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Everyday Educational Life of Younger School Age Students During the SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic

Abstract

The aim of the article is to reconstruct everyday educational life during the Covid-19 pandemic experienced and subjectively expressed by early childhood education students. Focusing on the child's perspective is in line with modern studies of childhood, in which it is preferred to know and understand the situation of children with their active participation and based on their narratives (Jarosz 2018). The research material was collected in the course of studies located in the constructivist paradigm assuming that social realities are constantly reconstructed, and the only way to recognize them is to appeal to subjective opinions, experiences and beliefs. Focus group interviews conducted in the third grades of selected schools in Poland were used to articulate students' own opinions and to reach various emotional states behind verbalized beliefs.

Keywords: younger school age, everyday educational life, pandemic.

Codziennosc edukacyjna uczniow w mlodszy m wieku szkolnym w czasie pandemii koronawirusa SARS-CoV-2

Abstrakt

Celem artykulu jest rekonstrukcja codziennosci edukacyjnej w dobie pandemii koronawirusa SARS-CoV-2 doswiadczanej i wyrazanej subiektywnie przez uczniow edukacji wczesnoszkolnej. Pokazanie optyki dziecka jest zgodne z nowoczesnymi badaniami dzieciinstwa, w ktorych preferuje sie poznawanie i rozumienie sytuacji dzieci przy ich aktywnym wspoludziale oraz w oparciu o ich narracje (Jarosz 2018). Material badawczy zebrano w toku badan lokowanych w paradygmacie konstruktywistycznym, przyjmujacym, ze rzeczywistosci spoleczne sa wciaz na nowo (re)konstruowane, a jedyna

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drogą ich rozpoznania jest odwołanie się do subiektywnych opinii, doświadczeń, przekonań. Wykorzystano wywiad fokusowy, prowadzony w klasach trzecich wybranych szkół w Polsce, pozwalający na artykulację własnych opinii oraz dotarcie do różnorodnych stanów emocjonalnych kryjących się za werbalizowanymi przekonaniem.

Słowa kluczowe: młodszy wiek szkolny, codzienność edukacyjna, pandemia.

Introduction

The category of everyday life, understood as common, routine manifestations of people's everyday social existence (Sztompka 2008), remains at the center of scholars' interest,¹ and has become one of the most important subjects of research studies; indeed, according to Alfred Schutz, "explaining social reality based on everyday experiences" is the primary aim of social sciences (1986: 176).

Everyday life is a world of experiences, it is an area of natural, spontaneous, real practices. According to Richard Grathoff, it is "a bottomless richness of concrete, viral experiences based on the activities of people" (Bielska 2002: 70). Today the category of everyday life is undergoing a great metamorphosis. No longer considered a fossilized obviousness emanating boredom, it is becoming a category in which the reality of everyday life seems to be constantly in motion. It connects with "surprises, adventures, amazement. With the Great Unknown" (Bauman 2009: 77–78). It is a category "extremely fluid and in essence very intuitive" (Mateja-Jaworska, Zawodna-Stephan 2019: 100).

Such a broad definition of the term requires a more careful conceptualizing, especially if it is to become a subject of study. An answer to this requisite is to "discard everyday life as a concept that is detached from the subject and instead consider it only in the context of specific human experiences" (Mateja-Jaworska, Zawodna-Stephan 2019: 101). In this understanding, "everyday life always belongs to someone, it always has its temporal parameter" (Mateja-Jaworska, Zawodna-Stephan 2019: 102).

Although everyday life is equated with day-to-day existence, "which is not shaken, rolls unnoticed, and therefore leaves few traces in memory" (Mateja-Jaworska, Zawodna-Stephan 2019: 113), it sometimes refers to a unique period. Indeed, everyday life takes place even during war, a plague, or a flood... In such circumstances, everyday life is subject to violent transformations. However, we can imagine that if a flood lasts for many days, then a particular rhythm of the day is established, a rhythm of food provisioning, of waiting for help. And that is also everyday life (Mateja-Jaworska, Zawodna-Stephan 2019: 113). Such a unique time that allows us to see "that things are not in their right place" (Sulima 2003: 234), is a time for reflection and self-awareness, as it provokes us to take action against the chaos that destroys our sense of security and certainty, it mobilizes creativity (Krajewski 2009).

¹ The first systematic research by Henri Lefebvre (1968) are fundamental for the sociology of everyday life as well as for studies conducted by P. Sztompka and M. Bogunia-Borowska (2008) referred to in this article. They have also inspired pedagogues: M. Dudzikowa and M. Czerepaniak-Walczak (2010), as well as A. Korzeniecka-Bondar (2018).

The period of the COVID-19 pandemic transformed our everyday life, also in terms of education. It posed new challenges for teachers and people administrating educational institutions, but most importantly for students and their families. We tend to perceive it primarily as a threat evoking negative emotions, but we also see it as a chance to search for new educational solutions which can become a source of positive, valuable change. It is a time of unique experiences for adults, but also (or perhaps even more so) a time uniquely experienced by children. The study of everyday education is validated by the new sociology of childhood which treats children as active subjects whose perspective on the world is important not because they are future adults, but because of their current status (Corsaro 2015). It moves from thinking about the child as an imperfect being who is only becoming a member of society (becoming human), to thinking about the child as someone who already is one. Emphasizing the child's ability to act subjectively draws our attention to his or her knowledge and competences in everyday interactions that constitute the social world. Thanks to this reorientation, a child is perceived as a social actor, living in a given time and space, which also forces us to put more emphasis on what the child experiences, thinks, how it feels in an environment in which it is currently living (Zdanowicz-Kucharczyk 2015).

The description of a child's everyday life enables us to see children as actors of social life, active representatives of communities, creative architects of reality and cultural meanings. It allows us to understand how children experience their everyday lives, what meanings they ascribe to reality, how they construct a mental map of the world in which they are living (Zwiernik 2009).

Research assumptions

In order to discover children's experiences collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted an empirical qualitative research study posited within the constructivist paradigm according to which the world is such as its representation. Social realities are constantly being constructed and reconstructed anew, and the only path for understanding them are subjective opinions, experiences, beliefs. Students of third classes participated in the research study² (groups of six students from selected primary schools in Białystok, Kielce, Łódź, Toruń and Warszawa), based on the assumption that children – perceived as active subjects who understand, interpret and process the social reality around them – are the most reliable source of information for adults about the meanings of different situations from their everyday life (Corsaro 2015).³ They are the best experts on their own reality and problems, as well as the most competent informers about themselves (Jarosz 2018).

² The research study was conducted by the members of the research team as part of the work of the Elementary Education Team, operating on the initiative of the Elementary Education Section of the KNP PAN.

³ The results of the research study on how first grade students experienced remote education were presented in the following article: Bonar J., Zbróg Z. (2022).

Adopting the position of Wilhelm von Humbolt or Leo Weissenberg (Wasilewska 2009) that the cognitive content, knowledge, experience and evaluation of the perceived reality are revealed in the linguistic image of the world, the following research question was formulated: What image of remote education emerges from children's statements?

The research material was collected using focus group interviews, allowing to gain insight into the ways in which children experience remote education. It enabled both to articulate their own opinions and assessments, as well as to listen to what others may have to say about it. It created conditions for mutual exchange of information and confronting one's beliefs with others (Kubiak 2007). It also offered the possibility to reach different emotional states hidden behind the verbalized opinions (Dukaczewska-Nałęcz 1999).

During the interviews, the researcher tried to provoke respondents to express many different opinions on a given topic, including more divisive ones, in order to obtain a cross-section of views (Kvale 2011). The aim of the focus group interview is not to obtain a consensus, but rather a diversification of opinions on a given topic (Wiśniewska 2013).

Remote education of third-graders – analysis of collected material

The analysis of data acquired from answers to open questions made it possible to identify children's subjective experiences, to discover the world they experience. The narrative axis revealing the experience of everyday education during the pandemic was based on children's statements⁴ which enabled to distinguish three categories organizing their experience with remote education: pragmatically oriented activities, in the form of everyday activities connected with the learning process; the material environment, forming the physical space used for those activities; and the accompanying emotions, inseparable from the everyday world.

Students' activities

The educational process is a set of mutually conditioning activities of a teacher and students, subordinated to achieving a common goal and realized in intentionally formed conditions. Contemporary scholars make us aware of the transformation of the roles of the teacher and the students in an individual's learning process. The first serves the role of a facilitator of a student's development, becoming a companion in the learning process (Filipiak 2009). The student in turn is perceived as

⁴ "In modern studies of childhood, we talk about understanding a child's situation, recognizing and understanding problems experienced by children, with their active participation and based on their own narratives" (Jarosz 2018: 7).

an active researcher of reality, who searches for and discovers knowledge. Learning is understood as a process of constructing new models and representations of the world through the manipulation of objects, language, and other cultural tools; a process of constantly negotiating meanings – with oneself, peers, and teachers (Dylak 2001).

The conducted research study demonstrates that, in accordance with the assumptions of scholarship on everyday life, many routine activities of children are connected with the learning process. These were activities undertaken both individually and together with other people.

Preparatory activities

The learning process begun with preparatory activities related to turning on the necessary electronic equipment. Some students did not have any problems with it, for others it proved a far more difficult task:

We practiced it with our IT teacher, because the teacher predicted that we would be switching to remote education, so she taught us everything and there weren't any problems.

In the beginning I didn't even know how to turn on the camera and sign in using a password, I just received the links and generally had no idea how to add a background, in general where to turn them on, how to write something in the chat, I didn't know anything about it.

For these activities, children would often ask for the assistance of their parents or other members of their family. Stationary education primarily uses the potential of teachers whose knowledge, abilities, attitudes fuel didactic, caring, and educational work (Szkolak-Stępień 2020). During remote education, the range of activities of parents had increased exponentially:

I was generally able to connect, but sometimes something didn't work, because sometimes the Wi-Fi wasn't turned on. So I was stressed out a bit, but later I was able to join. And if it doesn't work, and I'm clicking on it multiple times, then I call my mom or dad.

My father taught me the best tricks on day one, so it took me 15 seconds to join a class, and not an hour like for others.

The quoted statements illustrate students' diverse digital competences, essential for participation in remote education. Some students were able to handle the equipment and deal with potential technical difficulties by themselves, others would ask their parents for help, while some, in situations that exceeded their digital competences, ended up resigning from participating in the classes altogether.

Activities during classes

Integrated education encompasses many areas of children's activities that are varied and diversified, adapted to their individual needs and capabilities. In their statements, students refer to activities related to most of the educational areas listed in the core curriculum, predominantly to classes on language and mathematics:

I liked Polish language classes, because we didn't write a lot in our notebooks, it was just a short note and it was easier.

Mathematics was easier for me in remote education, since now, every time there's more difficult writing examples, I'm afraid to go up to the blackboard.

They point to impediments connected to didactic classes. These for instance refer to the specific qualities of a given area of knowledge or typical didactic tools used in classes, which are the source of specific sensory impressions, helping to construct appropriate cognitive structures. Students were aware of the reasons for these limitations (such was the case in geometry lessons), or they would simply state the fact (for example, physical education classes, requiring space and the necessity to provide safety, and natural science classes, based on observation, experiments):

It was more difficult with this kind of 3d assignment, because then not everyone had some kind of 3d thing and if the teacher was showing it on the computer, it was rather flat and we couldn't touch it, like in school, and hold it in our hands, and see what kind of geometric shape it is.

Additionally, it was strange to participate in PE in remote classes.

The forms of work proposed by teachers and used by students were also limited. Only sporadically did they mention work in peer groups, which is conducive to the development of cooperation, teaching precision in knowledge through argumentation, exchanging personal experiences, sharing personal understanding, negotiating and resolving contradictions (Michalak 2020):

We entered the classroom and the teacher would divide us into groups, and we worked on internet programs, and sometimes I worked with Harry like this, that I would do it, sharing the program with him and asking Harry to draw, and I would share my computer mouse with him.

Students noticed the absence of some classes that were important for them, taking place outside, in places representing an educational niche, allowing for more freedom and more helpful in learning. This meant a reduction of the learning environment of children, which leads not only to impoverishing their surroundings, but also to falsifying and distancing from the realities of life. It has significance especially for early education, since actual integration of knowledge is possible only in the process of negotiating meanings between those taken from the current of spontaneous and extra-curricular knowledge with information provided in the institutional school context (Kruk 2015):

We didn't go to the museum... to the cinema.

The worst part is that we haven't had a school trip in 2 years.

Research study participants mentioned difficulties in attempting to conduct cognitive activities involving both students and teachers, which Rudolf Schaffer (2006: 132) calls “joint involvement episodes,” in which an adult and a child work on a specific topic and take action on it together. This allows to check one’s abilities and to receive support in the form of feedback from the teacher. Edyta Gruszczyk-Kolczyńska (2019: 75) calls it “a common field of attention and activity”:

Everything was happening too fast. The teacher only says: please write this down, and then you have to learn everything by yourself... Sometimes you would raise a hand, but the teacher didn’t react. Now I know that when I raise my hand, the teacher can see it.

Remote education was simply pointless, because when I was writing something in the chat, half of the boys would play games during class and it was pointless, we didn’t learn anything. I’m not sure if it wouldn’t be better not to have this remote education at all.

Difficulties in undertaking joint activities were related to the changing forms of relations with colleagues and the teacher, resulting from a lack of direct interaction, although it is precisely the feeling that we are not alone that helps us in dealing with problems. Replacing it with virtual contact was not easy for students:

Everyone was talking and shouting at the same time, the teacher was shouting to different boys who would mute others or throw them out of the class.

The difficulties were the effect of the constricted communication between participants of the didactic process; the result of a limited use of both verbal (questions, directions, instructions that make it easier to complete assignments) and non-verbal communication (eye contact, face expression, gestures, touch):

We missed contact with our colleagues, we missed it a lot. You can’t see the teacher, touch, talk directly.

As a result of the constricted interaction and the changing relations between students and the teacher, students often turned for assistance to their parents and siblings. Their support consisted in helping with learning, but also in taking care of the proper nutrition of children:

For me sometimes, when I understood what was happening, I was able to manage by myself, and when it was harder, then I would mostly call my parents, or my dad actually. And if my dad wouldn’t pick up, then I would go to my sister.

When I was hungry, I ran to my mom, to the kitchen, to eat something.

The situations experienced by students provoked them to adopt a defensive position, typical for a crisis situation. Students had different ideas about how to make remote learning easier, different strategies for survival, allowing them to deal – more or less successfully – with these problems:

You didn’t have to be especially prepared, you could sit in your pajamas and eat something during class.

You could cheat, or pretend you don’t have internet access, or pretend you don’t

know how to turn on voice or your camera. Sometimes I didn't even open my books but I just laid on my bed. I frequently fell asleep during classes.

Some students, provoked by difficulties in realizing joint activities, would organize parallel classes:

We didn't pay attention during classes, we listened to music, wrote on Messenger.

Some played games and you could actually see that they're playing, because they looked from below and you could see that their faces are soaked in this light.

Students also undertook various activities, organized by themselves or by the teacher, during breaks between classes:

During each break I went out to the balcony, well I just couldn't stand being in this house. Sitting in front of the computer for so long is a massacre.

I would take care of my brother during the break, or play Brawl Stars on my phone.

I sometimes listened to music, but generally I went to my mom to eat something.

Material environment – space and objects

Everyday life is always located in a particular space, it happens in different places, which in consequence determines its content and character (Sztompka 2008). Places are always pedagogical in the sense that they are what people make of them, and therefore should be understood as a cultural artefact with primary character (Mendel 2006). Places in which something occurs are not pure. When we are in them, we are surrounded by rules and systems, in which certain spaces and codes enable one type of practice, while prohibiting from others (Wentzel-Winther 2006). The conditions of one's surroundings participate in education and socializing. Places and objects can support a developmental cognitive change or petrify a student's thinking (Nowicka 2011). They contain the potential to encourage subjective activity, enable to accumulate experience in different orders of reality and to reconstruct one's knowledge (Bałachowicz 2018/2019).

During remote work, students participating in the research study used different spaces of their home/apartment. Sometimes it was individual space, used solely by the child:

I was at home in my room all the time and I was alone all the time.

More often, however, it was a common space, requiring adapting and thus limiting children:

I was with my brother. He's in seventh grade and he was sitting next to me, on my bed, and I was sitting by the desk.

I kept my books in this large backpack on wheels, because I never wanted to take them out [...] and I didn't have any space for all these books.

Sometimes children would also engage in education outside their homes. They often participated in classes while visiting their grandparents:

During remote education you could take your computer with you, for example, if you went to your grandma. After finishing classes you could play, and now, when we have classes at school, you can't go and visit your grandma.

Objects that are associated with remote education are primarily electronic devices: computers, laptops, tablets, telephones, printers. In addition to these objects typical for remote education, children would also mention books, pencil cases, and chairs which, as it turns out, are very important for them. Perhaps because a properly equipped work / study station consists primarily of an ergonomic chair.

Well, I had my notebooks, pencil case, books next me at all times, a charger, a pen. In my opinion, the charger was the most important, since sometimes when my computer runs low on battery, I can switch to my phone and connect instantly, and use internet on my phone.

A comfortable chair. To be able to sit for so long, you need a comfortable chair.

The electronic equipment available to children did not always live up to their expectations. It was unreliable, which made learning more difficult.

There were a lot of these problems, my teacher would freeze and sometimes we couldn't see what the teacher was sharing on the screen.

Students pointed to the multiplicity of objects in their nearest surroundings, their distracting excess that made it harder to concentrate:

This pandemic wasn't cool at all, since it distracted, this online form distracted, because for instance I'm looking at something, listening to the teacher, and suddenly I see: "Oh, a pen, maybe I'll write something."

There are always a lot of toys in the room, so I can take a crayon, then I'd go to the bathroom, play with my dog during class, so I'll turn off the camera and play with him.

Difficulties would also result from the close proximity of other people (family or neighbors):

We were distracted, for instance my mom was beating chops or my brother was watching an animated film. My grandpa would come into my room and you could hear him, because my microphone was on. Well, the thing I remember most from remote classes is the neighbor's drill.

Surprising difficulties were related to the presence of animals at home, who would also represent an obstacle for remote learning:

So I'm sitting and participating in a class, my sister is looking for my dog, she enters my room and says: "Here is my little doggie," to which I would react: "Mary!", and she: "Oh, dear mother!", and leave the room.

In my case, it was the cat. He would walk over my keyboard and interrupt me constantly. [...] for me, it was the rabbit [...] he scratches its cage and I can't hear the lesson.

Emotions accompanying learning

When analyzing everyday practices, one cannot omit the emotional component. Everyday life is experienced through our embodiment, involves all of our emotions (Sztompka 2008). Emotions accompany us in our thinking process, in activity, they are an element of narration, introspection, retrospection, auto-analysis, self-defining, creation (Konecki 2014). They play a significant role in education. They impact our interest, accomplishments, and a student's involvement in the learning process. They support the individual developmental process of children and adolescents, forming a central element of their mental health and proper functioning (Grzegorzewska 2012).

Students participating in the research study pointed out primarily the negative emotions accompanying remote learning. They mentioned the fear embedded in reality, a reaction to the specific threat related to the coronavirus pandemic:

I was afraid that my family will get sick. And I even, that we can die, because with this disease we can die even at such a young age.

Well, I was afraid about my first communion.

Children also spoke about sadness (a frequent consequence of strong experiences, unfortunate events, fear) resulting from isolation and lack of contact with their peers:

I was sad [...], I didn't want to learn. Sometimes it was difficult to cope.

It was sad, we couldn't play with our friends. I felt isolated from the entire world.

They also spoke about the nervousness of online learning, most often related to technical difficulties:

I was frustrated because when I tried to connect, it wouldn't work and I had to constantly try something else, some box, disconnect, reconnect etc.

They mentioned different ways of dealing with anger and tension:

First I would call for my mom, but how can I wait for so long, I waited and waited, and later, when I was able to connect, it would disconnect me again, so I tried to do it by myself, and finally I got mad and ignored it, I went to the living room and watched television.

Only some students were able to look at their difficult experiences with a sense of humor and demonstrate an unconventional interpretation of reality. It is important to remember that such an attitude helps in cognitive development and learning:

When I couldn't log on, I would ask my mom for help, but most often my dad would come, but generally I really wanted to teach my computer how to fly from the balcony.

My dad has a magical hand. I type in the password, I can't click on a key, my dad comes in, I tell him: look, it's not working. I click and then it works.

Children pointed to boredom appearing anytime one suddenly finds themselves in a situation characterized by monotony, repetitiveness, lack of stimuli. One that is

“a nightmare of the teaching process, as it kills cognitive thirst, it quenches the passions and discourages from doing anything” (Koziellecki 1998: 37):

For me what was boring was when I would turn on my computer, and sit, sit and simply stay in my room constantly and not do anything, I didn't have any exercise.

Remote classes were boring because, well we didn't have any opportunity to talk... I was simply bored at home, because I was alone and I don't have any siblings.

They talked about being tired, i.e. a state of depressed mood, connected with the loss of energy and desire to act, resulting from an excess of problems and experienced stress as well as lack of physical activity:

We were often tired from sitting in front of the computer. I even fell asleep during classes sometimes.

I lacked fresh air, I mean I would open the window, but sometimes it was cold, so I would close it, but I really missed it.

The tiredness felt by children was at time very strong and related to the appearance of physical signs, for instance pain or stomach disorders:

I associate it a bit with this pain, because something always started to hurt me because of the computer. Pain in the head or in the eyes. Jesus, my eyes hardly got any rest.

So when I finally went to school, I was very happy and my stomach didn't hurt as much.

They talked about the feeling of injustice they experienced:

I would sometimes feel injustice, that for instance others had their parents sitting next to them and giving them advice. And you could hear it.

Children also spoke about positive emotions, although these appeared far less frequently:

You can sleep more in remote classes, you can be happy that you don't have to connect to every class, you can walk around the house, talk to your mom, dad, parents, or your sister.

What I enjoyed was that we had far less exercises in the textbook.

It was nice that I had my own room and I could go and lie down at any moment. Or that I could go and eat something whenever I was hungry.

Conclusions

The study of everyday life is an interesting, albeit difficult task. The basic difficulty stems from the elusiveness of the phenomenon of everyday life. According to Sulima (2003: 7), “There is no return to everyday life. Instead, we ‘melt away’ and ‘solidify’ in myth, in what is ‘inexpressible.’ Only in the things and words that surround us can we ‘glimpse’ some everyday ‘histories.’” This attempt to read them allowed me to see the diversity of children’s experiences related to remote education, as well as to distin-

guish dominating categories relating to: children's activities connected to learning, the material environment, and the emotions accompanying remote education.

The third-grade students participating in the research study point to the necessity to specifically prepare for these types of classes. Although they had many experiences with using technical equipment, the requirement to use a particular online education platform proved to be a challenge. Students around the world experienced similar difficulties. Davide Parmigiani – the chairman of the Association of Teacher Education in Europe – talked about it during the conference *Changes in the Learning Environment in Early Childhood Education during (and after) a Pandemic – Research, Dialogue, Developmental Resources and Everyday Practices* in May 2022 in Kielce.

The statements concerning the course of the classes are also dominated by discussions of their technical dimension, for instance the limitations resulting from the available family resources when it comes to electronic devices and the unreliability of equipment. Children are also aware of the very significant change in relations, the lack of direct contact with other children and the teacher which is difficult to accept, therefore confirming that the need for closeness and contact in the real world is natural. They much less frequently focused on the content of education, although they saw that some areas, e.g. music education, natural sciences, and PE, were realized in a limited capacity.

Education moved to the home space resulted in diverse material conditions for learning. Some students used places and equipment at their own disposal, others had to share space with other members of their family. The children's statements confirm researchers' view demonstrating the important role of objects used for everyday activities. "Because the essence of everyday life is its cyclical nature and repetition, the objects which fill it function as teams working together to achieve a specific goal, together with the individuals that use them" (Krajewski 1992: 181).

The specific character of remote education, the transformed social relations, the various levels of competences (especially digital), the diversified level of support from family and teachers caused that children's education during the pandemic was accompanied by very strong and diverse emotions. Negative emotions dominated, typical for situations related to actual danger. They were accompanied by particular behaviors and thoughts connected with depression, unwillingness to act, but also with anger that motivates to take action. It is anger, calling out to "fight, scream, say what bothers you" (Mościcka-Teske 2022), which provoked attempts to find new solutions for dealing with the situation. It mobilized children's creativity, helping to think of original ways of surviving and, especially important in times that are dominated by stressful experiences – humor.

The presented results invite us to deepen our didactic reflection not only on the activities of students and teachers, but also relating to the emotional and social development of children in early education – "learning about yourself in rich relationships with others and with the world in which we act in" (Klus-Stańska 2018: 22–23). It is important to remember that episodes of everyday life have a definite duration and all have various consequences (Sztompka 2008).

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