

**Jacek Burski**   
University of Lodz, Poland

## The Coping Strategies in Biographies of Polish Middle-Class Representatives of (Post)Transformation Period

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.15.4.09>

**Abstract** The article focuses on the problem of life strategies adapted by the representatives of young Polish middle-class in the (post)transformation period in Poland towards different aspects of social change. On the basis of two research projects focused on the consequences of the Polish systemic transformation, I discuss issues related to biographical experiences of this process. The main theoretical and methodological background is concentrated on using the autobiographical narrative interview to analyze coping strategies in relation to the class position of examined cases. The interviews taken under consideration have been conducted with young men who could be described as middle-class members.

**Keywords** Life Strategies; Middle-Class; Sociology of Biography; Autobiographical Narrative Interview; Sociology of Work; Precariousness

**Jacek Burski**, sociologist, a research assistant at the Department of Sociology of Culture, Institute of Sociology, Faculty of Economics and Sociology, University of Lodz, Poland. He defended his PhD thesis about the social world of football fans in Poland. He is the author of articles published in *Przegląd Socjologiczny*, *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej*, *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, *Warsaw Forum of Economic Sociology*. He participated in research projects focused, among others, on biographical research, the consequences of social change, and sociology of work. He is a member of the Polish Sociological Association.

**email address:** [jacek.burski@uni.lodz.pl](mailto:jacek.burski@uni.lodz.pl)

In the paper, I would like to present the analysis of individuals' life strategies (Mrozowicki and Karolak 2017; Mrozowicki, Karolak, and Krasowska 2018) towards current social, economic, and political conditions of living in Poland. These conditions could be understood as the consequences of systemic change that had occurred in the country in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To obtain this goal, I will use biographical material and methodology based on the works of Fritz Schütze. The time-related scope of the analysis is focused on the period after 1989, which could be called a (post)transformation moment in the modern history of Poland. As a team member of two

simultaneous projects working on biographical consequences of different mechanisms of the Polish transformation,<sup>1</sup> I am in a convenient position to use both projects' materials and results to present the development of life strategies towards the post-transformation reality. As the direct empirical support and the asset in proceeding with the analysis, I will use cases of two young Poles who could be counted as members of the middle-class.<sup>2</sup> The class perspective will be treated here as one of the reference frames that let me explain motivations, actions, and attitudes I find important in the collected interviews.

I am interested in following the logic of actions that had been reconstructed by interviewees in their life stories. Keeping that in mind, I would like to go over the crucial points of analyzed narratives and examine whether it is possible to establish more general categories regarding their biographical experience of collective processes. One of the issues I would like to confront is the apparent division of conformist and non-conformist attitudes presented by the interviewees towards the rules, norms, and values of the worlds they live in. The hypothesis I would like to raise is that

<sup>1</sup> This article was prepared within the project PREWORK ("Young Precarious Workers in Poland and Germany: A Comparative Sociological Study on Working and Living Conditions, Social Consciousness, and Civic Engagement") funded by the National Science Center in Poland and the German Research Foundation (DFG), the NCN project number UMO-2014/15/G/HS4/04476, the DFG project number TR1378/1-1, and within the project "Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. A Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective" funded by the National Science Center in Poland, the NCN project number UMO-2013/09/B/HS6/03100.

<sup>2</sup> One will find a more detailed description of ranking both interviewees as members of middle-class in the following parts of the article.

analyzed biographies will show complex and differential dimensions of using available capitals, following social rules, recognizing norms and values. Additionally, I will try to show how life strategies are established in collision with different class backgrounds in changing social, economic, and political conditions.

Both research projects have explored the consequences of the social changes of contemporary Polish society. The project "Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective" (2013-2018) inquired into issues of social transition occurring in Poland at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The center of its interest was the consequences of socio-economic transformation and its biographical experience regarding the division of the collected interviews in three cohorts: individuals born in 60', 70', and 80'. The collection of 90 autobiographical narrative interviews was gathered and analyzed.

Within the second research project (PREWORK [2015-2019]) 64 interviews (conducted with the support of methodology of the autobiographical narrative interview) were collected in central and south-western Poland. The PREWORK project analyzed transformation processes in different aspects of the everyday life of young Poles than it was in the first-mentioned case. It focused, particularly, on the work-related sphere. The main topic was how the precarization of work affects the lives of young people in Poland and Germany. Inspiration to follow how life strategies work comes from the results of the project which are centered around

the concept of coping strategies of young precarious workers.<sup>3</sup>

In the paper, I choose to analyze two cases—one from each project. Sharing some similarities (which will be explained and described more specifically later on), the two young men's narratives are examples of understanding the rules of their social milieus and adapting (not without struggling) their biographical approaches to social, economic, and (to some extent) political circumstances.

The first case, of Remek,<sup>4</sup> shows a married individual who lives in a middle-size city, works as a local official, has one child, and rents a middle-sized flat. From the distance, it could appear as an easy life of the local middle-class or the intelligentsia<sup>5</sup> member. However, Remek's narrative exposed a deeper reflection on the precarious conditions of his and his family's living. His main concern is to gain a decent and stable work position, but to do that he needs to know how the local public institutions (the field of his professional interests) work. He has been learning the rules of the local labor market and has been following them since he started working in the late years of his university studies. For now, I classify

him as a conformist type regarding his structural position.

In comparison to Remek, the second informant, Radek, represents on the surface the non-conformist attitude. He is a young homosexual who had migrated from a very small village to Warsaw. His narrative is constructed around his relations with the closest family (especially parents), his sexuality, and interrelations between the local and traditional milieus of his origin and the seemingly open and tolerant capital city. His class background could be described as middle-class as well. However, in his case, economic capital is clearly higher than in Remek's case. Furthermore, Radek's occupational position could be understood as higher as well—he works as a copywriter in a media agency in Warsaw, when Remek is admittedly manager, but only in a middle-size city library. His non-conformism would refer here to his potential to break social barriers as a homosexual man from a small traditional village who does not fear to talk about his sexual orientation.

Both cases constitute a contrast set (Glaser and Strauss 1973:55-58; Schütze 2014:268-269) that allows us to generate more theoretical categories in an analytical process. I set out to present how individuals from different family and class backgrounds rework their economic, cultural, and social capital (in accordance with Bourdieu's definition) to establish appropriate life strategies that help them organize their biographies. Before more specific analytical conclusions will be presented, I would like to draw more attention to the conditions of living in (post) transformation Poland.

## Living in Contemporary Poland

Living in a present-day society brings paradoxical stability of instability. Individuals are subject to multiple tensions and forces which come from outside of their local milieus, but are also generated inside their communities. It could be assumed that the modern outside has been constructed around the rules of global capitalism and the norms of consumption which (especially in the Western world) dominate behavioral patterns. Globalization affects all countries and societies, but this process occurs with a different intensity and scale around the globe (Robertson 1992). For example, if we analyze the impact of the 2008 global crisis on the Polish economy, the effect would be surprisingly mild in comparison to economies of the center (North America and Western Europe). There were obviously some signs of an economic slowdown, however, due to weaker interconnectedness with the global economy and financial sector, Polish companies and banks were much less troubled (Nazarczuk 2013).

Nevertheless, in other aspects peripheral (or semi-peripheral) economies are more vulnerable—particularly under enormous pressure coming from the centers of the global economy. The process of the systemic transformation from the centrally planned to the neo-liberal economic system, which occurred in Poland after 1989, has been interpreted as a success story. The economic literature summarizes the Polish transformation around the successful establishment of the new—mostly economic and political—order (Gomułka 2014). Macroeconomic goals (like regaining economic balance, decreasing rate of indebtedness, market liberalization, and resto-

ration of economic growth capability) have been (at least to some extent) accomplished. Other research shows, however, that a more complicated picture is hidden under the surface. Pobłocki (2017:18-23) remarkably deconstructs the neo-liberal discourse of success and dominant narration. His argumentation is a critique of an economic mirage of the one-way development which still dominates the Polish public discourse in recent decades. Furthermore, there are more studies that used more sophisticated approaches to examine the present course of transformation. Sociological (but, not only) initiatives particularly show different consequences of the process (Sztompka 1999; Gardawski 2001; 2009; Dunn 2008; Mrozowicki 2011).

Another important perspective is to differentiate the local context of transformation (mechanisms which could be understood as uniquely Polish) from changes that could be named global ones. For example, shifts in the global labor market and economy in general cause the domination of uncertainty above stable professional life which was common in the early decades after World War II. The post-Fordist and postmodern perspectives set new rules of organizing biographies which can be described as “the shift of emphasis from the professional to the private and free time” (Andrejczuk and Burski 2017:52). It impacts the class structure where decomposition of traditional divisions of means of production would transform into a capability of consuming at a certain level. It can be assumed that today the class position is less defined by a type of work, but more by a lifestyle in the public and digital spheres (Gdula and Sadura 2012). However, being successful in fulfilling the

<sup>3</sup> There is not enough space for sharing all results from the project, but I do recommend works of Adam Mrozowicki and other members of the project team (Mrozowicki 2016; Mrozowicki and Karolak 2017; Mrozowicki, Karolak, and Krasowska 2018). For more details about the project, one can visit the PREWORK's website: [prework.eu](http://prework.eu).

<sup>4</sup> The first interviewee was anonymized as Remek, the second as Radek. Other names, cities, institutions (like the place of study) were anonymized in both interviews.

<sup>5</sup> From the economic point of view, Remek could be assigned to the middle-class. However, his social position is based on his working with and producing cultural capital—the most important attribute of intelligentsia (see the works of Tomasz Zarycki on the Polish intelligentsia [i.e., Zarycki 2009; 2014]).

new patterns is a luxury available for few. The rest of us face reality and class-founded ambitions, as well as consumption patterns. All of these mechanisms have had an impact on the life of Polish society. Young Poles are cases in point of these processes where they are more and more clearly exposed to class-based struggles. The transformation brought not only access to the free market of goods, political freedom, mobility, but established new constraints and tensions as well.

One of the negative social and economic consequences of establishing a neoliberal system in Poland was the drastic growth of unemployment. At the beginning of the 21st century, the country had the highest rate of unemployment in Europe—according to Eurostat, at the peak it hit 20% in 2002.<sup>6</sup> To reduce it different tools were implemented by the authorities. One of them was loosening the labor code and legislation to allow employers to hire people and terminate their contracts more easily. The effect was unsurprising—a number of people (especially the young—those who entered the labor market after graduation) were hired on temporary contracts, therefore mandatory contracts or other types of unstable employment reached incredibly high levels. For comparison purposes, in 2000, the percentage of young Poles (aged 15 to 24) employed on a temporary basis was at 14,2%, while in 2015, it hit 73,1% (Mrozowicki 2016:95). What deserves attention is not the fact that unstable employment conditions are frequent in this cohort, but the dynamic and scale of growth rate

are shocking. This kind of drastic change in living conditions had to have ripple effects on the biographical experiences of individuals.

Mechanisms of increasing instability and its impact on individuals' biographies put the problem of accessibility to people's experience in front of social researchers. One of the possible answers would be through biographical material and appropriate methodology. Using this type of approach, the researcher can find a way to explore what is important for informants, how the appropriate life strategy is constructed, and how it works in the biographies. Based on the works of Fritz Schütze and other academics specializing in this method (Schütze 2012a; 2012b; Kaźmierska 2016a; Waniek 2016), I would like to look at varied aspects and advantages of the biographical approach in regard to exploring coping strategies in contemporary Poland.

Fritz Schütze developed the concept of process structures, which can be understood as the main rules of the biographical order of one's life story.<sup>7</sup> One of them, the biographical action scheme, covers the efforts of the individual to shape and plan their biography actively. We can suppose that in the new—more precarized—world it would be harder to establish an efficient biographical plan of action or just imagine the future for yourself. It can be assumed that in the autobiographical narrative interview the

<sup>7</sup> There are four process structures: biographical action schemes, trajectories of suffering that cover the experience of losing control over one's own life, institutional expectation patterns that cover those parts of life when individuals are fulfilling institutionalized and normalized life trajectories, creative metamorphoses of biographical identity that cover the onset of new biographical development pathways (Riemann and Schütze 1991; Schütze 2008).

informants—regarding the work sphere—will have to concentrate on the problem of lack of stabilization and insecurity in their professional career and its impact on other life aspects.

The autobiographical narrative interview was used in both projects in order to capture the biographical experience of the collective phenomena. As stressed by Kaźmierska (2016b:61), this type of interview is not only a data collection technique, but also a coherent approach to the research design. This means that the researcher does not only collect data in a methodologically-determined way, but also can benefit from a well-developed analytical theory that stands behind this approach. In principle, it should allow him to reach the biographical experience of collective social processes.

Life history is a narrative "gestalt" that must be envisioned as an ordered sequence of personal experiences, and that orderliness implies the inner identity development of the biography incumbent. The most important ordering principles of life history are biographical process structures. [Schütze 2008:168]

Biographical process structures organized not only the life story of the informant, but could also be helpful in establishing order in the researcher's process of reflection. They could be used as an interpretative frame for analytical actions taken after collecting the interviews as well, especially when the collection consists of dozens of them. Each interview is a complex system of meanings, symbols, and events which eventually make up a narrative interview. Competent handling of this type of material requires skills in analysis and synthesis, work-

shop preparation, and sociological intuition. The challenge is harder when the researcher wishes to explore relations between macro sociological phenomena (like processes of transformation) and the biographical experience of ordinary people.

The paper focuses on the problem of establishing and shaping coping strategies in narratives. My aim is to show how those mechanisms can be traced in the material. Special attention is paid to the turning points as crucial moments of the individual's biography. It is assumed that as regards breakthroughs there are moments of verification of the biographical approach towards social reality in which individuals act. These parts of the interviews are taken under scrutiny and can be described as narrative communication schemes, and are contrasted with argumentation or theoretical remarks done by the informants. Thanks to the autobiographical narrative interview we are able to see how individuals reconstruct their life stories, what references they use, how they integrate the story, and what is the meaning of emerging events.

## Remek

Remek was born in 1984 in a middle-sized city in central Poland. He has a younger brother. The family moved to the country in the narrator's childhood (however, they lived near Remek's city of birth). Remek's education proceeded without any problems. He followed his peers in their choices of schools and studies, which could be interpreted as following institutional expectations patterns. He refers to school as "work" and "effort" rather than "fun" or "friendship."

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tipsun20&plugin=1>. Retrieved October 11, 2019.



His first choice of study was Administration, but while at the university, Remek started attending lectures on journalism. It was the reason behind changing his educational path. Finally, he majored in both subjects at the local university at the baccalaureate and master levels (Remek earned his MA degree in extramural studies after starting his professional career).

He started working in a local newspaper during his university studies, but he was disappointed by the relations with his supervisor. Eventually, he quit the job and moved on to another one—in the lawyer's office—which was run by his friend. His main task was to manage the office. Remek worked there till he got an internship funded by the EU grant in one of the local public institutions. He was assigned to the PR and marketing department there. That decision was crucial for Remek's further career—he decided to dedicate himself to that professional area. In the meantime, after completing the internship, Remek was unemployed for almost a year. It was a tough time, for economic reasons in particular. He was actively looking for a job and—as some escape plan—he contemplated leaving the city and moving to Warsaw. Luckily, he managed to get another internship in the institution where he still works today.

The central theme of Remek's biography is a consistent career path in the public sector:

Working in cultural institutions/ the culture was always hermetic/ regardless of the city, bigger, smaller. I know most people working in cultural institutions in the city. I am more familiar with some of them,

with some we are just acquaintances, I know who is who. Eee so I am becoming a middle-sized fish in a middle-sized pond. Maybe someday I will be a bigger fish in the middle-seized pond, maybe not. Eee I go to events of different institutions, some people come to my events. We see each other around. Sometimes we go for a beer. Eee so it is nice. I know that if I were in a bigger city, for example, Warsaw, I would be anonymous. I would be just one of the millions of people who live there, and I would mean nothing. And I am a man who likes to be popular. Here I have this chance. [Remek, p. 13-14]

Remek knows the local labor market, especially in public institutions. He is familiar with the situation in the private sector too. He does not want to leave the city and he tries to find a way to reconcile his career ambitions with his limited resources. The most important asset in fighting for his occupational position is to be recognized by and network with the right people. He does not put emphasis on the type of work or relations with his colleagues too much. He is rather keen on self-development and regarding that we can, to some extent, categorize him as a representative of the middle-class. He rather follows his individual goals by being a respected person by important people than tries to establish familiar relations with his team colleagues.

I have chosen this interview as an example of reflexive work within a set of norms and values of everyday life. They allow him to find a way to lead a decent career in harmony with his own beliefs. He is in constant "biographical work" on precautions strategies in case of losing his job:

Working in the culture, I go to these events of other institutions. I'm trying to get to know everybody from the media, from the culture, so my name would be known in the city. So, eee, if I lose my job for some reason or I decided to change it, I would not need to introduce myself to another institution. [Remek, p. 15]

In the interview, one can find a repeated phrase: "I still did not know what to do with my life," especially at the points of passage in the educational system (from primary school to high school, from high school to university). It can be assumed that this phrase is important as it underlines the liminal status of the informant at the turning points of his biography. Secondly, it is a description at present—Remek finishes the interview with the following words: "I still do not know who I want to be when I grow up." It was supposed to be a humorous concluding phrase, but it carries a more serious meaning—despite being married, having a son, and being employed in the public sector, Remek still feels insecure and vulnerable. Particularly, the economic status of his family is at risk:

Eee, we still rent a flat which costs us almost my whole salary. Almost? The whole! There is only some small change left. We live on the money my wife brings home. Eee/ so/ it's tough at the moment. There is no chance we can get a loan. [Remek, p. 19]

Asked directed about his affiliation to precariat,<sup>8</sup> he replies:

<sup>8</sup> The precariat is understood here as a group of people with unstable employment or low salaries.

If we understand this term as a group of people who don't have a stable position and this instability affects their life decisions, choices eee their mentality, so, yes. Because, I say, lately, I got a permanent contract, but with every previous contract, I didn't know if I will get one. I was forced to save money for a black hour. I couldn't buy any treat. I kept in my mind that one day I can lose my job, and I have been in that situation and I know it is not easy. And it has an impact. Actually, now I have a permanent contract, I got a promotion to a manager's position, but I am still not sure. I don't know if our director would not be replaced at some point. You never know, especially in cultural institutions. So, yes, if the term is understood thusly, then I am, I fit in. [Remek, p. 23]

In this citation, we can observe how Remek moved from being precarious in the aftermath of systemic changes in the Polish labor market (he was employed based on temporary contracts and as an intern) to being "awarded" with a permanent contract and managerial appointment. However, his understanding of his social and economic position did not change. He still feels insecure and unstable. This part of the interview can be understood as an open declaration and, at the same time, Remek's own interpretation of his socio-economic status. It is this exposure that reveals the true and harsh nature of the social reality in which he and his family live. He could be included in the local elite, however, his precarious position (in terms of job stability and economic safety) defines his actions and, in the broader perspective, determines his life strategy. Remek decided to establish his occupational status based on the social network—to know the right people is a key factor to stay afloat.

## Radek

Radek was born in 1985 in a small village in central Poland. He was the fourth child in the family. His father is still the richest man in the settlement. He made his fortune on the land trade (it is not said exactly when it happened, but it can be supposed it might have taken place shortly after 1989). A high economic status combines with traditional division of gender roles here—on the one hand, we have a conservative and a rather withdrawn father, while, on the other hand, Radek had a strong relationship with his sensitive and close mother. Remaining between his parents had a strong impact on Radek's well-being and produced a lot of tension in the family.

Radek has always been aware of his homosexuality. It is not directly stated, however, one can assume that coming out with his sexual identity in his adolescence resulted in having several mental problems. From one point of view, the source of tensions was rooted in the contradiction between his sexuality and the local intolerant community. But, Radek struggled not only with a potential rejection in the community—the main threat came from his father, who reconciled with his son only after Radek's mother's death. He managed to take control of the problem in his late twenties (at least to some extent) thanks to his biographical caretaker—his mother. Following his short-term migrations, he was trying to become a writer, but, in the end, Radek landed a job as a copywriter in one of the marketing agencies in Warsaw. The crucial moment of the interview—and of Radek's life story—was his mother's death. It ties different lines of

narration which could be interpreted as a story of growing up and searching for one's own place to live.

In this lightly spoken story, one can trace psychological and social tensions and contradictions that produce continuous worries for the informant. In the foreground, it can be observed how Radek constantly reworks his identity, especially in terms of his sexuality. Traditional religious culture in the story is contrasted with his seeking authenticity and his own identity. One of the crucial points is an experience of his physical attraction to another man:

so, this cousin, Slawek, came to us. He was twenty-something then, I was ten, eleven/ I don't know, he is such a distant family that even my sister had something to do with him, so even though he was family, there was some affair. But, I found him so attractive and I was so mad that he was interested in her and not in me, and then I knew. I've known since childhood. Completely [he hit his thighs to these words]. It has always been this homosexuality, mmm, because I, psychologically, totally/ or maybe not, maybe not, but I have some of the worst men's qualities, but, psychologically, I am a woman. [Radek, p. 9]

Dealing with his sexuality is placed in the center of the narration, but other issues follow as the sources of potential trajectory:

So, studies... a lot of turbulence in my life. Some anorectic episodes, psychiatrists, psychiatric medications, Xanax, hypnotic [soporific] drugs, the first, so-called, homosexual consumption. So, it was a very

tough time for me, very tough. I had to support myself with these drugs to get through, and I remember that I endured a lot of pain when I fell in love for the first time. So, yes, I visited a psychiatrist because I was 30 kg lighter than now. Now I am almost 90 and then I was only 60. I'll show you photos [laughing]. [Radek, p. 2]

Balancing on the edge of biography disorganization, Radek could always count on his mother's support. The role of the significant other in his case relates to establishing safety space as some kind of shelter, especially from other members of the local community and family:

Eee, so I'll tell you about this relation. I think that she intuitively knew how it was. But, she didn't have any problem with that. Because, you know, some mothers would say: "Jesus, what are you wearing?" But, she always praised me, she was always keen on my creative fashion ideas and supported my cosmetic interests. She didn't think about it as some kind of social faux pas when Radek chose her lipstick, or Radek chose this or that for her, or Radek helped her in fashion. You know, like those simple women: "Jesus, boy, those things? Don't confess to that! Tell nobody!" Eee she took it very mildly that I am gay. It was always obvious. Even when I was meeting with that boy, she was able to pick him up from the bus stop and bring him to me. She said: "But, don't tell father." She believed that was totally unnecessary, that they could not understand, and this knowledge would not help them. [Radek, p. 8]

Relations with other family members are in the center of his biographical concern, but being gay and

participation in the social world of homosexuals are other important issues. With reference to the article, it can be assumed that this could be a competitive source of values, attitudes, and norms, but a supposition that Radek would be flattered by the outside world is far from the truth. He established an outsider's perspective and became critical towards the social milieu of homosexuals, especially in the capital city:

It is only here if I have ever come across any homophobia in my life, it has never been in my village, rather in Z [a bigger town]. And till today, if I go home with my friend and somebody rides a bike, for example, some block with a girl, he says: "Look, faggots." And that's normal. That geographical location, it is rather mental belonging, which is not related to geography and I can tell you that my colleague was beaten in the city center for being a faggot. It was near Rotunda. So, if Z is attractive, it is rather naive, you know, those gays from little towns who think that they can be themselves. Yes, they can, but they can hear bad things too. The thing is that there are a lot of homosexuals, it's a majority in Z. Every other boy is homo here, so they think that they are going to find somebody, and so on, but this is a lie too, and that's untrue because the market here is saturated. The competition here is really fierce. All attractive persons are: a) taken, b) busy whoring, so I don't know why people think that Z is eee/ I understand that people come here for a career and their sexual life is on the side, like in my case, but there are people who come here only to pursue their sexuality. That's a fact that at the beginning, you know, when you finish high school and come here, and every other person is gay, and there are

lots of clubs, and you can date three times a day by Internet, but it passes after a few months, and, you know, that is only a mirage and this community is finished. [Radek, p. 10]

Radek experiences liminality, which is understood as being between different positions in a society or community. It is the foundation of his biography—firstly, he was a marginal man in his family: the youngest child, always more sensitive and (apparently) vulnerable, who had a strong relationship with his mother and was in conflict with the father figure; secondly, as a young gay in a traditional village community, he was forced to hide or at least limit his performative desires. Even after migrating to a big open and (apparently again) tolerant city, he felt like someone who is rather outside than inside groups or social bonds. At the end of the day he remains lonely, especially after his mother's death:

So, now I have this mission—I hate life, really. If I had to choose to be born or not to be born, I would never want to come to this world, because this world is bad. In general, this symbolic order which the man established doesn't fit this world, and that's why there is always a conflict between the man and the world. Eee and all these ideas: justice and so on, it is really not in the nature of this world. Those are fabrications, you know, and that's why the man struggles to fit in all this. So, I don't want to be part of it. I would like to be a tree, lizard, and just to sink all this from the world the way it should be. We should enjoy the sun, air, not, you know, rubbish like, you know, coffee machines or perfumes. [Radek p. 8]

This credo is his final exposition of the “true” problem of Radek's biography—he does not fit into the world the way he perceives it. He chooses to discursively sign out of it. It is important that he applies a rather argumentative communication scheme of presentation. Radek presents himself as an outsider, however, his emigration is of an internal character. On the outside, he has eventually and apparently become an autonomous and adult individual.

### Conclusions

Using Remek and Radek's cases I would like to present how the researcher can trace and reconstruct life strategies of coping with social change (understood here as a consequence of Polish transformation and—in a broader perspective—as an effect of global modernization mechanisms) in particular biographies. To achieve this goal, I decided to get a closer look at two cases of young Poles from different family, economic, and social backgrounds. However, both of them could be categorized as representatives of middle-class (but different segments of it).

In previous parts of the article, I have concentrated on presenting the advantages of using biographical material and methodology in analyzing the consequences of collective processes. To support this action, I would like to refer to the important mechanisms present in analyzed interviews—the self-presentations of Remek and Radek through engagement in different social worlds (Schütz 1960; Strauss 1978; 1982; 1984; Clarke and Star 2008; Schütze 2012c; Kacperczyk 2016). In some cases, the

reference to a particular social world is clearly visible in the interview, as in Radek's interview, where descriptions of different aspects of the social world of the homosexual man appear. His knowledge about the life of a gay who migrates from a traditional village to a big modern city gives us an opportunity to understand how the rules, norms, and attitudes in the social world of homosexuals are constructed. In the meantime, the emergence of individual identity can be observed when the biographical experience of a member of the sexual minority has been reworked regarding his family and social backgrounds. Radek faces moral dilemmas emerging from the clash of traditional culture of his origin (or rather the origin of his family) and his sexuality. One of the possible ways is to use his parents' high economic position to move away from the village. It enables him to literally escape by moving to the capital city, and morally by breaking the cultural codes of the traditional family. Thanks to his mother's care (she is his significant other and Radek's biographical caretaker) our protagonist transfigures into an autonomous adult independent (to some extent) of his family home.

In the second case, we can observe how Remek, a local official in the public library, skillfully manages his narration structure. He divides it into a few main segments which correspond with his education and career, private and family lives, hobby and passion. Using the terminology of social worlds, he refers to three subworlds for each segment. The mainline of narration refers to Remek's reconstruction of his way to a decent position in the local labor market. Nevertheless, the other

two narration parts support the main argumentation that his efforts are mostly focused on struggles with establishing stabilization and security to himself and his family.

Referring to factors of stabilization in both cases, we could look at those parts of Remek's biography where he refers to the social roles of the husband and father. In Radek's case, one can observe how the economic capital (in Bourdieu's meaning) is transformed by the informant into the social and cultural capital that allows him to establish an autonomous life in the capital city after leaving his native village.

A reconstruction of the main events of Remek's career tells a story of becoming a member of the local intellectual elite. To accomplish this goal, the interviewee needs to know how the social world of public institutions works. However, with regard to the economic status of his family, it is not only a fight for social recognition. The goal is stabilization and safety not only of Remek himself. He and his family live on the edge of falling into financial troubles.

Under economic pressure, Remek found a way to escape. He decided to engage in an amateur theater. He underlines a few times in the interview how important it was to his biography:

In the meantime, I started to play in an amateur theater and it was a landmark in my life...Hmmm, one of the reasons I didn't move [to another city] was the theater I mentioned. I became intimate with the group and it has worked somehow. Because I knew



that I liked it very much and if I went to another city, I would lose it for sure. And you didn't know if I could find something like this. [Remek, p.11]

The role of the social world of amateur theater is crucial to understand how his narration is shaped in the context of relations between different process structures. On the one hand, Remek is under constant pressure from institutional perspectives. He is forced to follow the rules of the local milieu at work—he must know the right people to get promoted and to defend his position if he were forced to leave. In family life, he and his wife are made to keep their budget under strict control. The social roles of a husband, father, and employee constitute responsibility for Remek, which—to be fair—he accepts. However, the risk of failure to meet institutional expectation's patterns brings potential jeopardy of another process structure—a trajectory of suffering. Class ambitions and consumption patterns work in the same way. Remek finally found a place only for himself in this complicated network of different tensions—an amateur theater. In this social world, he does not compromise—eventually, he can be free.

There is no easy way out in Radek's case. His narration is constructed around experiencing a trajectory of suffering where his mother's death plays a crucial role. Even though he seems tough outside, Radek represents the fragile identity of a young homosexual man. The only person who knows him well is his mother:

You know, mother, by some intuition maybe, she knew that eee that I am, I don't have any protective

coloration, so to say. Because, you know, the country environment, a rural family is not the best place for, you know, an effeminate boy with interests in fashion, and, you know, beauty. It's not the best place, a village. So, mum had some intuition that life could hurt me if I had a weaker character and, because I am genetically intelligent, so, I say it immodestly, I never let others push me around. Despite the fact I was a fat fag, nobody messed with me, because it was known that I would say three words and they would run away and cry. But, mum knew that/ this instinct, bond/ that she had to take care of me/ maybe it was stupid, but which mother would say no to her child? [Radek, p. 7]

As long as his mother lived, Radek was able to live the life of a spoilt and rich kid—as beneficent of the class position of his parents. He had freedom in his choices of study and work. When he decided to become a writer, parents paid his school fee and covered the costs of living in a different city; when he decided to move to London, all expenses were borne by his parents. In contrast to Remek, Radek was not forced to make a living.

He clearly exposes in the interview how apparent the rules of social reality could be. For example, the local traditional community is a far more tolerant place in his case than the worldly capital city. Radek's security was insured by the high economic status of his family where the mother was his biographical caretaker. Complicated relations with father were a source of potential neglect. However, the trauma of his mother's death—surprisingly—bonded Radek and his father, but, ultimately, his mother's death led Radek to loneliness. He partic-

ularly struggled to establish social bonds with others (like his siblings or friends).

He reconstructs spheres of his life (family, local community, homosexuals, work) with ambiguous characteristics. I would suggest that one of the possible reasons for adapting this attitude is a rejection of the value systems that work in each of them. After his mother's death, the family is ruled by a despotic father with whom Radek does not have good relations. The power is in the hands of a priest in the local community. Radek is in a personal conflict with him because after his mother's death, the family was informed impolitely that they had been charged for the grave. Moreover, Radek openly declares his atheism and presents a very critical opinion about the Roman Catholic Church and religion in general. The social world of homosexuals is probably the closest milieu to Radek at the moment. However, he is aware of the social rules which govern this community and he does not accept them as well. On the other hand, his job (copywriting and advertising) is a source of financial stability, but Radek feels pressed to win awards, prizes, and honors. All of these failures in constructing social bonds with different communities can be interpreted as the evidence of struggling with establishing an effective life strategy. In theory, Radek has all attributes to find his place in terms of social belonging. However, he constantly experiences the rejection in real life (which—the rejection—is affirmed by him to some extent).

Radek and Remek make up a specific set of contrasting cases. Their interviews differ in many aspects—from the structure of communication schemes (in

Radek's interview one can find more of a narration communication scheme than in Remek's) to a biographical composition of events. However, in both cases, we can trace two young men who try to adapt to social expectations. Both of them need to learn the rules of social worlds in which they function. With every change from one job position to another Remek gets a better understanding of the local career market. He slowly develops the biographical plan that leads him through the public institutions' maze. It is interesting that he resigns from the private labor market after unsuccessful attempts to find a job there. He justifies that decision pointing out that he is unfit for a salesman job (the most popular one in his family town, in his opinion), but has not any particular skills. He chooses a more conformist path of a local official in the end. Radek is the example of an individual who develops the position of the marginal man—somebody who does not fit any collective identity. In psychological terms, Radek accepted his sexual orientation and mostly family-related consequences of this fact. However, regarding social references, the process of establishing social identity is not completed. He neglects all available collective frames. Possibly, this could be a base for his coping strategy with the social reality he lives in.

In the introduction, I have pointed out that my main goal was to reconstruct the coping strategies of the selected interviewees. However, Remek and Radek's life stories do not undergo an explicit interpretation in this regard. It is impossible to describe those narratives with simple dichotomies or typologies. The division into conformist (Remek) and non-conformist (Radek) case, mentioned in

previous parts of the text, does not explicitly stem from the material. An in-depth analysis of their interviews shows the unique complexity of possible interpretations. In many parts of his interview, Radek refers to traditional family and local communities not only as a source of restriction, but as an economic, cultural, and supportive resource. Since he acknowledges the rules of his family and community, Radek's attitude could be interpreted as a conformist type. In Remek's case, the non-conformist approach could be found in the distance and, to some extent, cynicism showed towards the rules of the local public institutions' world. Remek follows them and, in a very reflexive manner, adapts his actions accordingly. Simultaneously, he establishes his biographical agenda—to be recognized and important. What is common in both cases is related to the condition of looking for a safe and

stable mental space. That, in my opinion, would be the most important stake presented in their biographies.

Remek and Radek are in different geographical locations and at different social status positions. They differ as regards their sexual orientation and family background. Yet, both face social reality which is constantly changing in a consequence of macrostructural processes transforming sphere of work (precarization) and private life (transition or moral rules regarding sexual identity). The importance and meaning of their social worlds equally affect their socio-biographical situations. Understanding the rules that govern their respective milieus is crucial in their professional and biographical careers; as such is important to successfully elaborate their life strategies as well.

## References

- Andrejczuk, Magdalena and Jacek Burski. 2017. "Constructing Relationships Between the Work and Private Life on the Basis of Narratives of Young Poles Experiencing Precariousness." *Warsaw Forum of Economic Sociology* 8(1[15]):51-67.
- Clarke, Adele and Susan Liegh Star. 2008. "The Social Worlds Framework: A Theory/Method Package." Pp. 113-138 in *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*, edited by E. Hackett et al. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Dunn, Elizabeth C. 2008. *Prywatyzując Polskę: o bobofrutach, wielkim biznesie i restrukturyzacji pracy*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej.

- Gardawski, Juliusz. 2001. *Powracająca klasa: sektor prywatny w III Rzeczypospolitej*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN.
- Gardawski, Juliusz (ed.). 2009. *Polacy Pracujący a Kryzys Fordyzmu*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
- Gdula, Maciej and Przemysław Sadura (eds.). 2012. *Style Życia i Porządek Klasowy w Polsce*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar.
- Glaser, Barney and Anselm L. Strauss. 1973. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago: Aldine.

- Gomułka, Stanisław. 2014. "Transformacja Gospodarczo-Społeczna Polski 1989-2014 i Współczesne Wyzwania." *Nauka* 3:7-16.
- Kacperczyk, Anna. 2016. *Społeczne światy: teoria – empiria – metody badań: na przykładzie społecznego świata wspinaczki*. Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego.
- Kaźmierska, Kaja (ed.). 2016a. *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii: antologia tekstów*. Cracow: Zakład Wydawniczy Nomos.
- Kaźmierska, Kaja. 2016b. "Wywiad Narracyjny – Technika i Pojęcie Analityczne." Pp. 61-72 in *Biografia i Wojna. Metoda Biograficzna w Badaniu Procesów Społecznych*, edited by K. Waniek and R. Dopierała. Łódź: WUŁ.
- Mrozowicki, Adam. 2011. *Coping with Social Change: Life Strategies of Workers in Poland's New Capitalism*. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Mrozowicki, Adam. 2016. "Normalization of Precariousness? Biographical Experiences of Young Workers in the Flexible Forms of Employment in Poland." *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej* 12(2):94-112.
- Mrozowicki, Adam and Mateusz Karolak. 2017. "Between Normalization and Resistance. Life Strategies of Young Precarious Workers." *Warsaw Forum of Economic Sociology* 8(1):7-32.
- Mrozowicki, Adam, Mateusz Karolak, and Agata Krasowska. 2018. "Lost in Transitions? Biographical Experiences and Life Strategies of Young Precarious Workers in Poland." *Kultura i Społeczeństwo* 4:69-89.
- Nazarczuk, Jarosław. 2013. "Wpływ Światowego Kryzysu Finansowego na Gospodarkę Polski i Jej Regionów." Pp. 75-89 in *Wybrane Aspekty Rozwoju Regionalnego*, edited by R. Kisiel and M. Wojarska. Olsztyn: Fundacja Wspieranie i Promocja Przedsiębiorczości na Warmii i Mazurach.
- Pobłocki, Kacper. 2017. *Kapitalizm: Historia Krótkiego Trwania*. Warsaw: Bęc zmiana.
- Riemann, Gerhard and Fritz Schütze. 1991. "Trajectory as a Basic Theoretical Concept for Analyzing Suffering and Dis-

- orderly Social Processes." Pp. 333-358 in *Social Organization and Social Process: Essays in Honor of Anselm Strauss*, edited by D. Maines. New York: de Gruyter.
- Robertson, Roland. 1992. *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*. London: Sage.
- Schütz, Alfred. 1960. "The Social World and the Theory of Social Action." *Social Research* 27(2):203-221.
- Schütze, Fritz. 2008. "Biography Analysis on the Empirical Base of Autobiographical Narratives: How to Analyze Autobiographical Narrative Interviews – Part One." *European Studies on Inequalities and Social Cohesion* 1-2:243-297.
- Schütze, Fritz. 2012a. "Trajektorie Cierpienia jako Przedmiot Badań Socjologii Interpretatywnej." Pp. 415-458 in *Metoda Biograficzna w Socjologii*, edited by K. Kaźmierska. Cracow: Zakład Wydawniczy Nomos.
- Schütze, Fritz. 2012b. "Analiza Biograficzna Ugruntowana Empirycznie w Autobiograficznym Wywiadzie Narracyjnym. Jak Analizować Autobiograficzne Wywiady Narracyjne." Pp. 141-278 in *Metoda Biograficzna w Socjologii*, edited by K. Kaźmierska. Cracow: Zakład Wydawniczy Nomos.
- Schütze, Fritz. 2012c. "Koncepcja Świata Społecznego w Symbolicznym Interakcjonizmie oraz Organizacja Wiedzy w Nowoczesnych Złożonych Społeczeństwach." Pp. 489-514 in *Metoda Biograficzna w Socjologii*, edited by K. Kaźmierska. Cracow: Zakład Wydawniczy Nomos.
- Schütze, Fritz. 2014. "Autobiographical Accounts of War Experiences. An Outline for the Analysis of Topically Focused Autobiographical Texts – Using the Example of the 'Robert Rasmus' Account in Studs Terkel's Book, 'The Good War.'" *Qualitative Sociology Review* 10(1):224-283.
- Strauss, Anselm. 1978. "A Social World Perspective." Pp. 119-128 in *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, edited by N. Denzin. Greenwich: JAI Press.
- Strauss, Anselm. 1982. "Social Worlds and Legitimation Processes." Pp. 171-189 in *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, edited by N. Denzin. Greenwich: JAI Press.



Strauss, Anselm. 1984. "Social Worlds and Their Segmentation Processes." Pp. 123-139 in *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, edited by N. Denzin. Greenwich: JAI Press.

Sztompka, Piotr (ed.). 1999. *Imponderabilia wielkiej zmiany: mentalność, wartości i więzi społeczne czasów transformacji*. Warsaw, Cracow: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

Waniek, Katarzyna. 2016. "Potencjały Bezładu i Cierpienia w Biografiach Młodych Kobiet Wchodzących w Świat

Sztuki i Medycyny." *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej* 12(2): 114-144.

Zarycki, Tomasz. 2009. "The Power of the Intelligentsia: The Rywin Affair and the Challenge of Applying the Concept of Cultural Capital to Analyze Poland's Elites." *Theory and Society* 38(6):613-648.

Zarycki, Tomasz. 2014. "Social Dialogue under the Supremacy of the Intelligentsia." *Warsaw Forum of Economic Sociology* 5(2[10]):69-79.

Burski, Jacek. 2019. "The Coping Strategies in Biographies of Polish Middle-Class Representatives of (Post)Transformation Period." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 15(4):194-210. Retrieved Month, Year ([http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive\\_eng.php](http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php)). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.15.4.09>