



Poles in the face of forced isolation. A study of the Polish society during the Covid-19 pandemic based on ‘Pandemic Diaries’ competition

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the preliminary results of the ‘Pandemic Diaries’ research project, carried out by a 5-member team of Polish researchers under a form of open diary writing competition. Its aim was to gather a possibly widest body of personal accounts of the coronavirus pandemic experiences. Within it, 403 entries were submitted, providing a detailed insight into the daily practices, emotional and material difficulties of all age, gender and education-based groups of the Polish society. The paper presents initial observations on the dataset and the most often expressed notions that arise, including a widespread exacerbation of mental health issues as well as the process of defining the period of pandemic through references to collective memory and patriotic milieus.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 31 July 2020; Accepted 20 October 2020

KEYWORDS Diaries; Covid-19 pandemic; social change; daily practices; collective memory; mental health; emotions

Introduction

The ‘Pandemic Diaries’ research project arose as a spontaneous response to the unprecedented social conditions created by the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. From the first days of the virus becoming a significant element of the public discourse, it appeared that its consequences could have a lasting impact on social life in local, national, and global realms. Willing to create a record of these ongoing processes, both changes in social life and lack thereof, through tangible testimonials, we launched a public competition for anyone over 18 years of age

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spending the pandemic in Poland or for Poles residing abroad. The former category included also foreign citizens, who produced 7 entries (2%) for the competition: 6 in Ukrainian and 1 in Belarussian. With regard to Polish citizens who spent at least a fraction of the pandemic elsewhere, they varied in country of origin and duration of stay abroad. A total of 27 diaries (7%) containing testimonials of Poles spending time in another country in the aforesaid time was submitted to the body of diaries.

Throughout two months of the competition, advertised widely in traditional, online, and social media, participants submitted a total of 403 individual diaries. Altogether, they constitute a rich, highly personalized body of data providing trustful insights into Poles' and Poland-based immigrants' everyday life during the pandemic. Many of them were written in a form of author's commentary to daily events, centred on rapidly changing governmental restrictions and new, forcefully created forms of social interactions.

Although at the time of submitting this paper we have only reached the stage of preliminary data analysis, we could already single out dominant sub-trends prevailing in the dataset, some of which are particularly context-sensitive to Polish society and hence deserve a further qualitative examination. Those included emotional tensions stemming from forced isolation, exacerbation of mental health difficulties, and the process of defining the struggle against the virus through historical analogies and toposes from mnemonic and symbolic milieus of the Polish nation.

The 'Pandemic Diaries' project in the context of Polish sociological tradition

The history of diary competitions and vast sociological research it followed proves it being a unique method giving insight into individual ways of experiencing meaningful moments in social history. For this reason, we decided to use the memoir analysis to study the time of the pandemic and social isolation. We assumed that it would allow us to collect a wide range of data about changes – or their lack – in everyday life, emotions related to isolation, historical analogies, ways of talking about the individual and social consequences of a pandemic.

The described diary competition draws on a long and rich tradition of this method in Polish sociology. Among the first works based on the analysis of personal documents (including diaries) was the research by

Florian Znaniecki and William I. Thomas, included in the monograph 'Polish Peasant in Europe and America' (Thomas and Znaniecki 1996 [1918]).

The method of diary analysis they initiated quickly gained popularity in Poland in the interwar period. It was used, among others, for research on generational differences in reactions to important social processes, for example a competition for diaries of the unemployed during the Great Depression organized by Ludwik Krzywicki (1933). It continued its momentum after World War II, peaking in popularity in the 1960s. Diaries were used to study individual experiences of post-war migrations and forced border changes (for example Dulczewski and Kwilecki 1963), migration to cities, and social mobility (Chałasiński 1938). In more recent times diary competitions are no longer as popular, but there are still research centres that use this method for large-scale research endeavours, including the Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development of the Polish Academy of Sciences or Institute of Social Economy of the Warsaw School of Economics.

Despite such a wide body of research, there is no dominant methodology prevailing in analysing diary-based research materials (Pawłowska 2009, Kaźmierska 2019). The method we employed in the following examination was thematic content analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The aim and scope of our study was not aimed at converting qualitative data into quantitative measures (as opposed to other types of content analysis). While reading diaries, we have identified key thematic dimensions we deemed most important, considering the frequency of their appearance in the body of research and narrative style of respective authors.

The remainder of this paper contains preliminary observations and possible future avenues for further research. First, we detail the sociological structure of the body of diarists partaking in the competition. Further, we present two principal areas in which we are able to generate major generalizable conclusions: the emotional tensions triggered by the pandemic, reflected in therapeutic journals and testimonies of mental problems, and the process of giving sense and symbolic meaning to the pandemic through mnemonic analogies and patriotic notions.

Method

The purpose of the 'Pandemic Diaries' research project was to collect and investigate the widest possible spectrum of individual accounts of daily life in the coronavirus pandemic. The task was carried out by a research

team consisting of five academic researchers from the University of Warsaw and Polish Academy of Sciences. All of its members work in the field of sociology and throughout the project were able to provide expertise from our respective areas of research, including social stratification, the role of families and perception of motherhood, collective memory, and sociological research based on diaries.

Recruitment

With the support of aforesaid institutions, a website – <http://pamietnikipandemii.pl/> – was created, containing primary information about the competition: formal requirements, terms and conditions and short biographies of the research team members. Formal criteria for competition participants were set as deliberately loose and wide in order to provide an inclusive platform for all types of diarists. An entry was accepted to take part in the competition if it covered at least two weeks since coronavirus became a major topic in public debate. A minimal number of entries inside a diary was not specified, neither was its length, vocabulary, or level of author's linguistic competence. Such a broad approach allowed to assemble a hugely diverse body of entries, which included first-hand testimonies of pandemic experiences from all age, gender and education groups of Polish society. Nonetheless, the collected data cannot be considered representative for the Polish society because of the sampling method (or the lack thereof), as well as the uncontrolled system of submissions.

In total, four prizes were announced in the competition; two ex-aequo prizes of PLN 2500 each (ca. 570 EUR, equal to 83% of 2019 monthly median net income in Poland) and two runner-ups (PLN 500, or 17% of monthly median net income). The primary method of promoting the competition was through social, online and traditional media. We set up a Facebook profile for it and kept a steady pace of frequent (3–4 per week) posts. A press release detailing the rules of the competition was sent out to 65 local newspapers across the country to enlarge the possible scope of participation. The latter proved fundamental in diversifying the body of authors, as dozens of them mentioned in their entries that they learned about it precisely from local news providers.

Ethics

The design of the study, as well as data collection and procession were carried out with several ethical considerations in mind. First, in

advertising the competition, emphasis was placed on the scientific value of the project. We presented it to possible authors as an opportunity to contribute to a unique study on Poles' pandemic experience to avoid a possible attempt to simply monetize one's lockdown experience. Further, storage and anonymisation of data proved both technically and ethically challenging. The amount of personal accounts, including cases of domestic violence and emotional breakdowns must be thoroughly protected. As this issue lies beyond simple data confidentiality (see Waddington et al. 2013) and is paramount in understanding data collected remotely during lockdown, we used an encrypted submission and data storage systems.

The competition regulations included a statement regarding publishing and republishing the selected material. In the following paper we use anonymised quotations. The consent obtained during the submission process included an agreement to use anonymised excerpts from the diary for scientific purposes. Any other form of republishing the diary would require an additional consent of the author.

Preliminary results

Participants – the diarists

We received a total of 403 diaries, 17 of which were sent by post in the form of manuscripts and hand-written journals. The shortest submissions were poems, consisting of just few lines of text. The longest diary, an electronic document had 106 pages. Authors were predominantly female: out of the 403 entries in total, 327 were submitted by women (81%) and 76 by men (19%). We assume it is a consequence of women being more likely to describe their personal experiences and emotions. It may also stem from socialized gender roles, assigning more emotional expressions to women (Plant et al., 2006).

Most diarists functioned in a heteronormative nuclear family model consisting of two adults (a man and a woman) and children, with sporadic mentions of interactions with older generations (grandparents, grandchildren). Nonetheless, it is worth noting there were 17 diaries describing same-sex relationships (4% of all). The very submission of such diaries is an extremely valuable research occurrence, given the illegality of formal same-sex relationships in Poland and an overall hostility towards sexual minorities.



Pandemic Diaries competition

Living in our society in this current and specific time, resulting from the pandemic, should be documented. That is why the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, the Institute of Sociology of the University of Warsaw and the Institute of Polish Culture of the University of Warsaw are announcing a competition for diaries from this period. We would like to ask you to describe what your daily life is like: your everyday life, your daily duties, contacts with loved ones and friends, your pastimes, how your work is going - if you work - and other such matters. Or maybe your life has changed only slightly? Your reflections and thoughts regarding the world around us at this extraordinary time are also important.

Prizes are available for authors of diaries that describe life during the pandemic in the most wide-ranging way:

- **Two main prizes of 2500 PLN each**
- **Two runners-up prizes of 500PLN each**
- **Books published on the basis of these diaries**
- **Publication in „Maty Format” magazine**

Help us to understand your everyday life during the pandemic!

Deadline for diary submissions:
15 June, 2020

A more detailed timetable for the competition, regulations, and an application form can be found at <http://pamietnikipandemii.pl>

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Figure 1. Competition Advertisement in English; the competition was advertised in Polish, English and Ukrainian.

The ages and gender of the diarists are shown in [Figure 1](#) and [Table 1](#). Diarists between 18 and 29 years of age are over-represented in the cohort of authors. In every age group there is also a significant prevalence of female over male diarists, which is to be attributed to socialized gender roles and constitutes a valuable point of entry for further research on gendered everyday practices during the pandemic. The age group containing the highest percentage of male authors is 50–59 (35%). It is, nonetheless, too small a percentage to stipulate that this age group differs in any way from others with regard to gendered involvement in the process of writing a diary.

Residents of large cities constituted a significant majority of the diarists. Out of 382 authors who provided information about their place of residence,¹ 190 indicated that they lived in the city with over half a million inhabitants. Fifty-five diaries were sent by rural residents, 51 came from cities with up to 50,000 inhabitants, 47 – from the cities to 200,000 inhabitants, and 39 diaries from the cities to 500,000 inhabitants. In comparison with nationwide population distribution, there is a significant overrepresentation of diarists from major urban centres. According to Editorial Board of Statistics Poland (2020), urban population in 2019 constituted 60% of total population, with 24.2% lived in the cities to 50,000 inhabitants, 16.5% to 200,000 inhabitants, and 19.4% in the cities with

¹We received about 20 postal submissions which did not include author's socio demographic data.

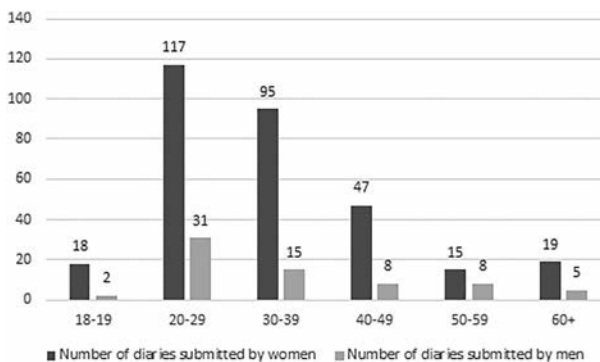
Table 1. Age distribution of diarists. Source: Own.

Year Born	Age	No. of women	No. of men	% of women in whole sample	% of men in whole sample	% of women in age group	% of men in age group
2001–2002	18–19	18	2	5%	1%	90%	10%
1991–2000	20–29	117	31	31%	8%	79%	21%
1981–1990	30–39	95	15	25%	4%	86%	14%
1971–1980	40–49	47	8	12%	2%	85%	15%
1961–1970	50–59	15	8	4%	2%	65%	35%
1960+	60+	19	5	5%	1%	79%	21%

200,000 and more inhabitants. In contrast, the rural population accounted for 40%. We are led to conclude this was a consequence of difficulties in disseminating the call for diarists in places and communities with limited access to the Internet and other media (Figure 2).

The level of education of the diarists also varied. Majority (46%) have higher education at master's level (dominant model in Poland), some of them have bachelor's (13%), and academic titles (6%). Conversely, 36.6% of the Polish workforce in 2019 had tertiary education (SP, 2020). 12.5% diarists have secondary education, in comparison to 59% Poles. Only 6 diarists represented people with lower secondary education, which goes in pair with 4.8% of employed Poles who have lower secondary and primary education.

Such a sampling bias – to have predominantly well-educated participants living in major urban areas – is typical for a study that is based on voluntary submissions and a low baseline selection (see e.g. Enzenbach et al. 2019). The higher financial and cultural capital was also reflected in the body of entries, as they often stressed that the pandemic

**Figure 2.** Gender proportions of diarists in age groups.

caused simply a linear transition from workplace to home office or from university to online teaching, still leaving room for additional activities, such as writing a diary.

Taxonomy of pandemic diaries

Based on a preliminary examination of the body of entries, we have been able to construct a initial taxonomy of the pandemic journals. The principal categories we singled out include therapeutic, descriptive, relation-driven, literary and those focused on parenthood. Their brief characteristics and frequency of occurrence are presented in [Table 2](#). Please note that the total number of diaries does not equal the total sum of frequencies in [Table 2](#), as some of the entries could belong to more than one category within the taxonomy.

Almost half of the diaries submitted featured some form of reference to mental health issues, treatment, medical diagnosis and even precise descriptions of medicines and dosing used by the author. Further, the second most frequent category was descriptive, that is, simply containing summaries of news reports, media information and facts and figures about the pandemic. Often authors would cite them without even a slightest word of personal commentary. Such a high frequency of diaries of purely reporting nature shows not only the shortening of the news cycle during the pandemic, but also the fact people became overwhelmed, overburdened with the constant inflow of new data and those data became pillars of their daily life, new points of reference.

We did not observe any gender-specific modalities in the taxonomy but one category: parenthood diaries. Pandemic realities of parents,

Table 2. Preliminary taxonomy of pandemic diaries. Source: Own.

Type	Short characteristics	Number of submissions (Percentage) [Number of submissions from foreigners]
'Therapeutical'	Focusing on and contemplating one's own emotions and thoughts, mentioning emotional crisis, possible therapeutic motivation and effect.	174 (43%) [0]
Relation-driven	Focusing on relations within a community (family, local community, extended family)	38 (9%) [3]
Diaries of parenthood	Focusing on struggles of being a parent (e.g. homeschooling of children)	90 (22%) [0]
Descriptive	Shortly reporting major events and the introduction of new restrictions without revealing (or hardly revealing) personal experiences	118 (29%) [3]
Literary	Story-like and fictionalized, including poetry	41 (10%) [1]

issues of parenting and relationships within that dimension were dominantly described by women, as we received only 8 (less than 1% of total) submissions of men writing about themselves as parents. Such a significant disproportion points to a possible conclusion that, despite media narratives and initial assumptions, the pandemic did not contribute to a more equal distribution of duties within a household, but only solidified the already existing imbalances.

Exacerbation of mental health issues

Among the predominant stipulations on possible consequences of the pandemic, one of the most apparent is the coming society-wide mental health crisis. Its causes include forced isolation, torn social bonds, as well as labour market future and overall societal uncertainties. As epidemic occurrences frequently result in growth of depression, PTSD, and other similar disorders, it shows that experience of social life's extensive reorganization, threats coming with pandemics and mental health issues are closely linked.

Preliminary observations stand in line with this assumption, as worsening psychological states are reflected in numerous works submitted through our competition. Specifically, a significant number of diaries were submitted as therapeutic journals, describing mental health issues with an unusual degree of honesty and openness. Those focusing on loneliness, hopelessness or depression could be counted in dozens, while a vast majority of others featured accounts of emotional problems at least as a side topic. They centred on the self of the author, manifested through an emotional, dominantly pessimistic voice speaking of the author's existential condition, their social surroundings, and prognostics of the future.

This type of attitude is suggestively described in the confession of a 34-year-old female resident of Warsaw:

I dream of spectacular catastrophes, I wake up full of fear, sadness, mourning after the loss I have dreamt of. I must get up, plan for another day just to survive and not to fall deep into the dark, the dirty, the sticky one. Not to drown in meaninglessness, rumpled sheets, stuffiness, and dust.

A more profound analysis of individual reactions shows, however, that those may vary significantly. For instance, restrictions on mobility and commuting in public spaces resulted in relief as well as gloom. The pandemic reality unveiled the arbitrary nature of some elements of the social pattern of interactions and at least temporarily pushed people to seek

alternatives in bonding or even funded new rituals, like greeting by sticking elbows. Such shifts proved very demanding for the authors struggling with mental health, which is exemplified in the 21-year-old female student's story of a remote psychiatric session:

I have mixed feelings on my first medical visit – it was suddenly an hour late. I got used to sitting in the doctor's office and talking to a real person. And then I only heard her voice. I did not see any of her reactions, nor did she see mine. Just plain talk without any nonverbal signals wasn't a good model for a psychiatric examination.

In some personal experiences the opposite was the case. Restrictions and society's reshuffle empowered authors struggling with depression since pandemic made their everyday demeanors – a calm and rather introverted way of life – a universal experience. Some diarists expressed both surprise and a sense of self-pride due to being well adjusted to the new normal. For example, 35-year-old female artist noted:

I realized I made it through smoother than many people. I am used to the fear on the verge of panic, aware of finitude and inevitability of certain things and for a long time I was feeling unsafe, my reality was usually unpredictable chaos, (...) Neither of these things surprised me, this is my daily functioning. [Pandemic] got many people caught by surprise and suddenly they have to adapt to it somehow and deal with it. I thought it might be much more difficult for them than for me.

Eventually, it is indispensable to mention that – especially in comparison with interview-based projects, the diaries gave a unique possibility to observe the passage of time and the changing emotional dynamic of the diarists' everyday living.

Giving symbolic meaning to the pandemic through collective memory and patriotic notions

Another noticeable trend in the body of entries focused on authors' attempts to define the period of pandemic through historical analogies and symbolic references to the realm of Polish collective memory. The ways individuals display their reference to the past are manifold. Close to half of them (179 out of 408), mentioned the past – personal or national – in their works. On the one hand, some only briefly mention past occurrences or recall one's individual experiences. However, we have also received a significant number (44 diaries, 11%) of submissions that extensively describe the representation of pandemics through the lenses of collective memory. For the purpose of the paper, we vastly

understand collective memory as a collectively shared relationship with the past, closely intertwined with collective identity. As defined by Olick, 'Groups provide the definitions, as well as the divisions, by which particular events are subjectively defined as consequential. These definitions then trigger, or result in, different interpretative phenomena. Collectivities have memories, just like they have identities' (Olick et al. 2011). Mnemonic and patriotic references appeared only in diaries by Polish authors residing in Poland. Scarcely (2 diaries) such motives were present in diaries of Polish migrants, while none – in the diaries of foreigners passing the pandemic in Poland.

Diarists focused on a vast array of areas in which the pandemic disrupted their daily life. It is, however, possible to single out two dominant dimensions: material deprivation and collective attitudes towards the virus, 'an invisible enemy' as it was oftentimes referred to in the entries. For many, the struggle with coronavirus was a patriotic challenge. As written by, curiously, a 32-year-old (so relatively young) author – an entrepreneur from a mid-sized town:

In the name of our civic responsibility we stay enclosed in our huts. In wartime conditions a person of patriotic qualities would have said we do it as cowards, but in the current conditions of a global pandemic, it needs to be said, we're acting like heroes.

Consequently, methods of survival known from previous periods of hardship were replicated during the pandemic, based on the assumption that if they proved successful during wartime occupation or economic crises of the communist regime, they are bound to function equally well in the circumstances of lockdown and quarantine. Descriptions of shortages provided by diarists focus therefore on what ceased to be readily available and how to replace it. The most common example was a domestic instruction of hand sanitizer production, easily replaceable by a mixture of ethanol and water in right proportions.

In turn, references made regarding collective attitudes towards coronavirus are a flagship example of post-memory, a concept first developed by Marianne Hirsch. Even if a diarist does not bear personal memories from, for instance, past armed struggle, it uses frameworks known from historical interpretations of those to give meaning to the period of pandemic. Those, however, oftentimes prove unsuited for this purpose, as the virus provides a different type of enemy the people need to face. One of the diarists, a 59-year-old mother from a mid-size town with a higher education degree, wrote:

In front of my neighbours' house there are three alien cars. Nobody is certain now how we're supposed to act, how careful - or not - we have to be. When the Germans were marching and firing their guns, at least they were visible, while now the war is fought against an invisible enemy and one cannot tell who the enemy is and who is not.

That is the case because the pandemic forces a reversal of moral principles. What used to be manifestation of bravery – namely taking visible action – now brings harm to the collectivity, while passivity becomes a virtue.

Discussion and conclusions

Drawing on the rich diary tradition in Polish sociology and using societal mobilization to write down their thoughts, observations and emotions, this study aims to systematize testimonies and their subsequent analysis through several different aspects. As we pointed out, because of the low baseline participation, the body of diaries cannot be considered representative. To make the project as inclusive as possible for prospective authors, we did not employ any specific sampling method. This procedure, however, is similar to the vast tradition of diary competitions that we outlined earlier in the paper.

From the outset, however, it already appears that some of those will be heavily context-dependent and reinforced by local specificities. Thus, in the nascent area of 'social pandemics studies' we expect a differentiation to arise between global, national and local phenomena.

It is definitive already that the state of pandemic emergency has disrupted formerly known patterns of social life. However, it is still unknown what the durability of recorded changes will be. The diaries, particularly those covering a wider time span, showed a complex emotional dynamic of the pandemic experiences. However, one needs to consider the specificity of the body of the authors – during the lockdown, it was much easier to reach out to people who use Internet and social media. Thus, the number of submissions in paper was much lower. It is also indispensable to acknowledge that, despite major efforts on behalf of the organizing team, it was inevitable that some authors took on a particular style, a form of self-creation, in writing the diary, motivated primarily by financial remunerations stemming from the competition.

The gender disproportion may be reflecting the generally recognized persistence of the female journal keeper stereotype in European culture, with the term 'diary' being 'vaguely feminine, or 'feminized''

(Gannett 1992, p. 99). Moreover, preliminary studies show the gendered impact of the Covid-19 pandemics, with women being more affected with the consequences of disease outbreaks such as forced isolation and closure of educational institutions (Wenham et al., 2020).

Furthermore, we observed references to different 'social memories of hardship' and parallels between the coronavirus pandemic and other periods in history. References made regarding collective attitudes towards coronavirus are a flagship example of post-memory, a concept first developed by Marianne Hirsch (2012, 2019). Even if a diarist does not bear personal memories from, for instance, past armed struggle, it uses frameworks known from historical interpretations of such events to give meaning to the period of pandemic. Those, however, oftentimes prove unsuited for this purpose, as the virus constitutes a different type of enemy. Therefore, we find especially worth further investigation the notion of nation-centric, almost nationalistic narratives towards the pandemic period and how those are reflected in other countries.

A key aspect of the competition (which was a vital part of our study) were criteria of selecting winners. Since we were able to award two ex-aequo prizes, we looked for diaries that were (a) describing possibly the most universal experience and were representative for the body of diaries and (b) those that were unique and describing in-depth a situation of an individual. After several rounds of discussions, we (as the organizing committee) agreed that on the one hand, we cannot prize only diaries describing very rare, unusual life situations. For example, one of the prized diaries was a memoir of a worker of a day-care facility for the elderly. Even though these facilities became one of the symbols of the pandemic, they were not a popular experience. On the other hand, we were looking for a diary that showed an experience of large groups. The winning diary was a diary of a young woman of a clear precary experience – experiencing an unstable job market, low-paid job, and no psychological welfare. Another dimension was the role of pandemic: whether the diary conveys the pandemic as seen through the lens of an individual experience or if it is one of the described aspects of a biography. The second winning diary was a diary of a mother from a small town, where the pandemic is a context for social relations. Finally, we decided not to take into consideration the writing style and grammar correctness since this would promote educated authors and professional writers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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