







The bright side of the crisis. The positive aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic according to the Poles

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on the outcomes of the research project on changes in everyday life during the pandemic, conducted at the beginning of lockdown in Poland with the use of CAWI questionnaire. We focus on results related to defining the positive aspects (PA) of the pandemic, describe the kinds of PA noticed by the respondents, categorise the identified PA (by values, concepts of order, and social change they referred), and analyse how socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents differentiate the responses. We argue that the perceived PA were directed towards individual rather than the general social well-being, that they express hope for maintaining rather than transforming the status quo, and that the nature of recognised PA is more defensive than progressive. Contrary to our initial assumptions, statistical analyses also suggest that the PA perception does not correlate with respondents' socio-demographic characteristics as strongly as expected, which allows for an assumption that other, more situational and personality traits factors also influence the researched phenomenon.



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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a social crisis that evokes such essential feelings as fear, anxiety, and a lack of existential security (Drozdowski *et al.* 2020). However, an intrinsic aspect of such an event is also the tendency to see its positive aspects (PA).

Searching for the PA of events and processes, expecting that the changes we are experiencing will have positive outcomes, or thinking optimistically on what is about to happen all seem to be universal human tendencies (Matlin and Stang 1978; Dodds *et al.* 2015), fulfilling

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an important adaptive role (Taylor and Brown 1988; Massie 2019). Individuals are not only able to accept the world and themselves as an integral part of it, but they are also motivated to make optimistic projections about reality or to maintain high self-esteem associated with an unrealistic assessment of one's abilities and attributes (Goodhart 1985). Additionally, finding PA (especially in the adversities affecting the individual) is regarded as an opportunity for a life change as it gives hope and encourages to undertake actions aimed at overcoming oppression (Tennen and Affleck 2002). Moreover, it is worth noting that within the culture of individualism, pessimism is a sort of stigma, and being optimistic is a commitment (Helweg-Larsen *et al.* 2002).

Although it plays an important motivational role, noticing PA is also treated as a cognitive distortion. Such concepts as wishful thinking (Trope *et al.* 1997; Krizan and Windschitl 2009), the Pollyanna principle (Matlin and Stang 1978; Matlin 2016), positive illusions (Taylor and Brown 1988), overoptimism (Van den Steen 2004) or unrealistic optimism (Weinstein 1980) are just some of the terms that show that looking for PA is often the consequence of the individual's values, needs, and dreams (Taylor and Brown 1988).

The most recent research on COVID-19 refers to optimism bias and its contribution to the spread of the virus. The study revealed a general occurrence of unrealistic optimism: people perceived themselves as less exposed to the disease than others (Dolinski *et al.* 2020). Participants of Kuper-Smith's study (2020) rated the chance of getting infected with COVID-19 lower for themselves than for other people similar to them regarding socio-demographic characteristics. Psychologists also examined the role of optimism-pessimism, general trust, and belief in conspiracy theories for COVID-19 related fears, and in preventive and hoarding behaviours concluding that optimism both prevents from believing in conspiracy theories and reduces fear (Jovančević and Miličević 2020). The search for PA is also an adaptive strategy. Positive attitude (hope, satisfaction, meaningfulness) helps people to cope with threatening events, as panic reactions to the pandemic are counter-productive and might lead to irrational behaviours or decisions (Trzebiński *et al.* 2020). Moreover, having a positive outlook enhances an individual's resilience during crises, especially if it refers to family well-being (Prime *et al.* 2020).

The inclination to look for the positive aspects of crises has so far been primarily studied by psychologists and treated as an element of individual strategies for coping with various emergencies. We would like to consider it as a practice that is always implemented in a specific cultural context by

someone with a particular position in the social structure. Therefore, during our research we decided to answer three questions: Do surveyed Poles notice the PA of the pandemic? What is the nature of these PA? What variables differentiate the perception of the PA of the pandemic? Answering these questions helps to enrich the existing knowledge on the human tendency to look for the positive aspects of crises with its collective aspect and thus provides information allowing a better understanding of how the surveyed Poles experienced the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

‘Everyday life in times of the pandemic’ is an explanatory research project conducted at the Faculty of Sociology of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Department of Social Practices Research and Theory). A study was initiated in the first days of Poland’s lockdown and designed to help understand whether and how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the everyday life of Poles and how they adapt to this new situation. The lockdown in Poland began on 12 March 2020, starting with the closure of educational institutions. The first stage of the research was carried out from 19 to 24 March 2020 ($N = 2541$). The second stage was conducted between 31 March and 8 April 2020 ($N = 1294$), at a time when new antivirus safety measures were introduced (24 March 2020), including the obligation of remote work, restriction of movement and gatherings, as well as closing civic spaces and limiting the number of people in shops (since 1 April 2020).

In both stages, we used questionnaires developed for the study by the research team members. The first questionnaire contained mainly closed-ended questions on various aspects of everyday life during the pandemic and the related restrictions. We have asked, for instance, questions such as: ‘Have you changed the working pattern during the epidemiological crisis?’, ‘Whom are you trying to avoid these days?’, ‘What do you think about certain behaviour at this time?’ (including items such as organisation of social gatherings at home, coughing in public places, seniors leaving their houses, etc.) or ‘Please specify how strongly do you experience following emotions in the last few days?’ (including items such as fear for one’s health, fear of a long-term pandemic, fear of losing one’s job). The second-stage questionnaire contained primarily open-ended questions (besides filter questions). During the first phase of the project, we observed respondents’ great need to share their experiences and emotions related to

the pandemic and the reorganisation of everyday life. By providing space for open-ended statements, we hoped to get closer to their everyday experience, and the ways they report it. We asked: 'Have there been any significant changes in your life over the last week?' (yes/no/hard to say). For 'yes': 'Please briefly describe the most important of these changes'. 'Do you somehow respond to these changes?' (yes/no/hard to say). For 'yes': 'How do you respond to these changes?'. 'Is there anything you are notably missing?' (yes/no/hard to say). For 'yes': 'Could you say what it is?'; 'Is there anything you particularly strongly experience excess of?' (yes/no/hard to say). For 'yes': 'Could you say what it is?'. 'What will change for the worse in our lives after the pandemic ends?'. 'What will change for the better in our lives after the pandemic ends?'.

The second survey is also the source of two questions that provide an empirical basis for this article. The first question was: 'Do you see any positive aspects of the situation we have found ourselves in after the declaration of the pandemic?' (yes/no/hard to say). The second: 'Please indicate the advantages of the situation which we have found ourselves in after the declaration of the pandemic' (open-ended question).

Due to the lockdown, we used a CAWI questionnaire placed in an online research platform in both stages of the study. Since we had to respond quickly to investigate the suddenly emerging phenomenon, we decided to availability sampling. The questionnaire was accessible for everyone interested in submitting their responses. Open survey invitation (with a hyperlink to the questionnaire) was distributed i.e. in the local edition of the biggest Polish daily newspaper 'Gazeta Wyborcza', Facebook profiles of sociological scientific associations, University's homepage, online discussion groups dedicated to the pandemic. At one point, the link started to be shared also spontaneously by Internet users who read about the study or took part in it. For the second survey, the invitation was additionally e-mailed to participants who completed the first questionnaire and expressed their will to continue taking part in the research (the persons who completed both questionnaires were identified by the provided e-mail address).

The way the questionnaire was distributed impacted the structure of the sample. The majority of respondents participating in the second survey were women (74.6% of the sample), inhabitants of the largest cities (residents of cities above 500 k inhabitants constituted 57.8% of respondents, cities between 100 to 500 k – 18.9%, towns with 20–100 k inhabitants: 8%, towns below 20 k inhabitants – 6.2%, villages – 9% of respondents), and people with higher education (90.1% of the sample).

The age profile of the sample was as follows: persons under 24 y.o. (12.5%), 25–34 (32.5%), 35–44 (26.8%), 45–54 (15.2%), over 55 (12.9%). Regarding the monthly income per capita in the household: below 2500 PLN (42.6%), 2501–5000 PLN (42.3%), over 5000 PLN (15% respondents of the sample). The sample consisted of respondents from all of Poland's regions. However, the majority of them were residents of Wielkopolskie region, that is the area where the research team is also based (36.8% of the sample), and Mazowieckie – region with the capital city Warsaw (20.9% of the respondents). Comparing the sample characteristics to the structure of the Polish population, we should state that among the categories over-represented in the study were: women (52% of the actual Polish population, according to Statistical Poland – GUS 2019), inhabitants of the large cities (only 11.5% of the Poles lives in cities above 500 k inhabitants, GUS 2020a), people with higher education (respectively 35.3% and 24.5% of Polish women and men, Eurostat 2018), younger people (age median in Poland is 40.9 years, GUS 2019), people with the high income (the average monthly disposable income per capita in Poland equals approximately 1800 PLN, GUS 2020b), and participants living in two regions mentioned above (23.8% of the population resides in those areas in Poland, GUS 2020a).

Respondents filled the questionnaires in digital form, so the answers were already aggregated in a database easy to import into statistical software. Processing of the open-ended question consisted of, firstly, ascribing responses to codes (identified during the pre-analysis of its content) according to the kind of the PA indicated by participants in their response, and secondly, of categorising of such coded responses by values, concepts of order and social change they referred. The answers to both of the abovementioned questions have been statistically processed using SPSS software. The analysis consisted of descriptive statistics (frequencies and cross-tables) alongside with tests and correlations [independent variables: gender, education, place of residence, income, having someone to support (yes/no), having children (yes/no), living with children (yes/no), personal situation (having/not having a permanent partner), and dependent variables: recognising the PA of the pandemic and kinds of recognised PA].

Results

The PA of the situation caused by the pandemic were noticed by 65.5% of survey participants. A further 23.4% of respondents did not see any PA,

and another 11.1% were unable to answer such a question unequivocally. The socio-demographic variables that turned out to differentiate (chi-square test, $p < 0.05$) the respondents' declarations on the perception of the PA of the pandemic were: gender [χ^2 (degrees of freedom: 2, sample size $N = 1282$) = chi-square value 6.646], age [(8, $N = 1294$) = 37.037], education [(2, $N = 1277$) = 12.725], having children [(2, $N = 1294$) = 13.553], and living with children [(2, $N = 540$) = 18.351]. The analysis of the distribution of variables in the cross-tables revealed that women, younger people, and those better educated noticed the PA of the pandemic more often. The correlations between seeing the PA, having children, and living with them were more complicated – having children was not conducive to noticing the PA of the pandemic, while living with them was (older people also have children, but during the pandemic they lived alone or separated from them due to the lockdown restrictions). However, all of the statistically confirmed correlations turned out to be weak (the value of the C-contingency coefficient was between 0.072–0.181). For the remaining variables tested (income, place of residence, having someone to support, personal situation), no further correlations were confirmed.

What positive aspects of the pandemic do Poles perceive?

The respondents who positively answered the question 'Do you see any positive aspects of the situation in which we have found ourselves after the declaration of the pandemic' (65.5% of the sample) were then asked in the questionnaire to elaborate on these PA. As this question was open-ended, the answers were ascribed to the following nine codes:

- (1) Individual revaluation (the pandemic as an opportunity to rethink one's life priorities; appreciate the freedom; a new perspective on work, career, social relations, lifestyle).
- (2) Slowing down the pace of life (less rush; more free time; possibility to engage in self-fulfilling activities).
- (3) New skills and knowledge (cooking, sewing, remote work software, hygiene awareness).
- (4) Promising habits (optimisation of paid work; not wasting food, thoughtful shopping, a new division of household chores; new rules of collective hygiene).
- (5) More quality time for relatives (closer relationships with relatives; a chance to develop valued or loosen unwanted relations).

- (6) Other personal benefits (catching up: at work, study, home; no need to do what one does not like: getting up early, going to the gym, meeting people one does not want to; instrumental benefits: cheaper fuel, more available access to parking spaces, no queues).
- (7) Strengthening social capital (greater kindness and empathy; gestures of solidarity; becoming aware of mutual dependence).
- (8) A chance for systemic change (emphasising the weakness of the contemporary state and government, global institutions, or the capitalist system; drawing attention to previously underrated professions and dimensions of local communities; better imagination of alternative paths of development).
- (9) Environmental benefits (restoring biodiversity; improving water and air quality; less noise pollution; slowing down resource consumption).

Among the respondents, some people gave ambivalent answers when asked to elaborate on the PA of the pandemic. It is worth quoting several examples of these responses:

Of course, I see the advantages. Although, personally, I am frustrated by looking for them. This is our defence mechanism – we have to think that everything is for something. Otherwise, only nihilism remains ...

This is a difficult question! Because when so many people are getting sick and dying, can there be anything good? [...] On the other hand, we are starting to mobilise ourselves as a society to help others, the weaker ones. And that is good.

Social solidarity is increasing. I would like to believe that the world will slow down and we will use this time to think together what future we want to build, but I doubt that it will happen (Table 1).

Table 1. Codes created in the first phase of analysing the kinds of PA.

More quality time for relatives	28.6%
Slowing down the pace of life	26.3%
Other personal benefits	26.2%
Promising habits	22.7%
Environmental benefits	16.1%
Individual reevaluation	15.4%
Strengthening social capital	15.1%
A chance for a systemic change	13.8%
New skills and knowledge	8.7%
Hard to say	4.3%

Percentage of respondents whose statements were assigned with codes referring to different kinds of positive aspects of the pandemic ($N = 843$). The answers do not add up to 100% because one respondent's statement could indicate more than one type of PA.

What is the nature of the positive aspects of the pandemic indicated by respondents?

Open-ended responses on the kinds of PA of the pandemic have been further categorised. The starting point for this classification was the code system created at the previous stage of analysis (assigning a given response to any of the categories described below depended on whether it was priorly described using any of the codes considered to fit into the particular category).

First, we determined where the PA of the pandemic were 'located': either within the sphere that is close to the individual and relates to their private and family life (PA codes 1–6) or within the systemic or environmental sphere of public life, politics or economy (codes 7–9).

Second, we identified what types of values respondents referred to when indicating the PA of the pandemic. Three types of values were distinguished: instrumental (materialistic, linked to security and satisfying basic needs – related to the codes 3, 4, 6 and 8); focused on self-realisation (self-development, the possibility of discovering one's hobbies, interests, maintaining social bonds – related to the codes 1, 2 and 5) and relational (acting altruistically towards community or environment – here, PA codes 7 and 9 were included).

Third, the nine priorly identified codes of the PA of the pandemic were organised according to who their beneficiaries were, resulting in: individual benefits (includes codes 1, 2, 3 and 6); collective benefits which are the benefits a pandemic brings to a particular community or category of people (includes 4, 5 and 7); systemic and environmental benefits, therefore, those which improve certain aspects of the way the system is organised or operates (e.g. make it more just, less oppressive, remove malfunctioning institutions) or the condition of the environment (codes 8 and 9 of the PA).

Fourth, the PA of the pandemic indicated by respondents were categorised according to what direction of change they suggested. Three types of changes were distinguished: ones that can be considered as retraditionalisation or a desire to return to a more traditional order, e.g. traditional gender roles, patriarchal family model, conservative morality (this is how codes 2, 3 and 5 of the PA were interpreted); those aimed at maintaining the status quo (codes 4 and 6); and expressing hope for new forms of social order (codes 1, 8 and 9 of the PA) (Table 2).

Table 2. Categories of positive aspects of the pandemic.

<i>'Location'</i>			
<i>Individual sphere</i>	<i>Systemic and environmental sphere</i>		<i>Mixed spheres</i>
61.6%	17.2%		21.2%
<i>Types of values</i>			
<i>Instrumental</i>	<i>Self-realisation</i>	<i>Relational</i>	<i>Mixed values</i>
26.7%	26.1%	10.5%	36.7%
<i>Beneficiaries</i>			
<i>Individual benefits</i>	<i>Collective benefits</i>	<i>Systemic benefits</i>	<i>Mixed benefits</i>
28.1%	22.9%	11.3%	37.5%
<i>Direction of change</i>			
<i>Retraditionalisation</i>	<i>Maintaining the status quo</i>	<i>Forcing the new forms of order</i>	<i>Mixed changes</i>
21.1%	17.9%	24%	37.1%

Percentage of respondents indicating particular categories of the PA of the pandemic ($N = 839$). The 'Mixed' categories include these responses that refer to more than one type.

What socio-demographic characteristics differentiate the nature of the positive aspects indicated by respondents?

Hereafter, we present only the correlations between the PA indicated by respondents and their socio-demographic characteristics which turned out to be statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). These correlations were determined using the chi-square test and the value of the correlation using the C-contingency coefficient.

Gender differentiated the nature of indicated PA of the pandemic in terms of self-realisation [(4, $N = 848$) = 12.067], collective benefits [(1, $N = 842$) = 12.884] and a desire to return to a more traditional order [(1, $N = 842$) = 5.958] that were expressed more frequently by women, while men more frequently indicated PA referring to instrumental values [(1, $N = 842$) = 4.998].

Age also turned out to be associated with pointing to the pandemic's PA. Being younger was conducive for PA categories aimed at maintaining the status quo [(4, $N = 848$) = 10.735] and regarding collective benefits [(4, $N = 848$) = 16.067]. The latter is mostly indicated by respondents of age 25–55 (approx. 57%), slightly less often by younger respondents (approx. 50%), and least frequently by the oldest (approx. 36%).

People with lower monthly income per household member more often referred to the PA connected with a desire to return to a more traditional type of order [(1, $N = 848$) = 6.019] and self-realisation [(2, $N = 743$) = 12.435].

People with a lower educational level more often referred to PA in relational values [(1, $N = 836$) = 5.203] and systemic and environmental benefits [(1, $N = 836$) = 7.374].

Being in a stable relationship turned out to be connected with collective benefits [(1, $N = 829$) = 5.474] while people without a permanent partner indicated individual benefits more often [(1, $N = 839$) = 8.721].

Having children was the variable that most often differentiated the types of perceived PA of the pandemic. People with children more often pointed to self-realisation [(1, $N = 848$) = 13.457] and retraditionisation [(1, $N = 848$) = 6.019]. Contrary, people without children were more likely to indicate PA in the systemic or environmental sphere [(1, $N = 848$) = 9.327], of instrumental value [(1, $N = 848$) = 7.365] and relational value [(1, $N = 848$) = 6.690]. Having no children was also related to a more frequent indication of systemic and environmental benefits [(1, $N = 848$) = 10.064] and the kind of change directed at maintaining the status quo [(1, $N = 848$) = 7.690], and forcing new forms of social order [(1, $N = 848$) = 5.298].

Having someone to support and living with children differentiated the answers very much like having children.

To sum up the presentation of the identified correlations, it should be noted that in all cases their strength should be considered weak (the value of the C-contingency coefficient was between 0.068–0.147).

Discussion and conclusions

The analyses suggest that seeing the PA of the pandemic was a common, but not universal quality. Most respondents noticed the PA, but doubted whether what they have defined as positive really has such a nature. For some respondents, the search for the PA of the pandemic was the result of social compulsion imposed by neoliberal utilitarianism, a fetish of productivity and efficiency. For others, it was immoral to point out such aspects because the pandemic entails suffering, death, and negative social consequences. For others, considering the PA of the pandemic appeared to be a form of wishful thinking that brings comfort in difficult times albeit the contemplated benefits are impossible to achieve.

The analyses of the nature of the PA of the pandemic indicated by surveyed Poles show that the lockdown led to a peculiar phenomenon of narrowing the perspective of perceived reality. The crisis forced people to focus on themselves and on protecting their well-being. Thus, such categories of the PA were noticed that bring advantages to them or their family and friends. The PA of a general social, systemic or environmental character were perceived much less often (slightly more likely by people who have not been in quarantine with their partners or children). This

appears to result from the defensive nature of Polish society, which has experienced numerous crises and systemic breakdowns of order in the past; a society whose members tend to close themselves up in small family communities and a society where distrust towards the state and other people prevails. As the analyses show, respondents were somewhat reluctant to change, they instead preferred actions aimed at maintaining the status quo. On the other hand, when they identified the PA of the pandemic that could lead to a transformation of social order, they were already divided on what the nature of these changes should be. Similar percentages of respondents indicated such PA of the pandemic that can be interpreted as a revolutionary call to introduce a new social order and those that are a reactionary appeal for the restitution of traditional forms of order.

Socio-demographic variables have not explained the differences in perceiving the PA of a pandemic to the level that could be expected. Several variables turned out to differentiate the responses (i.e. those indicating whether the lockdown was spent alone or with a partner/children, and gender), although the correlations were weak. The lack of significant links between dependent variables and incomes, education or living in a larger city may also be surprising, as if these capitals traditionally linked to opportunities and world-view turned out to be no longer as critical regarding the issue we were exploring.

It can be assumed that the lack of confirmation of stronger correlations between socio-demographic variables and the fact and nature of recognised PA of the pandemic was influenced by the level of measurement of dependent variables not allowing for using more sensitive statistical tests and/or a homogeneous research sample (a consequence of distributing questionnaire online). However, there might also be other reasons for this.

First, it can be assumed that recognising PA of the pandemic does not result as much from some socio-demographic characteristics of an individual, but from the mass media pressure to looking for them. The people filling out our questionnaire were bombarded, i.e. with photos of dolphins swimming in Venice canals, wild urban greenery showing nature coming back to life; entries from personal coaches convincing that the pandemic is an opportunity for self-development. Similar news was reinforced by media discourse suggesting that the epidemic is a kind of punishment for sins and will eventually bring the renewal of social life. Alternatively, it was discussed that COVID-19 gives us a chance to deploy the postulates of social movements fighting against neoliberal exploitation, overproduction and over-consumption malignant to the environment. Or that the crisis we

experience is an excellent opportunity to implement many changes related to, e.g. transport, health care or the quality of school/university teaching, that had previously been seen as utopian.

Second, it can also be assumed that the lack of stronger links between perceiving the PA of the pandemic and socio-demographic variables is the presence of other factors differentiating this phenomenon. These can be both specific personality traits and the individual's personal situation (e.g. job security and life savings, family situation, health, housing condition).

However, these are just assumptions. Determining how these additional factors contribute to the individual's inclination for searching for the PA of the pandemic requires further research, especially of a qualitative kind (more suited for studying idiosyncratic and individualised differences), combining psychological and sociological methods. No less crucial seems to be the analysis of how the PA of the pandemic recognised by respondents change over time, along with the evolvement of COVID-19 situation and the emergence of its new after-effects. Such an analysis would allow to determine more precisely the role of looking for the PA during crises.

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