led to the development of widely spread private renting for students and Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA), slowly emerging and gaining popularity among investors in the Polish market.

The number of students changed drastically over the years—amounting to 403.8 thousand around 1990, reaching 1,917 thousand in 2004, then falling to 1,223 thousand in 2022 (GUS, 2004-2022). Although the number of students now is lower than in previous years, the rent on the private market, the main source of student housing, is strongly impacted by many reasons. Among them, it is possible to point to the pandemic, the influx of migrants from Ukraine, strong inflation or government policies. These neoliberal policies emerge due to the lack of regulations on rental rates and policies affecting mortgage rates or because of low level of government action in financing universities' student social policies.

Housing problems affect students, who react to the situation through public displays of dissatisfaction, i.e., protests and strikes. Multiple student-led demonstrations were held

in order to draw attention to the issue of the decreasing number of student dormitories. Recent prominent examples include actions conducted in the University of Warsaw Library and the occupation strike in the Jowita student dormitory, which belongs to Adam Mickiewicz University (AMU) in Poznań, Poland.

The closure of Jowita, located in the city's centre, had been discussed for around ten years but gained publicity in 2023 when the university rector announced the decision to close it and prepare its sale. This caused strong opposition among those who wanted to keep the dormitory and the possibility of living there. The occupation protest was a manifestation of this. In exchange for Jowita (345 beds), the Meteor dormitory (400 beds) was built - more expensive for students, on the outskirts of Poznań at another university campus (AMU, 2023). Therefore, this was met with opposition from people whose faculties are in the city center, and those working while studying who are unable to afford more expensive housing. One of the main reasons for the occupation was the dramatic housing situation of the students - they wanted to keep the student dormitory open. Points brought up by protesters were strongly related to issues coming up in the discussions on neoliberalism. Affordable housing allows for broader access to good quality education for people from various social classes, which, in turn, helps reduce social inequalities (Michałowska, 2013; Sadura, 2017).

At the beginning of the protest, protesters laid out postulates such as renovating the dormitory and restoring it to its function, enacting a plan to expand AMU's housing stock, opening low-cost public canteens at AMU and increasing the stock of social rooms in the university buildings. The protest was gaining enough visibility in the media that the Minister of Science and Higher Education intervened. After talks with the university authorities and the strikers, he pledged to provide state funds for the renovation of Jowita.

In this article, we attempt to present the housing experiences and perspectives of occupants who decided to participate in the Jowita occupation. Student occupation strikes in Poland are extremely rare, other than singular examples over the years. By the time of the study, there had been no waves of occupation strikes since 1990, so the interviews gave a unique insight into the perspectives and experiences of people who decided to participate in this event. We use a case study method, studying the particularity of this event, to explore attitudes and perceptions of the student housing market, which was the cause of the occupation itself. Referring to Robert Stake's (1995, for a review, see Yazan, 2015) case study approach, we see it as a way better to understand the complexity of a student occupation strike, analyzing the issue that proved to be of high importance to occupants. Those perspectives will include both their experiences with different forms of housing and methods of managing their difficult housing situations. Since this article aims to shine a light on students' housing experiences and perceptions, we will not be getting into the events taking place during the occupation.

To analyze the housing situation as perceived by the occupants of Jowita, the article will

apply the critical hidden curriculum analytical framework (Sotomayor et al., 2022). The framework counters perceptions of students as "privileged" because of the material support offered by parents or institutions. Our article presents the housing difficulties of the Jowita occupation participants - young people, mostly students, who decided to take action against the current housing situation in Poland. As a country that experienced rapid political transitions around 1989, it presents itself as a curious case of housing conditions, with different generations experiencing different housing conditions influenced by these political changes.

The critical hidden curriculum analytical framework was presented in Sotomayor et al.'s case in the context of Canada, where the socio-economic character and history differ strongly from the experiences characterizing Poland. While the conducted study presents that many of Sotomayor et al.'s findings can be replicated in the analyzed environment, it also gives new insight into aspects of the progressing alienation of students from each other caused by having to work to sustain oneself during the university and losing time on working. Driving students into the private market makes them bear various monetary and social costs, and they miss out on organic options of interacting with other students in environments other than classrooms. Results also showed that when students have no other choice, they might turn to alternative spaces for housing—squats became a home for those who could not otherwise afford to live in a city while studying full-time.

This article is organized as follows: first, we present studentification with a brief definition and the Polish context, relating it to the concept of hidden curriculum and how it was presented concerning student housing. After that, we present shifts in education and housing affected by the neoliberal processes. We finish the literature review by explaining the results of the difficult socio-economic situation. After the contextual introduction, we present methods, describing the study's conditions, how it was structured, and the recruitment of participants. Then, we will present the respondents' metrics, including their age, socio-economic conditions, living situation, and other factors. Results will be presented in relation to the hidden curriculum critical framework, first describing forms of housing available to students and the main patterns of problems that are visible in the descriptions of their experiences. Then, after presenting the challenges of dealing with student housing, methods of managing it are presented—and it is shown how students have had to manage their situation. Ultimately, we discuss our findings, focusing on student alienation, lost opportunities created by the socio-economic situation, and alternative ways they can take action in their housing situation. We finish the paper with conclusions on the current state of the student housing situation of students in precarious conditions in Poland.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. STUDENTIFICATION IN THE POLISH CONTEXT AND THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM OF STUDENT HOUSING

Recognizing the significant impact of student migration on the city, Darren Smith coined the term "studentification" (Smith, 2002). It describes the processes that occur in a town (or, more specifically, in specific neighborhoods near institutions of higher learning) because of the seasonal migration of students attending Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). In Polish literature, studentification has been researched in relation to the original meaning, although with a slightly different perception of the phenomenon (Kubicki, 2017). Differences in student migratory patterns have been observed (Rewers, 2016; Wylon et al., 2018), where students often align themselves more within existing neighborhoods rather than creating their own student enclaves. Research usually focuses on big academic cities such as Kraków (Kubicki, 2017), Poznań (Gaczek & Kaczmarek, 2016; Nowak, 2016), Gdańsk (Murzyn-Kupisz & Szmytkowska, 2015; Grabkowska & Frankowski, 2016), or Łódź (Zasina, 2017, 2020). Many studies have been conducted on housing issues (Grabkowska & Frankowski, 2016; Zasina, 2017, 2020), analyzing both students' presence in cities and the role and usage of student dormitories. Students' position in cities is also studied in relation to aspects such as public transport (Dąbrowski et al., 2015; Wylon et al., 2018), student budget and finances (Gaczek & Kaczmarek, 2015) and their impact on commercial and service sectors (Gaczek & Kaczmarek, 2016; Nowak, 2016; Kubicki, 2017; Zasina, 2020).

The mainstream perception of studentification, however, often ignores the impact of universities on the process. Students are not only users of education but also its product (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979), and their socio-economic conditions can affect their ability to graduate (Carroll et al., 2009; Edwards & McMillan, 2015), influence their level of focus on their classes (Cvetkovski et al., 2012) or significantly affect their success during their studies (Messinis & Sheehan, 2015). Despite accepting large numbers of students, universities often do not have enough dormitory space and believe that the private market can handle the surplus of students in a given location (Smith, 2008; Hubbard, 2009). Local authorities can often willingly accept the construction of PBSAs, hoping they will help manage the high numbers of students (Hubbard, 2009).

Therefore, universities might not be seen as the actors responsible for the student housing problem. Instead, this responsibility falls on individual students to secure a place to live. This responsibility falls on them not only in the form of having to secure a place to live to get by but also in the form of unwritten rules or how the housing problem is perceived by general society. Sotomayor et al., in the 2022 article, draw attention to the concept of hidden curriculum and how it can be perceived in the context of student housing.

The hidden curriculum, first described at the elementary school level (Jackson, 2009), can be observed at the level of higher education. There, it can take various forms—usual-

ly a behavior exhibited by a student in the process of obtaining education or interacting with university-related entities (Koutsouris et al., 2021; Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018; Margolis, 2001; Thielsch, 2017).

In analyzing students, through framing the issue from the housing side, Sotomayor et al. presented a variation of hidden curriculum as a set of behaviors expected of students to deal with housing problems if a student experiences them—a critical hidden curriculum analytical framework. According to the framework, students' housing experiences are not homogenous, and students experience various problems and challenges shaping their relationship with student housing. Sotomayor et al. outline problems encountered by students in relation to multiple forms of housing, as well as methods used to deal with them, mentioning that those difficulties and harsh conditions can be met with opposition and grassroots attempts by students to express dissatisfaction. The framework focuses on the neoliberal perception of society that a student must be resourceful and entrepreneurial in the process of obtaining housing if that housing is not readily available to them. Hence, the responsibility for obtaining it and the subsequent success of that process rests with them and their ability to cope with the situation. As the perceived responsibility rests with the student, the consequences of not coping are simultaneously perceived as something he, as an individual, is to blame for.

Sotomayor et al. described the hidden curriculum referring to Canada, where the educational system differs from Poland. The most significant difference is that higher education in Canada is fee-paying, so by definition, there is a high selection of university applicants because of the socio-economic aspects (Qingyun, 2009). In contrast, access to higher education in Poland is free. Canadian universities base their funding on equity and established partnerships (Jones & Weinrib, 2011). Polish universities rely on state funding, especially considering that most students attend public universities, which comprise most of Poland's top universities.

## 2.2. NEOLIBERAL SHIFTS OF HOUSING AND HIGHER EDUCATION

In Poland, after the political changes in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the democratic system allowed for the development of the market economy. This has resulted in the emergence of the neoliberal processes influencing education in Poland (Michałowska, 2013). The presence of the private market and non-public universities promoted the commodification of education (Pokusińska, 2020, pp. 91-108). It also fostered the growing perception of students as clients of education, from whom HEIs are trying to get as much value as possible (Nowakowska, 2011). Focusing on the monetary value of education and beliefs about the meritocratic value of education resulted in higher numbers of students attending higher education, noting a significantly high number of students in 2004/2005. Higher education was perceived as a meritocratic tool for attaining a better position; thus more people began studying at HEIs (Sadura, 2017). This fostered the

so-called worthless education, where "getting a diploma" is more important than having competencies (Baranowski, 2020, pp. 391-405). It became more common to treat education as a tool for securing a better job and a better social position instead of seeing education as a goal (Michałowska, 2013). This is also connected to a smaller emphasis on non-material values such as a focus on the community, trust, integrity, empathy, and sensitivity toward others.

Neoliberal focus on individual responsibility also influences students' possibilities of attaining education. Despite having access to public higher education, classed styles of education and differences in access to it can be observed (Sadura, 2017). Students' financial and social position is strongly connected to Bourdieu's concepts of social and class capital, as well as differences in emotional support received from the student's environment.

In Madden & Marcuse's book *In Defense of Housing* (2016), commodification is thoroughly analyzed through three main factors affecting its development, one of them being globalization (pp. 24-25). There, globalization relates to the "decoupling of housing from residential needs", while the estate and its target group may become "more responsive to global economic signals than local ones". Since Poland joined the European Union, the country has become more open to the wider market, affecting international companies and their decision to invest in Polish real estate (Ambroziak et al., 2022). While Poland's international position is being strengthened, the cost of living is still lower than other EU countries in the West, making it appealing for foreigners to live there.

Targeting estate to global rather than local needs is especially visible in PBSAs and how their creation targets foreigners. In the Cushman & Wakefield Report on Polish Student Accommodation (see Furmańska, 2023), a big focus of the report is the year-on-year rising number of international students and low number of beds in public dorms and PBSAs, presenting the latter as a sound and safe investment with a high return. In the report, data on public dormitories is brought up as an argument for building private dormitories—while university housing can be cost-effective, it is not the solution for most, which creates a niche worth investing in. This means that while now PBSAs aren't widely present in Polish cities (Zasina, 2017), it is expected to see their popularity rise (Furmańska, 2023).

## 2.3. INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FROM HEIS

Problems with securing accommodation for students thus potentially limit their ability to pursue education. Article 70(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland states that education in public schools is free, which also includes providing access to public HEIs. This would mean that, in theory, education is accessible to all who want to participate. The problem can arise if the availability of education is limited by socio-economic conditions, which can restrict the actual poor people from studying at HEIs. In order to enable poorer students to study, some mechanisms are supposed to help them study,

such as student dormitories, scholarships, or public canteens.

Student dormitories are facilities that provide housing for students, especially those who are from low-income families and live far away from the city where the university is located. Dormitories often function as short-term rentals, serving as hostels for tourists (Matczak & Szkup, 2020). At the time of political transitions around 1990, one bed was available for every 3.7 students in the HEIs. Thirty-two years later, in 2022, that number dropped to one bed for every 10.6 students (Kalbarczyk et al., 2024). Simultaneously, between 2004 and 2022, the number of beds in student dormitories dropped from 151 thousand to 115 thousand (GUS, 2004-2022).

The need for dormitories was visible in the recent academic year's increased interest in student dormitories. Various students all around Poland declared increased numbers of applications to the housing facilities, with HEIs such as AGH University or Jagiellonian University having respectively over 800 and 500 more applications than what their facilities were able to handle (Kołodziej, 2023).

According to Polish HE law, scholarships are a form of institutional support to students in difficult economic situations, students with disabilities, and students with achievements in science, sports, or art granted by universities (MNiSW, 2018). Students can also apply for scholarships from other institutions that can be awarded according to different rules, for example, considering students' social activity.

When analyzing data on institutional scholarship recipients over the years, there can be seen a decrease in the number of recipients and the percentage of students receiving scholarships compared to the total student population. In 2004, with a total number of 1,926,122 students, 471,372 of them received scholarships of any kind, accounting for 24.5% of all students. In 2022, out of 1,223,629 students, 154,368 received scholarships, accounting for 12.6% of the population (GUS, 2004-2022). This can also be noted in analyzes provided in the reports on HEIs. The authors note the changes in the criteria for providing financial support. There, it is noted that since 2006/2007, the number of students receiving financial support decreased, mainly because individual universities began to change their criteria for providing financial support. (GUS, 2014).

## 2.4. SYMPTOMS OF A PROBLEMATIC SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION

Throughout the years, the aforementioned neoliberal processes of commodification and massification have influenced the shaping of the current socio-economic situation that students experience. This results in such symptoms as (Sotomayor et al., 2022): (i) Strong reliance on private rental, (ii) Being forced to work to keep studying, and (iii) Bottom-up resistance and student-led solutions (Margolis, 2001), showing dissatisfaction with the experienced conditions.

Higher prices and a smaller amount of support from institutions result in having to

spend a lot of time working. According to the Eurostudent Report *Combining studies and paid jobs: Thematic review* (Masevičiūtė et al., 2018), 44% of students in Poland were engaged in paid employment during the whole lecture period, and 16% worked from time to time. Out of students with paid jobs, 48% identified themselves primarily as workers rather than students, and the mean hours spent on paid jobs amounted to 36 hours weekly. For students working 20 or more hours per week, the medium intensity of studying (21-40h weekly) was the highest out of all European countries presented in the study, meaning that on top of working over 20 hours per week, 69% of students declared having additional 21 to 40 hours of studying. The same category of students also stated that they spent less time on personal studies and taught studies.

According to the latest *Eurostudent* report (Hauschildt et al., 2021), full-time students spent 9 hours working per week; for part-time students, it meant 37 hours weekly. Self-earned income accounted for 51% of students' funding monthly. 16% of students were recipients of national public student support. For those students, received support amounted to 50% of their total income, signifying the significant importance of this income for students.

A small number of places in student dormitories requires students to rely strongly on private rentals. According to the *Eurostudent VII* report, 54% of students declared living with a partner/children, other people, or alone, 37% declared living with parents, and 10% declared living in student accommodation. According to the reports on student housing made by AMRON since 2018, the amount of rent increases year-on-year. In 2018, 62% of respondents paid between 250 and 750 PLN for rental, and 15% of students paid between 750 and 1000 PLN (AMRON, 2018). In 2023, 43% of full-time students paid up to 750 PLN for rental, and 28% of full-time students paid between 751 and 1000 PLN (Przypaśniak & Sawczuk, 2023). Additionally, 57% of students who stayed in the same apartment experienced a rise in their rent, and 46% experienced it when moving to a different place. Among those who experienced rising prices, 53% of students experienced rises of up to 10%, 27% of students had their rent rise between 10 and 15%, and for 21% of students it was above 15%.

Social unrest due to difficult socio-economic conditions was presented in the hidden curriculum of student housing (Sotomayor et al., 2022), relating it to prior research on how students manage their difficult situations. Awareness of difficult socio-economic conditions, decreasing support, and feelings of inequality can lead to bottom-up resistance and student-led solutions focused on fighting the situation (Margolis, 2001). Among examples of social unrest, it is worth focusing on regular protests and occupation strikes, although below, we will focus on outlining the occupations.

The highest frequency of student occupations happened during the fall of communism (Dworaczek, 2012, pp. 120-136), when students engaged in opposition activities (Zakrzewski, 2020). At that time, most occupation strikes were related to the fight for indepen-

dence, although the aspect of space at the university would appear in some postulates, mostly referring to the building resources available for the universities (Gieszczyński, 2003; Kaczmarek, 2019). Now, with a few exceptions, they are a rare occurrence. Said exceptions include the occupation at universities due to the introduction of the Law on Higher Education and Science (known as Ustawa 2.0) in 2018, the October 2023 sleepover at the University of Warsaw Library, and the occupation strike of Jowita, Adam Mickiewicz University's (AMU) student dormitory[1]. The last two cases were strictly related to fighting the decreasing numbers of student dormitories, bringing attention to the issue.

## 3. DATA AND METHODS

Methods used in the study focused on in-depth individual interviews. Participants belonged to the group of people who took part in the occupation of the Jowita student dormitory and were asked to participate in the study while in the occupation. The interviews took place in a more secluded part of the building and were carried out individually as in-depth interviews to study the style of phenomenological interviews. The interviews were conducted in Polish, the national language of all respondents (the quotes presented later in the paper are authors' translations). This method allowed respondents to freely share their experiences and perspectives on the housing market while not being strictly restricted to a particular set of answers (Seidman, 2019). Furthermore, questions about their housing experiences and their biographical aspect would allow, in the limited context of the participants of this occupation, which took place in a specific moment in space and time, to talk about their subjective views on the issue. The respondents were asked questions about their studying situation and experiences with student housing, especially the forms of student housing they experienced, the reasons for choosing them, and the pros and cons of these forms.

The recruitment process was twofold: the interviewer approached the occupants directly, explaining the purpose of the study and asking for their willingness to participate, but also, the study was publicly announced during general meetings, informing the occupants about it and encouraging them to approach the interviewer themselves. The participants did not receive any financial reward for their participation, and the only incentives were the possibility of sharing their experiences and perspectives on the housing market.

The interviews took place from 14.12.2023 to the last day of the occupation, which was 17.12.2023, and all but one interview took place after the decision to end the strike (the occupation took several more days due to already planned activities) following the pledge of Minister of Science and Higher Education to fulfil strikers' main postulate. One of the authors participated in the occupation for several days, spending most of the time on

[1] By the time of this article being published, another similar occupation protest has been organized in "Kamionka" student dormitory in Kraków.

the interviews. Other authors visited Jowita only briefly or after the decision to end the occupation.

The study consisted of 30 in-depth interviews with 30 participants, with the characteristics presented in Table 1.

| | |
|---|---|
| Age | ■ Youngest – 18, Oldest – 37<br>■ 24 under 24 y.o, 4 between 25 and 30 y.o, 2 above 30 y.o. |
| Gender | ■ Male – 13,<br>■ Female – 10,<br>■ Non-binary – 7 |
| University studying status | ■ Current students – 24,<br>■ Former students – 3,<br>■ Planning to enroll – 2,<br>■ Unable to study due to their socio-economic problems – 1 |
| Place of living during studying | ■ Changed the city they lived in – 24,<br>■ Did not change the city/town they lived in – 3,<br>■ Never studied – 3 |
| Place of living before joining the occupation | ■ Currently in Poznań – 23,<br>■ Not living in Poznań but studying here – 2,<br>■ Other – 5 |
| Current sources of self-sustainment* | ■ Family support – 18,<br>■ Job – 9,<br>■ Savings – 5,<br>■ Private tutoring – 2,<br>■ Scholarship – 1<br>■ 16 people do not undertake any paid activity |
| Housing experiences since university age* | ■ Student dormitory (lived/applied) – 2/5<br>■ Private rented housing – 18<br>■ Living in family or friend's house – 14<br>■ Squatting – 6<br>■ PBSA – 1<br>■ Other - 5 |
| Declared membership in NGOs* | ■ *Inicjatywa Pracownicza* trade union – 7<br>■ *Rozbrat* squat – 2<br>■ *Food Not Bombs* – 1<br>■ Other, not Jowita occupation's organizers – 9 |
| * - possible multiple answers from one person | |

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants
Source: Authors' own elaboration

The feature common to all respondents was that they freely decided to participate in the occupation. The group consisted of people connected to higher education—current, former, and upcoming students, as well as a person whose situation did not allow them to become one. Furthermore, most of them migrated to a different place to study and so had to participate in the housing market. Another important aspect is the specific gender distribution, which highly represents non-binary people. Considering the organization

membership of participants, we can generally call them left-wing students and activists.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed with the help of MS Word, and corrected by the researchers. Analysis was partially done using MAXQDA 2022, and the results were analyzed through the lenses of the critical hidden curriculum analytical framework (Sotomayor et al., 2022). Further analysis was conducted using the thematic analysis approach (Clarke & Braun, 2017), in which interesting information was gathered from the interviews and then combined into more general themes, which we present in the Results section.

## 4. RESULTS

When categorizing the perceived housing options of respondents, the main types were (1) private rental housing, (2) student dormitories, (3) living with family/friends/in a family (or friend) -owned housing, and (4) squats. Other housing types appeared infrequently in the interviews, i.e., mentions of living abroad (Netherlands, France). One respondent (IDI_1), in an interview that took place before the visit of Minister of Science Dariusz Wieczorek, when describing his housing experiences, mentioned that "he's currently living in Jowita", which meant that he possibly did not perceive the occupation simply as a short-term initiative, but a place he started perceiving as his temporal home.

Stories told by the participants were then analyzed for main patterns arising in them, showing the general housing outlook shared by the participants, as well as things in which perception they might differ from one another. Then, the challenges and ways of dealing with them were presented to show different strategies that students equipped to handle housing struggles.

### 4.1. STUDENT DORMITORIES

#### 4.1.1. NOT ENOUGH SPOTS

With the country-wide low percentages of spots available at public universities' dormitories, not all might have the chance to get in. Three respondents mentioned living at the student dormitory, and five others applied unsuccessfully, with another person mentioning her friends' fruitless attempts.

Applying, or considering applying, would sometimes put students in uncomfortable positions. When recalling her situation, one student (IDI_25) mentioned the discrepancy between getting into the university and being able to sustain herself. Her parents earn too much for her to get into the dormitory, but it does not mean she can live comfortably. In her situation, she is too rich according to the university standards, but that does not mean she is able to sustain herself with a given amount of money. Not living in the dormitory means she needs to work to have enough money to rent a room.

> "I am too rich for the dormitory, and at the same time, too poor to be fully supported by my parents when I am renting privately; there are so little spots in the dorms, so I would not get in. But simultaneously, in order to provide for myself while living in a privately rented apartment, I need to work. So if there was an option to live in a dormitory, then great, I would use it, but I do not see that happening anytime soon." (IDI_25)

For that particular student, her experience of not being able to get into a dormitory is contrasted with her parents' stories. Their expectation was for her to apply for the dormitory to live there, and it was caused by their own experiences with living in a dormitory. When she compares the discrepancy between experiences, she perceives a decrease in the conditions, seeing herself in a worse position than her parents.

> "First, I was skeptical about it (applying), cause I was not sure if I would be able to live with this number of people. But then it turned out it did not even matter, because I just cannot get in. And what was so shocking for me was how obvious was this for my parents to have a place in a dorm, and I know that their dormitories, in which they lived in [city], mostly do not function, or they got partially privatized." (IDI_25)

Many students would not even apply simply because they did not believe they would get in. Some respondents already knew how hard it would be to get a spot, so they avoided applying.

### 4.1.2. STANDARD-TO-PRICE RATIO

One crucial aspect often influencing someone's decision whether to apply was the cost of rent related to the standards. If the rent were low, it would usually mean substandard conditions and high standards would correlate with the price often deemed not worth a dormitory. One respondent pointed out that dormitories are not a much better option compared to the market economy. According to him, many dormitories are priced similarly to private apartments, so if someone can afford to rent, they will do so, avoiding university-provided housing.

> "Dormitories are not a competition, I mean if it is cheaper than private housing, often the standards are terrible. [...] Dorms often are not competitive financially, that for the same price, or one, two hundred more, you can find something better." (IDI_22)

Often, students end up not considering dormitories at all. Another student pointed out how often high standards in dormitories are not what students want or need. Often students just need a safe place to live, not to expect luxuries from dorms. For that respondent, the newly built dormitories are not in line with the expectations of students, being closer to luxurious properties available on the private market. And that is not what

is needed from universities—universities should provide affordable housing, providing only necessities but charging a much lower price.

> "These dormitories, that are being built or renovated, I feel like they completely stand apart from what students actually need en masse. [...] "How much would I save", I thought to myself, "if I could just put a mattress between the [library] shelves unnoticed and just sleep there"." (IDI_27)

## 4.2. PRIVATE RENTED HOUSING

### 4.2.1. POWER IMBALANCE

When describing private rental experiences, respondents would often relate them to how good or bad the contact with a landlord would be, presenting an essential factor of their living experience.

One respondent described their positive relations with the landlord they have never met in person. All their contacts happen over the internet or phone, which is perceived positively, especially concerning others and their stories. "I rate it [the contact] positively; it is nonexistent." (IDI_26).

Not all experiences could be described as optimistic. In one instance, the respondent, along with other roommates, was traded with the apartment that was bought as an investment, "someone just wanted to put some money aside [...] we were treated like rubbish" (IDI_27). They, as tenants, were not involved in selling the apartment, and the only thing they could do was either accept the new landlord and higher rent or leave the apartment.

Respondents were intensely aware of the power imbalance affecting their experiences. Sometimes, in the descriptions of the landlords, they would mention how they have multiple apartments (IDI_22, IDI_23, IDI_26) (one student mentioned their landlord having as many as 30, 40 flats (IDI_22)), and how sometimes their contact with landlords is sustained through renting companies. Those relations felt dehumanized, as respondents would have to communicate through the offices of people hired to manage properties.

Among landlords' descriptions, no negative attitudes towards the students' status per se were noted. However, given students' young age and inexperience, there were attempts to manipulate leases to their disadvantage, e.g., offering them contracts that would put them in a less secure position as tenants, making it easy to kick them out of the apartments they are renting.

What about signing contracts? These are things students are wary of. One form of contract described particularly negatively was the occasional lease agreement, which allowed the landlord to evict the tenant more easily. Two respondents (IDI_9, IDI_23) mentioned situations where they wanted to sign a lease, but this form of contract was

required from them, so they searched for another place to live.

One student, who declared herself highly experienced with tenants' rights and fighting unjust evictions, pointed out another aspect of renting that relates to the renting companies and their predatory practices. She mentioned how she always tries to rent housing from private individuals rather than renting companies since those companies often try to abuse the signed contracts. As she pointed out, regular people are rarely aware of loopholes included in those contracts, but those companies usually abuse them to get more money for various things.

> "These companies are very aggressive, when it comes to requirements, and rarely is the deposit returned. The contract that is signed has 10 pages, in addition to a standard contract, specifying who are the sides of the contract and what the subject is. It still has 10 pages of some fine prints and other provisions, which people may often not understand or think that it will not happen, it often does." (IDI_27)

### 4.2.2. BAD HOUSING CONDITIONS

With power imbalance sometimes came terrible living conditions and difficulty improving them. Rented apartments would sometimes come with problems such as fungus on the walls, and while in some cases it was as mild as having to get rid of it once a year in winter, some instances ended up being much more severe.

One student lived in an apartment full of fungus, covering the bathroom ceiling and one room altogether. When she and her roommate moved into this apartment, they wanted to remove it, but it turned out to be much more complicated since it would never entirely go away. When they discussed it with their landlord, he only confirmed it to be fungus, but nothing else was done. He did not take action to improve the lives of his tenants. Instead, he ignored the problem. Respondent expressed strong anger about her situation, especially considering that the landlord himself was wealthy and living abroad, meaning he did not have to worry about the situation they were experiencing.

> "[landlord] is a man that owns entire townhouses, and he lives in Germany, and he is a doctor. We would laugh that he is conducting an experiment, how living with a fungus is affecting people because it was just horrible" (IDI_23)

The conditions were so bad that she wanted to force the landlord to do something about the fungus. She wanted to start a rent strike with her roommates, but they were too scared of being evicted, and she did not want to do it alone. Eventually, she left the apartment. After leaving the place, the worries did not go away. When conducting the interview, she was undergoing medical examinations to determine any signs of disease caused by these conditions. She was scared not only for her health but also for others involved: her old roommates and the cat that belonged to one of them.

> "My roommate lives there with her cat. There is a small animal living there and will probably die soon, because of lung cancer or something, because it is a several-month-old kitten, damn it." (IDI_23)

#### 4.2.3. ALIENATION OF STUDENTS

Living in a private apartment often meant having regular contact with a few people. While living individually was a positive aspect of private housing for many, some pointed out its isolation. For them, dormitories appeared as places to facilitate organic meetings of new people and make friends. The diversity of people living there would allow for interdisciplinary discussions, making it beneficial for their scientific development. Some respondents also pointed out how needing to work long hours on top of studying makes it harder to have any contact with friends.

> "Because living in an individual apartment is basically like, okay, you are living there, and you have university, house, maybe work, and at the beginning of your adult life, you isolate yourself from others." (IDI_9)

The feeling of alienation was also contrasted with the experiences of previous generations. One respondent mentioned how important student dormitories were for her parents. From their perspective, dormitories were a place where they were able to make strong friendships.

> "They have friends for life from those times, from dormitories." (IDI_25)

Dormitories were important not only for forming friendships but also for starting a family. As this respondent mentioned, she was born while her parents still lived in the dormitory. This became crucial in the earliest years of her life, as living there provided her parents with a solid support network—being surrounded by an organically created community allowed her to support her parents in the baby's upbringing when they needed to keep studying. When they were in need, fellow students would take care of the baby. As the respondent said, "various aunts and uncles from the next room took care of me." this community became almost a family-like structure, supporting each other.

### 4.3. LIVING IN A FAMILY OR FRIEND'S HOUSE

#### 4.3.1. COMPROMISES

For people who could live with their friends or family in a structure less formal than one offered by dormitories or private rentals, their experiences were often marked by compromises they would have to endure.

The most common compromise was related to the distance from the university—especially families of the students who often live on the city's outskirts, meaning that commuting can take up a lot of one's day. Thus, while it is cheaper to live with family, it

would often mean waking up early in the morning or sleeping at friends' houses if the public transit would not work during the night hours. One student described how their commute heavily relies on time since "if the train is delayed even by 15 minutes, I can be 2 hours late because of how many times I have to change trains and how long I have to walk." (IDI_14). Any disruption to the tight schedule means shame of being late, but more importantly, it means lost opportunities for studying and disrupting their days with unnecessary stress and waiting.

#### 4.3.2. FEELING OF PRIVILEGE

With a comfortable and safe living environment often comes the feeling of privilege. Their awareness of privilege was usually connected with solid empathy for how others live and their situation. This was also evident in the fact that they all took part in an occupation strike to improve the housing conditions, even when some respondents declared living in comfort.

Many respondents would mention how their conditions, even if not perfect, were far better than what their peers had to endure. One respondent, who had to change her place of living multiple times throughout her education, was talking about privilege in relation to the dilapidated house she and her brother inherited from their father. While the house was in a terrible condition, it was still associated with the feeling of stability, which was necessary when surrounded by instability.

> "I am quite a privileged person because of this half of this house that is falling apart, and I mean it, even this house that is falling apart is some sort of a house, so I am glad I have a perspective that I can return somewhere, and I have my own place. Because without that, it would be tragic, not just bad, but tragic." (IDI_16)

Experiencing better living conditions would sometimes result in displays of altruism, when students in a better situation would help those less fortunate friends by, e.g., sharing their housing with them. The respondent who inherited the house from her father mentioned creating a commune where her friends live, paying for utilities, and helping renovate.

### 4.4. HUSTLING—HOW TO MANAGE A DIFFICULT HOUSING SITUATION

#### 4.4.1. WORKING

Of 24 respondents who declared themselves students at the interview, 12 mentioned working full-time or doing odd jobs like tutoring or freelancing. Studying means hustling—without one steady income from a full-time job but with high living costs, respondents have to take on any available job. Two respondents declared they were receiving scholarships, allowing them to focus more on their studies. Multiple students mentioned

working during the holidays, which allowed them to live off their savings.

When mentioning work and combining it with studies, the topic of time often came up—having to work through the university often means having less time to study and spend time with others, allowing us to form relations and connect with people. One respondent (IDI_1) pointed out that the possibility of taking part in student life is very important for him. However, it is limited by the fact that his friends have to work, so he cannot fully experience student life. When a respondent declared working while studying, it meant thinking of all the things they could not do because of that. Another respondent (IDI_27), who spent most of her time at the university working various jobs (from taking on internships to working as a cashier), meticulously described her time, spending each day and each hour with a purpose, not allowing herself to waste time. Working for most of the studies, as well as working abroad during holidays, allowed her and her partner to make ends meet, although without much leeway.

### 4.4.2. SOLUTIONS TO FINDING HOUSING

Students who have to manage to find housing end up developing their own solutions to find and secure suitable accommodation. Searching for housing is a vital aspect of working through the university since securing the wrong place or with the wrong landlord can have severe consequences for the student. Student dormitories are deemed very safe since people living there are students, so there is little risk of living with someone untrustworthy. Still, when they are not highly available, students rely on their abilities to find the right place. While for some (IDI_17), the online platforms for searching for housing were a place to look for accommodation, others found it untrustworthy and avoided them.

One respondent (IDI_23) mentioned that when searching for housing, she looked on a Facebook group for students from another university in Poznań. She mentioned another important factor - finding good roommates. She mentioned how people studying at that university are often “alright, “ and she had already found roommates there twice. When talking about that method of finding roommates, she pointed out the privileged aspect of knowing where to look. Looking for housing online comes with the dangers of finding unreliable roommates, and it is essential to secure a good place. If one knows a safe community to turn to in their search, it can provide comfort while looking for accommodation.

> “There are a lot of people that I know, who come here from some village, for the first time to the big city and they end up in such apartments, where they pay high rents, living with random people through a random offer that they found online. I have it so good that I already live in Poznań for 20 years, and I know more or less where I can look for some better apartment through friends.” (IDI_23)

The constant search for safe housing does not come without its costs. One respondent, who had to constantly move between student dormitories, family homes, private rentals, and living with friends, commented on the toll of that instability and precarious housing conditions and how they affected her activity at the university. She sees this constant search through the lenses of missed opportunities, reminiscing about opportunities that she has lost because of the time that she had to commit to finding housing and moving between places.

> "Something I want to point out is that this wandering is very tiring. [...] I think to myself about all the things I did not achieve because my time was consumed with thinking about where I would live, for what, and how it would look like." (IDI_16)

The uncertainty does not just affect the past and lost chances, but it also affects the way that students perceive their future. One student, who is living in precarious housing conditions and is not in a financial position to easily change it anytime soon, when asked how he sees his future and where he would be living, answered:

> "I am trying not to think about it too much because it is a very pessimistic vision of the future." (IDI_28)

Bad conditions take a toll on the perception of the future. If someone is experiencing precarious conditions and is not experiencing stability, the perspectives for the future become overwhelming. Costs in the form of time and energy that have to be spent on future searches and managing their situation become unbearable, so the reality becomes easier to handle when it is not a focus of one's thoughts.

### 4.4.3. ALTERNATIVE SPACES—SQUATS

By urban squatting we mean living in or using a form of housing without the owner's consent (Pruijt, 2013), and several respondents declared living there, either presently or in the past.

While living in a squat has its pros and cons, the uncertainty of living security appears in the descriptions. One student, living in a squat for around eight months, described his perception of that environment. He decided to live in the squat because while he gets 1500 PLN of monthly allowance, "having to pay 1200 or 1500 for housing would leave me 300 for food, and I would want to go out to the movies with my friends, I wanted to go to the theater, to the concert, and if I were to live in an apartment, I could not do those things". According to him, the independence from paying rent comes with the uncertainty for the future.

> "We have to take care of everything ourselves. The electricity we pay for, we deal with our own garbage, we pay for water ourselves, and really nothing is given to

> us once and for all. It can disappear at any time, and it all depends, sometimes on good will, or on quite a bit of commitment: mine and my friends, in maintaining something that we have managed to obtain." (IDI_1)

While squats provide an alternative to conventional forms of housing, they are not perceived as a stable form of housing. It is not regulated by law and requires much independence from those living there. While the aspect of autonomy was seen positively for some, as it allowed them to learn this independence, others expressed dissatisfaction with the uncertainty it brought.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the experiences and perspectives of protestors experiencing the student housing market. Seeing it through the eyes of people who decided to participate in a student occupation allows for a better understanding of their needs and perception of the student housing market, which will help shape it to improve it.

Although many issues are visible through the stories the respondents tell, focusing on a few main aspects is possible. Stories that participants share are shaped through (i) hidden costs that students incur and (ii) responsibilities they bear in regard to that situation. It is also worth noting how (iii) the alienation of students is visible in the occupants' stories.

### 5.1. HIDDEN COSTS OF EDUCATION

Costs relate to the sacrifices they have to make to continue studying despite their hardships, from finding a place to live to enduring lousy living conditions or providing for themselves. Respondents experience various aspects affecting their time and what they must do to keep studying. Many work regularly to support their education—which aligns with findings presented by *Eurostudent* reports on students' socio-economic positions and their need to work (Masevičiūtė et al., 2018; Hauschildt et al., 2021).

Costs can also relate to non-material aspects, although they often relate to what students can or cannot afford—they might need to accept living in dire conditions because the rent is low enough to be affordable. They may need to sacrifice the opportunities presented to them at the cost of searching for housing if they cannot depend on stable sources.

Costs might also relate to their future—students who experience socio-economic difficulties can experience higher psychological distress or be less likely to complete their degree compared to those with better socioeconomic conditions (for a systematic review, see Brownfield et al., 2020). Here, we see that students who do not experience stable housing conditions, experiencing precarious conditions, can feel fear for their future. Lack of certainty makes it harder for them to be optimistic about what will happen to them when there is nothing certain they can rely on. If they have to fight for everything

they have, it can be hard to feel comfortable and secure, which is so important in order to receive an education.

In the narratives presented by the respondents, the aspect of how housing conditions affect their livelihood and chances is evident. It is not just statistics on who gets to live in a dormitory and how it changes over time—it is students whose lives are affected. Many students expressed negative perceptions of their living situations, pointing out how tiring it is to manage the situation they are put in. The future does not seem much more positive, and experiencing difficult housing conditions made some respondents perceive the future negatively.

This presents an important human perspective to the issue—students have to endure against overwhelming odds. With strong changes affecting the housing market, the globalization of the market and changes in student accommodation are making it of high quality but, subsequently, more expensive. It results in precarious conditions for students who cannot afford stability and safe living, forcing them to fend for themselves. This can be seen as a result of the neoliberal attitude, which puts the responsibility of providing for themselves on the individual, making them and their resourcefulness fully responsible for their success or failure in life, or in this case - in their education. It lowers the chances of obtaining higher education (Michałowska, 2013). They were aware of many existing costs they faced (or they were privileged not to face) and joined a protest, which was calling to halt the process of commodification of housing that exemplified in Jowita and to retain accessibility of higher education in Poland for everyone.

## 5.2. RESPONSIBILITY OF HEIS IN MANAGING STUDENTS' HOUSING CONDITIONS

Responsibilities relate to the discussion on studentification. Increased student numbers result in a greater number of students in need of housing (Duke-Williams, 2009). When HEIs are not supporting students with securing housing, students have to manage their own situations and find ways of surviving in often tricky situations (Sotomayor et al., 2022). Shortages of university-owned accommodation thus force students to enter the private market, frequently affecting the prices and the demographic character of the neighborhood through their appearance (Smith et al., 2005). HEIs and local authorities thus tend to shift the responsibility to the students in hopes they would manage the situation themselves (Smith, 2008; Hubbard, 2009). The private market, in the form of individual landlords and PBSAs, takes advantage of this need, investing more in the housing market and seeing students as a source of profit.

Although the number of students in Poland has been decreasing in the past years, the sudden growth noted from 1990 to 2004 was overwhelming compared to what the universities were able to handle housing-wise. The lack of affordable housing is visible in the perspectives presented by the occupants.

In the study, respondents expressed various cases of responsibilities they bear in regard to their situation. Their position in relation to landlords is unstable, and they have to manage the existing power imbalance. They are at risk of this position being abused, which means they develop mechanisms of working that help them deal with it. They need to be familiar with various types of contracts, being weary of abuse that can occur.

### 5.3. FORMS OF ALIENATION

Precarious and unsafe housing conditions influence how people can or cannot feel "at home" when living in rented housing (Madden & Marcuse, 2016). This problem can be seen in the stories of occupants dually. Firstly, students cannot feel entirely safe in their place of living, and their housing experience relies strongly on their relationship with the landlord, be it a private, unknown to their owner, or a family member. If the owner decides to remove them from the apartment, they have no choice but to move. The sense of security came from being sure that they had a place to stay and that it could not be easily taken away from them. Lack of security then causes them to not fully feel "at home", alienating them from where they have to live.

Secondly, the lack of space in student dormitories and reliance on private housing blocks them from experiencing an organically forming student environment. The perception of student life, appearing in the stories from the past and forming parents' perception of studying, needs to be faced with the reality that effectively makes such an organic, everyday integration virtually impossible for all who cannot live in student dormitories. While it is still possible for those who do not live in student dormitories to experience student life, it does not allow for integration outside of classes in a shared environment. Working to sustain oneself while studying further limits students' time, making it harder to focus on their education. However, it also limits the time students can spend with others, making the next generations of students more alienated from one another. It corresponds with a neoliberal approach that focuses on achieving one's own success while omitting the aspects of community or other intangible values in social life. The domination of economic rationality leads to the alienation of individuals, marginalizing the influence of social masses on society and democracy despite appealing to democratic values (Michałowska, 2013).

### 5.4. STUDY LIMITATIONS

Limitations of the study come from the nature of the environment—interviews were done during an occupation strike, with participants responding during late hours, often after midnight. While the results were obtained mainly after the occupation had achieved its goals, it was still in the heat of the moment, and many participants took part in the strike because they experienced precarious housing conditions, which also, in general, influenced how they perceived the general housing situation. Although the study was

conducted on a very specific group of people who do not represent the general student population, their experiences also provide a window into problems that other students face.

Analysis of hidden curriculum in the Polish context could further benefit from comparing it to the more representative sample of respondents to see if the participants took part in the occupation because their conditions are challenging in comparison to the rest of the population (mainly students) or are those conditions more common amongst current population.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Sotomayor et al.'s critical hidden curriculum analytical framework presents an essential insight into current life and the expectations put on students who need to find housing for the time studying at a university. This article works toward further developing the framework presented in the abovementioned paper. Some of the student housing experiences prove to be accurate and exist, regardless of whether the country provides paid higher education or guarantees free public education to all who want to partake in it. In the framework's context, precarious living conditions and housing struggles cause students to be progressively more alienated from one another. Working long hours forces them to sacrifice time that could be spent on studying or fulfilling social needs. With the lack of space in student dormitories, organic interactions are much more complex to experience.

Student dormitories do not seem like a good option for living when there are so few places that only individual students are able to get in, and the standard-to-price ratio of existing dormitories is not a competition for many private rentals. Renting from private owners puts students in an unsafe position, forcing them to rely strongly on the goodwill of the landlords, and often causes them to live in unsafe housing below the acceptable standard. Landlords might also want to abuse their position and benefit from housing ownership regarding conditions stated in the contracts signed by students. Living with friends or family members often proves to be the safest. However, it still puts a student in an uncomfortable position to compromise on privacy or commute time. Despite that, it is often perceived as the safest option, and those with access to it recognize it as an enormous privilege and express altruism toward their less fortunate friends. The results also show less conventional forms of housing that can be used—squats were used by multiple respondents throughout their lives, with some students living there while studying. This alternative form of housing, while posing problems such as uncertainty about the future and having to rely on one's own abilities and skills, provided a place to live for those who would not have it otherwise, allowing them to study.

Understanding precarious housing conditions and presenting them publicly helps in including those perspectives in the discussions on urban housing, as well as universities'

role in maintaining housing for its students. Further studies on the topic of student housing should continue presenting various perspectives from students in different countries and experiencing various housing conditions. Students are an important factor in cities and their functioning, which strongly affects how cities change. When students lack enough beds in university-owned dormitories, private landlords and PBSAs can use this as an opportunity to benefit, further transforming the housing market, including for other citizens. Understanding the experiences and struggles of those living in precarious or unsafe conditions helps introduce a perspective that might not be known to decision-makers, allowing them to prepare better housing policies.

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