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COWORKING SPACES – SOLIDARITY COMMUNITY IN TIMES OF PLAGUE

motto:
"We break down walls, so we can breakthrough in our businesses."
Power of Coworking by Cynthia Chiam

Abstract

Analysing the importance of social support, overcoming alienation, and investigating solidarity mechanism and group cohesion are the significant challenges of modern social systems. In this article, I consider the vital issue of changes in the sphere of work and the specifics of coworking in the pandemic, both in matters related to the running of coworking itself and also aspects related to interpersonal relations and dealing with uncertainty. This article addresses the problem of the role of coworking space and the epidemic's impact on the labour market, especially among freelancers and micro-entrepreneurs in Poland. More specifically, the article aims to consider the following elements of the covid era on the labour market: the importance of social support, solidarity, the experience of uncertainty and risk and overcoming social aspects of isolation. Thus, I pose the research question: What were the changes in the functioning of coworking spaces during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the restrictions were the most severe? The research data presented in this paper are drawn from an internet survey with users of coworking spaces – freelancers and micro-entrepreneurs – conducted during the first lockdown in Poland (April 1–14, 2020).

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Flexible working methods represent a structural change that will inevitably increase in the coming months and years. The community that is created around CSs evokes mutual responsibility and loyalty; the relationships that bind them affect their commitment. Coworkers, as a community, recognised and pooled their resources. They develop a shared repertoire of experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems.

Keywords: coworking space, changes in the labour market, COVID-19, social support, solidarity

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of COVID-19 disrupted the Chinese economy and spread globally. The COVID-19 pandemic first emerged in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 [Wu et al. 2020]. In this uncertain environment, it was difficult to forecast the social and economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis. In 2020, Nuno Fernandes explained in the report *Economic effects of coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19) on the world economy*:

> that there is no historical benchmark that we can use directly. Indeed, no previous crisis has started like this: a health event, global, that influences the supply and demand simultaneously, in a period when central banks have no firepower left (due to the zero or negative interest rates already in place) [Fernandes 2020].

This pandemic is unique in many ways, but there are still lessons we can learn from previous economic crises (e.g., the global financial crisis) as well as epidemics (e.g., avian and swine flu, SARS, MERS, Ebola Virus Disease), which highlight the central role of employment, social protection and social dialogue in mitigation and recovery policies.

> In times of crisis, International Labour Standards provide a strong foundation for key policy responses that focus on the crucial role of decent work in achieving a sustained and equitable recovery. These standards, adopted by representatives of governments, workers' and employers' organizations, provide a human-centred approach to growth and development, including by triggering policy levers that stimulate demand and protect workers and enterprises [International Labour Organization 2020: 7].

A booming industry and a strengthening cultural movement have remodelled the very notion of what a workplace is and what it should deliver in terms of human interaction in the 21st century.

> The flexible workplace evolution continued to pick up speed in Europe over 2018, driven by a combination of factors the flexible structure of employment, the rise of the tech and gig

economy, shifts in corporate culture and use of space, government support and accountancy changes, which all point to the direction of further growth [Colliers International 2019: 3].

During that time, contemporary society struggled with changes in the labour market caused by growing uncertainty and risk associated with issues such as flexibility, mobility, instability, temporary work, and informal agreements. Changing employment systems – leaving a permanent job or a full-time job for self-employment-is an important phenomenon that directly impacts emerging phenomena and innovative management of the labour market.

The outbreak of COVID-19 is affecting everyone's lives, and the coworking industry is no exemption. In the 2020 report *Economic effects of coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19) on the world economy*, Nuno Fernandes showed that the economic effects of the outbreak are being underestimated due to an over-reliance on historical comparisons with SARS or the 2008/2009 financial crisis. Do we know much more today? The survey *What coworking spaces say about the impact of the coronavirus*, conducted in 2020 through Social Workplaces.com, showed that almost all respondents expected a more positive attitude from employers towards remote working after the crisis. To better understand possible social and economic outcomes for freelancers and micro-entrepreneurs, this article explores the situation regarding coworking spaces (CSs) in Poland during the pandemic. In this article, I consider how the global pandemic is altering the flex workspace landscape, aiming the investigative lens at how CSs (institutions) and coworkers (individuals) respond to the social changes wrought by COVID-19. Where should our analytical attention be focused?

I define CSs as individual work conducted in a communal (shared with others) physical space. The community forming in CSs comprises individuals working in the knowledge economy. They work in a shared space adapted to work, for which they pay a subscription fee. It has been shown that most people working in CSs (Coworkers) enjoy the benefits of knowledge transfer, cooperation, informal exchange, and business opportunities [Spinuzzi 2012]. When the pandemic hit, the CS foundations, which were mainly concerned with a sense of community among coworkers, trembled.

CSs can be "homes away from home" [Ross, Ressia 2015] where unrelated people relate in an inclusively sociable atmosphere, exchanging knowledge and experience. During the pandemic the CSs' solidarity was tested. The question is, did they pass the test? Has the community turned out to have strong ties? Were they able to meet the expectations of support? Thus, I propose the main question: What were the changes in the functioning of CSs during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the restrictions were the most severe?

The pandemic confused sociologists and made clear the need for immediate action, in terms of recording, exploring, and analysing the phenomena. An excellent example is the list of pandemic surveys catalogued by the Polish Sociological Association on its website [PSA 2020]. It can be said that the scope and dynamics of the phenomena and processes that took place during the pandemic required their "ongoing recording". This article presents the results of "hot" research endeavours. However, it does not stop there. Instead, it treats it as an initial stage for continuing and inscribing this "hot" experience into the broader context of international research. Because of this, I aimed to contribute to the nascent scholarship on the community in CSs during the pandemic, which investigates the sudden and unforeseen switch to working from home.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Our theoretical starting points are the concepts of social support and dealing with the experience of uncertainty and risk. As it is the place where we spend the better part of our days and years, the workplace is a central and essential location for realising human agency in contemporary society. This article will contribute to the ongoing discussion on CSs in the post-covid era, taking into account the relational part of the work [Sias 2009; Raggins, Dutton 2007]. Relations with coworkers constitute an essential domain for the realisation of solidarity. They are also fundamental to the "social climate" in the workplace [Moos 1986]. Furthermore, coworker relations have both instrumental and affective underpinnings. Some minimum support from coworkers is instrumental, even essential, for dealing with the experience of uncertainty and risk.

Following Fantasia [1988], widespread management abuse can evoke high levels of group solidarity in defending dignity [Linhart 1981: 35]. In the case of freelancers and micro-entrepreneurs, perhaps the COVID-19 pandemic will be regarded as a factor that evokes high levels of group solidarity, comparable to the management abuse mentioned by Fantasia [1988].

What does coworking space mean?

I deliberately chose CSs to investigate the experience of uncertainty and the risk the labour market poses for micro-entrepreneurs. I am particularly interested in those who use this form of work most frequently, such as freelancers, start-ups and micro-entrepreneurs, in varying degrees specializing in the vast field of knowledge-based industries [Gandini 2015: 193]. CSs are seen as a way to reduce

the risk of isolation (exceptionally high in working from home) and increase meeting opportunities [Moriset 2014].

CSs are regarded as "serendipity accelerators" designed to host creative people [Spinuzzi 2012] and entrepreneurs who endeavour to break isolation and find a convivial environment favouring the development of collaborative communities [Moriset 2014]. Social, institutional, cognitive and organizational proximities [Boschma 2005] within those communities may lead to an increase in informal exchange, collaboration and interaction with others, knowledge transfer, and business opportunities [Spinuzzi 2012].

CS is defined as a shared workspace where a subscription applies and where the guiding principle is to co-create this place with others. Co-creation involves cooperation, a sense of bond, and mutual communication (exchange of information). This idea is the opposite of a situation when a person rents an office on an hourly basis, where the users are charged only for the prepared workplace (desk) with facilities (e.g., internet, a printer, a coffee machine). CS is a service whereby one participates in building the character of a place, circulating open and hidden knowledge, and creating relationships and bonds. A variable pointing to CS rather than to an office to rent on an hourly basis is the co-creation through which one is engaged in CS.

It is no accident that CS first appeared in San Francisco, a city on the edge of Silicon Valley, known for its high concentration of cutting-edge information and telecommunications technologies. The cultural climate of the Valley, close to the Bohemian, promoted the formation of patterns of work based on social networks and the accelerated circulation of tacit and explicit knowledge. These circumstances contributed to the appearance of the first manifestations of CS in San Francisco.

The increase in the popularity of self-employment and independence from the employer are also associated with the change in freelancers' approach, favouring work based upon cooperation with others rather than work within a structured organization. Freedom and autonomy remain the values of crucial importance for freelancers, but they need adequate support to work effectively. Due to diverse needs that are difficult to define, freelancers started to create their communities independently, including, among others, CSs [Leighton 2013: 46–47]. "(...) as the networking and flexibility are becoming characteristic for the new organization of industry, and as new technologies enable small firms to find market niches, we begin to witness the resurgence of self-employment and mixed forms of employment" [Castells 2013: 244].

An analysis of CSs in Poland conducted in the years 2015–2019 (selected results in Rabiej-Sienicka 2016a, 2016b and 2019) indicates the importance of the category of the institutional change in the labour market caused by the increasing number of freelancers and micro-entrepreneurs in the field of knowledge-based industry for CSs. In the organisational field encompassing CS, there is competition between CSs that regard the foremost criterion as community forming and those that view it as economic gain. Three types of CSs can be identified, among which this competition occurs. The business-prestige type, focusing on large and small companies and freelancers, is set up in premium-class buildings in attractive locations with a 24-hour service. The efficient-administration type targets small companies and freelancers, with professional office staff based in small spaces in city centres. The relational-negotiatory type is the most difficult, demanding adaptation and generating a creative, supportive and inspiring community [Rabiej-Sienicka 2019].

CS means individual work done in a common (shared with others) space (office). Although the space plays a significant role in CS, the most important factor is the community. CS seems to be a response to the intensifying individualization and simultaneous need to belong to a group.

Social support and dealing with the experience of uncertainty and risk

Over several decades, labour sociology has focused mainly on the loss of employment security. The violent changes caused by economic globalisation have caused a feeling of uneasiness in terms of employment, occupational status, and the sense of an individual's usefulness in the workplace. Despite the benefits and flexibility of new work systems, the globalisation of the economy has contributed to increased employment uncertainty. A feature of modern society is the lack of a sense of security connected with work, and this lack of a sense of security is experienced simultaneously in all areas of society [Standing 2011].

A principal avenue for reclaiming self-esteem in an oppressive environment (currently – in an oppressive pandemic situation) is to develop strong group ties [Ezzamel, Willmott 1998]. Identity and status can then be achieved through group activities and the affirmation of group values. Social support is typically seen as beneficial for staff because it can decrease stress and enhance employee and organisational well-being amid periods of personal stress or workplace tension [House 1981; Sias 2009; Smollan, Morrison 2019]. Perhaps CSs play such a role for freelancers and micro-entrepreneurs. Coworkers help to give meaning to work by sharing work-life experiences and friendships, and coworkers can also

provide a basis for group solidarity and mutual support. Social support can be defined as the aid – the supply of tangible or intangible resources – individuals gain from their network members [Berkman 1984; House 1981]. Alternatively, as Cohen [2004] expresses, social support is recognised as a social "fund", where individuals draw on emotional and material resources to assist colleagues when experiencing demanding and stressful circumstances. The foundation of solidarity is "shared experiences at work" and "the sense of involvement and attachment" that arises from these shared experiences [Goffee 1981: 475, 488].

Coworking spaces have been increasing rapidly globally and provide, in addition to basic business infrastructure, an opportunity for social interaction. Gerdenitsch et al. [2016] demonstrated that social interaction in coworking spaces could take the form of social support. Authors conclude that coworking spaces, as modern social work environments, should align flexible work infrastructure with well-constructed opportunities for social support: "Positive coworker relations are essential for overcoming social aspects of alienation through the establishment of solidarity, mutual defence, group cohesion, and mutual support" [Hodson 2001: 233]. Social relations constitute a significant part of the "social climate" at work [Moos 1986:14] in which workers experience meaning, identity, and dignity [Gabarro 1987: 174]. Individuals embedded in strong social and organisational bonds [Sias 2009] are more likely to enact social support if it reinforces existing workplace subjectivities [Smollan, Morrison, 2019]. Sociologists have increasingly taken up problems of uncertainty and risk in recent decades [Lash 2009; Beck 2009; Giddens 2009]. Some scholars claim that mechanisms to deal with uncertainty are the most significant challenges of modern social systems [Luhmann 1976].

The literature review showed that there needs to be more knowledge on he role of CSs in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. So far, no research on the impact of COVID-19 on CSs has been conducted in Poland. However, there is an evident need to describe this part of reality. My research has ambitions to contribute to a better understanding of CSs.

Thus, I propose the main research question: What were the changes in the functioning of CSs during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the restrictions were the most severe?
Based on the assumptions made in the previous sections, I proposed the following specific aims:

1. A diagnosis of the first stage of the process of the reorganisation of the co-working industry in Poland caused by the coronavirus outbreak.

2. An exploration of the importance of social support, dealing with the experience of uncertainty and risk for the labour market in CS.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

At the beginning of the first lockdown in Poland, between April 1[1] and April 14, 2020, I asked coworkers from 278 CSs providers[2] across Poland what the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was on CSs in Poland? It was a challenging time, with the most extraordinary restrictions during the pandemic, e.g., limiting going outside only to critical situations.

The crucial issue is the period in which the study was conducted. It was the time of the first lockdown in Poland - the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic when the restrictions were the most severe. The first case of a laboratory-confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infection in Poland was that of a man hospitalised in Zielona Góra, with confirmation announced officially on March 4, 2020 [Ministerstwo Zdrowia 2020] On March 10, six days later, Poland cancelled all mass events due to the coronavirus. On March 12, eight days later, schools and universities were closed. On March 15, eleven days after the confirmation of the first case, a sanitary cordon was introduced on the Polish borders, and on March 25, interactions between people were restricted. Finally, on March 31, twenty-seven days after the first case, the President of the Republic of Poland signed a package of laws called the Anti-Crisis Shield. The majority of new regulations entered into force on April 1, 2020[3]. As of March 29, 2020, there were 269,307 people under quarantine for suspected SARS-CoV-2 infection [Worldometers.info 2020]. Government regulation tightened the lockdown restrictions starting from March 31–April 1.

Study design and procedure

This study was exploratory and interpretative. The survey was conducted between April 1 and April 14, 2020, at the beginning of the first lockdown in Poland. The research data in this paper were drawn from an internet survey with owners of CSs and their users (coworkers) – freelancers and micro-entrepreneurs. The survey software allowed for secure and anonymous data collection. An online search was carried out, leading to the identification of 278 CSs providers all

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[1]   The first day of the first lockdown in Poland.

[2]   I carried out an online search, which led to the identification of 278 coworking space providers in Poland.

[3]   The Act of March 31, 2020 amending the Act on special solutions related to the prevention, counteraction and combating of COVID-19, other infectious diseases and crisis situations caused by them; The Act of March 31, 2020 amending certain acts in the field of the health-protection system related to the prevention, counteraction and combating of COVID-19; The Act of March 31, 2020 amending the Act on the system of development institutions.

across Poland. Next, providers were contacted via e-mail in order to outline and explain the purpose of the study. Providers were asked to forward the study information and the online survey weblink to all their members. Response rates were relatively low, so reminder messages from CSs fan pages on Facebook were posted Additionally, the study was promoted on the fansites of CSs.

Thirty-one respondents filled in the questionnaire. Participants consisted of the following groups: owners of CSs n = 13, coworking members: n = 18. The respondents came from seven cities in Poland: Kraków (n = 11), Warszawa (n = 10), Gdańsk (n = 5), Trójmiasto (n = 1), Poznań (n = 2), Wrocław (n = 1), Rzeszów (n = 1).

The topics covered by the questionnaire included the following: the home office, coworker relationships, joint help initiatives during the epidemic, the situation in the labour market, support for coworkers, the situation of CSs from the owners' (operators) perspective, support for coworking owners, and individual help initiatives during the epidemic. After a pretest, the questionnaire consisted of eight main parts, with 40 items. The respondents filled in different parts of the questionnaire (some of these parts were common to all of them), hence the different number of answers to the questions. The overwhelming majority of the survey consisted of closed-ended questions with a cafeteria.

Sample characteristics of the coworking space

As indicated, the most common CS size was for less than 20 coworkers (8); two spaces had 50 to 60 coworkers, one had 200 and another had 450 coworkers. The share of CSs that were closed is observable. In this study (n = 31), closures accounted for two spaces. Seven were temporarily closed, and the other six CSs continued their regular operation. Half of the respondents (16) agreed that a CS was still working, but that some changes had been made.

Thirty-one respondents participated in the present study. Over half (17) of the participants (n = 31) were female. Concerning the duration of working in a CS, most of the coworkers (n = 18) within the present sample used the CS for more than two years (11). Five used the CS between one and two years and two of them less than six months. Regarding employment status (n = 18), half of the coworkers were self-employed (10), six were employed under a contract of employment and two were employed under a civil law contract. The branches indicated by the participants were (n = 18): marketing (5), training (2), NGO (2), crafts furniture (2), architecture (1), consulting (1), IT (1), language (1), real estate (1), UX design (1), and coworking branches (1).

Research limitations due to the pandemic

A better way to conduct research could be to focus on only one of these groups of respondents. The current COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing restrictions on movement have adversely impacted scientific research worldwide [Harper 2020]. Fear, uncertainty, and paralyzing anxiety are also factors that could have contributed to such a low response to the research. I lacked the opportunity to use other researchers' experience conducting research during the pandemic, and what followed needed a more innovative approach to online data collection. As such, the knowledge yielded by my study is "hot knowledge", and itself part of the studied social process. Therefore, I treat this data only as an illustration, or a snapshot taken from that time, in order to start a discussion on what we know about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on functioning in CSs.

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON COWORKING SPACES IN THE WORLD

There are significant differences in how CS functions, even within Europe or Poland [see Rabiej-Sienicka 2019], largely due to diverse socio-economic conditions. However, reference to the findings of global researchers on the development of coworking spaces makes it possible to situate the research presented in this article in a broader context.

The literature on CS shows that they are mainly located in large urban areas, in most cases in or around city centres, where there is a concentration of skilled labour, knowledge and innovation. CSs may constitute an integral part of the city's entrepreneurial ecosystem and contribute to its strengthening, mainly due to the characteristics of the coworkers [Bouncken, Reuschl 2016; Capdevila 2013]. This phenomenon can be explained by Florida's 3Ts theory of economic develop-ment, which specifies the role of the concentration of (i) technology, high-tech activities and R&D innovations; (ii) talent, talented work forces; (iii) tolerance, the level of inclusiveness, diversity and opportunity to work [Florida 2002]. In recent decades, the most famous discourse on the transformation and regenera-tion of the western urban environments and the socio-economic scene was the implementation of "creative cities" [Landry 2000; Power, Nielsen 2010; Musterd, Muri, 2010]. This vision went hand in hand with the alleged "growth of a creative class" [Florida 2002]. However, the concept of a creative class was criticized by Peck [2005] and Pratt [2008]. Although the diffusion of CS became noticeable on a large scale about ten years after Florida's manifesto, it shows what was sup-posedly an unfulfilled promise of the creative class [see Gandini 2015].

Nowadays, The COVID-19 pandemic, as much as climate change, influences the decision on where to work and live. Climate change, e.g., is causing glaciers to shrink, temperatures to rise, and shifts in human migration in parts of the world [Adger et al. 2020]. Inhabitants of large cities have begun to look for a peaceful, healthier (smog-free) and less populated space [Florida, Rodríguez-Pose, Storper 2021]. Some part of society has begun to look for better places to live in rural and suburban areas. Migration has multiple benefits and costs for both origin and destination regions. For Italy, Mariotti [2020] even claimed an "exodus from big cities", mainly to suburban areas which are well connected to the metropoles by appropriate traffic infrastructures [also Capdevila 2020]. COVID-19 has only strengthened this trend. From the current trend regarding digital workers, those who can afford smart work will migrate to smaller cities and peri-urban territories [Subirats 2020].

People may increasingly look for collaborative workplaces near their homes to avoid long commutes [Görmar 2021]. People want to leave the densely populated cities where infection with the virus might be more probable than in the countryside [Florida, Rodríguez-Pose, Storper 2021]. Consequently, this may lead to changes in the social structure in rural areas – the influx of new people and the emergence of new infrastructure needs (optical fibres, the expansion of transport, and the creation of collaborative workspaces).

The decision to work in CSs in rural areas may not only be a reaction to change; CSs could generate a capacity for change in rural societies. Collaborative workspaces are increasingly gaining the attention of policymakers as they are considered essential intermediaries that help deliver entrepreneurial growth and local innovation agendas [Babb et al. 2018; Capdevila 2015; Di Marino, Lapintie 2018].

The vast majority of CSs are located in urban agglomerations. However, in recent times, we have observed the gradual spread of CSs in less densely populated cities, towns and villages in rural and even peripheral regions across the EU [Avdikos, Merkel 2020; Fuzi 2015; Arnoldi, Bosua, Cooper, Greenfield, Ch'ng 2018; Jamal 2018]. There is still no clear evidence about their functions, their impacts and the ways that policymaking may (or should) promote a rural CSs wave and assist in linking the development of CSs with processes of local socio-economic development and sustainable development in rural areas. That policy link is much needed for those disadvantaged places [Rodriguez-Pose 2019], as only a few EU policies (e.g. Interreg) have assisted, in a fragmented way, in the development of CSs in peripheral and rural areas.

On the one hand, the open, high-density community settings of CS venues do not sit well with COVID-19 and social distancing. On the other hand, corporate

occupiers will probably seek greater flexibility in the post-pandemic era. New models in CS can combine the highest service standards in health and hygiene with attractively flexible leases. Knapp and Sawy claim that "coworking as an open concept is also evolving, leading to new types of CWS that are adapted to specific conditions" [Knapp, Sawy 2021]. The CS sector has faced strain in the Coronavirus crisis. However, the report *Global coworking growth study 2020* calculates that despite their slow growth in 2020, CSs are expected to develop more rapidly from 2021 onwards. Based on Deskmag [2019], we have witnessed an upsurge of CSs (600 CSs in 2010 – 18700 in 2018) with 1.65 million CSs users worldwide. Unfortunately, in 2022 the Corona pandemic continues to be highly influential. Following the Coworking Trends Survey, 4th quarter of 2021 [Deskmag, 2021], the proportion of profit-making spaces dropped significantly, when compared to pre-pandemic surveys. Globally, there were more CSs making losses than profits in 2021. How else will the COVID-19 pandemic affect the functioning of CSs?

SNAPSHOT OF THE PANDEMIC IN POLAND IN COWORKING SPACES DURING THE FIRST WAVE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, WHEN THE RESTRICTIONS WERE THE MOST SEVERE – FINDINGS

By April 14, the coronavirus pandemic had already impacted the coworking sector. Whereas CSs and embedded communities used to be location-bound in physical spaces, COVID-19 has forced their clientele to move into new hybrid (digital/physical) arenas. Half of the respondents (n = 31) agreed that a CS is still working, but some changes have been made. None of the respondents maintained that COVID-19 had not impacted their daily businesses at all. The research results indicate that CS in Poland implemented some new business strategies to counteract coronavirus spreading. CSs had to adjust to government regulations, altering their model that had previously revolved around building communities based on physical proximity and interaction [e.g., Spinuzzi 2019].

In the question regarding the changes introduced in the first days of total lockdown, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the restrictions were the most severe, I proposed a cafeteria. The answers proposed in the cafeteria can be divided into three dimensions: 1) economic security, 2) health security, 3) security resulting from a sense of belonging to a community. What is interesting is that additional answers provided by the respondents (not proposed in the cafeteria) basically relate to the "health security" dimension. Also, an additional technical category appears – the exchange of the rented premises for CSs.

FIGURE 1. Dimensions of changes have been made in coworking spaces during the epidemic (n = 31, multiple choice)
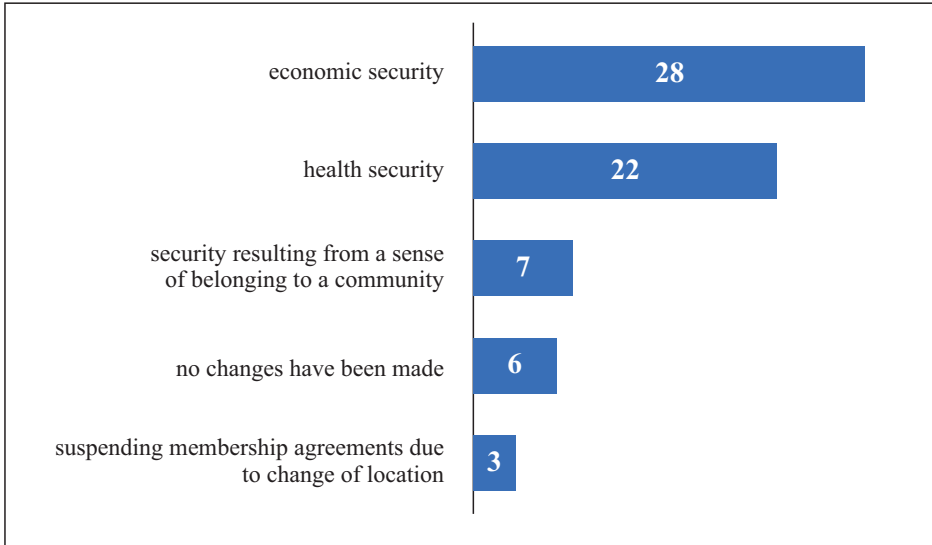
Source: Own research.

The uncertainty is clearly seen in these responses. These different factors regarding their working conditions increase coworkers' insecurity.

TABLE 1. Three dimensions of changes have been made in coworking spaces during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic when the restrictions were the most severe

The dimension of economic security	The dimension of healthy security	The dimension of security resulting from a sense of belonging to a community
discounts for current members	new virtual mail service in which no physical presence is required	organising virtual events for members
rolling over any unused days to future months for members	offering single rooms for virtual meetings	
adjusting cancellation policies to allow for more relaxed cancellation periods	other working hours for staff have been introduced, disinfectants have been introduced, larger gaps between some desks have been introduced	
lower pricing for new members	no new contracts signed	

TABLE 1. (cd.)

The dimension of economic security	The dimension of healthy security	The dimension of security resulting from a sense of belonging to a community
the marketing strategy was adjusted	limiting the number of people allowed in the office	
	change of working hours	
	keeping an attendance list to avoid a large number of people in the office at the same time	
	Coworking spaces' managers present only on selected days and for a short time	
	collaborating with video conferencing companies	

Source: Own research.

These new business strategies showcase the adaptability of the coworking industry. Not all CSs have made changes. The ones that introduced adjustments offered diverse discounts and virtual services in which no physical presence was required. Organising virtual events for members was also popular. Almost all respondents (n = 18) expect a rethink of employers' attitudes towards remote working after the crisis. The results show that ten respondents expect companies to rethink the way employees work after the coronavirus crisis. Six rather expect changes in companies' behaviour, one remains hopeful, and only one thinks that companies' attitudes towards teleworking will rather remain unchanged.

Florida et al. [2021] stated that the fear instilled by the pandemic has affected where people live, work, travel, and commute. Two of these three dimensions, economic and health, also appear in the question: What are you afraid of regarding the coronavirus outbreak? Coworkers expressed fear in two fields: getting infected in a CS and being challenged by financial problems. COVID-19 and its health consequences were infecting the first main fear. The major worries are: "Being in contact with someone who has the coronavirus but does not show any symptoms" (11) and "Getting the virus in the workplace and taking it home to one's family, loved ones or vulnerable people" (7). The second significant fear was related to the economic impact of COVID-19: "Decline in the volume of orders" (1), "Deterioration of the situation of the poorest people" (1), "Economic problems in the world economy" (1). This is not surprising; modern society feels

a lack of a sense of security in terms of work and health. However, it fits in with sociologists' claim that mechanisms to deal with uncertainty have become the most significant challenges in recent decades [Lash 2009; Beck 2009; Giddens 2009, Luhmann 1976].

To the open question in the survey about what coworkers miss the most, there are answers related to their longing for the social aspects of work and the spatial organization of work. It is visible here that CS responds to the needs of people looking for a place to work with a specific community that is built around it. As previously mentioned, these entrepreneurs endeavour to break isolation and find a convivial environment favouring the development of collaborative communities [Moriset 2014].

TABLE 2. The things respondents miss about the coworking space while working from home – selected quotes from respondents

What do coworkers miss in the category of social aspects of work?	What do coworkers miss in the category of spatial organization of work?
people	opportunities to focus on work
atmosphere and brainstorming	work in a peaceful and quiet space
contact with customers	separate rooms for teleconferences
contact with other people and talk over coffee	it is one of the places I go to in the city as a perfect escape from working at home
events	

Source: Own research.

Following Moriset [2014], CSs are seen as a way to reduce the risks of isolation (exceptionally high when working from home) and increase meeting opportunities. The areas cited by coworkers that they miss fit into the above definition and also show the performative nature of this phenomenon. More and more tenants started to work from home, mainly to avoid social contact. In parallel, workers moved to the digital realm to sustain their social contacts. Most coworkers (n = 18) said they were working from home (16). Over half (10) of those surveyed indicated they felt isolated when working from home.

Regarding distractions, seven of them perceived being distracted by their family members as one of the biggest challenges. The community itself started to unveil a strong desire for community. Out of the eighteen coworkers who completed the questionnaire, fifteen indicated that they stayed in touch with coworking members. As the topics of the conversation show, this "stayed in

touch with coworking members" was not limited to formal, work-related matters. Instead, it had the dimension of social support, both emotional and material (specific knowledge). The conversations with other coworkers cover three areas: 1) support in a crisis, 2) daily contact, 3) involvement in the future of CS. What develops the community, and what helps to maintain it? Ordinary talking about nothing is essential to have contact with each other, but solidarity binds this community together. Conversation topics that seem trivial, such as exchanging daily tips, are no less important than those in which coworkers share their professional knowledge and support others in the field of law or economy. These trivial topics are a substitute for everyday small talk over coffee in the kitchen. Those essential and challenging topics of aspects of life in a pandemic show that this community is not accidental. Moreover, it is a community that builds up around CS. Currently, knowledge strategies are shifting due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has pushed organisations into systemic changes to meet social distancing, physical isolation, and workplace restrictions [Ceinar, Mariotti, 2021; Mariotti et al., 2021].

TABLE 3. Topics on which coworkers communicate among themselves – selected quotes from respondents

Support in a crisis situation	Daily contact	Involvement in the future of coworking
we exchange legal and economic advice, etc. on how to deal with the current situation in the labour market	nothing, it is just important to have contact with each other	we arrange the rules and possibilities for saving our coworking space
we support our professional knowledge of other coworkers	we are talking about private life	we arrange the next work to be done in the new place and organise ourselves
we are looking for new clients and projects together	we exchange daily tips (e.g. recipes)	about renovation and arrangement of a new place

Source: Own research.

The coworking communities were supposed to express support and solidarity and provide advice. During the survey, fifteen out of eighteen people admitted to having contact with coworkers. When asked whether they felt solidarity with the coworking space members (n = 15), eleven of their coworkers said "rather yes", and another three said "yes definitely". A "don't know" was reported by one of the coworkers in the present sample. The research results indicate that coworkers are helpful. Twenty one (n = 31) of those people who completed the questionnaire

reported that they helped others during the first wave of the pandemic. Coworkers utilised both their finances and their experience or support from groups to help others and survive economic shocks.

TABLE 4. Ways to help others during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the restrictions were the most severe – selected quotes from respondents

Financial aspects	Non-financial aspects
I support local businesses, purchasing in small businesses	I help by providing free advice to others in the field of my profession
I financially support	I sew masks for healthcare (or prepare sewing material or deliver it)
I do shopping for other people	I print the necessary equipment for hospitals on a 3D printer
I bought transparent panels for engineers from the Warsaw University of Technology. They print helmets for doctors. I stuck my oar in and bought material for 200 helmets.	I am in the process of preparing a project supporting social enterprises during and after the epidemic
I buy a suspended/pending meal	I support talking and staying in touch with relatives, friends and colleagues who need it
	I borrowed a 3D printer
	I am involved in creating an initiative that strengthens the role of the parish in conducting aid activities: www.wspolnoty-pomocy.pl

Source: Own research.

As Hodson [2001] claims, positive coworker relations are essential for overcoming the social aspects of alienation, understood as mutual defence, group cohesion, and mutual support. Four coworkers who maintain relationships with each other outside of CS, despite the early stage of the epidemic and lockdown, have created or planned to create a joint aid initiative (with other coworkers) for others. These were such initiatives: "It is an initiative to keep the CSs going and provide jobs for coworkers. At the moment we are talking about what we can do and how to show solidarity for the place (CSs) and each other"; "We sew masks and print the helmets on 3D printers"; "Fundraising on the survival of Wytwórnia (the name of the CS) and so far our efforts are focused around it"; "We are working on a joint initiative". Apparently, CS gives a fragmented sense of security because ten of the coworkers indicated that the probability of not going back to the CS was tiny,

more than a third of those (6) said small, and two chose "don't know". Nobody believed in not returning to a CS.

Based on this limited sample, it is impossible to answer whether the changes taking place in CSs relate to the characteristics of various types of CSs in Poland [see Rabiej-Sienicka 2019]. The research shows an image of CSs, on the one hand, more focused on the business nature of CSs – for example, discounts for current members or lower prices for new members. On the other hand, it also shows a type focused on the community – joint aid initiatives organized by coworkers, or a sense of solidarity. It would be valuable to develop this thread in subsequent studies and decide whether, depending on the type of CS, these spaces coped with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic differently or similarly.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Dealing with the experience of uncertainty and risks in the labour market in a coworking space

CS responds to the needs of the self-employed, establishing micro-enterprises or freelancers. It allows them to use the forms of organisation which have adapted to the needs of individuals struggling in neoliberal capitalism with flexibility, lack of stability and safety, mobility, and a new model of life. Each of them works separately, but the opportunity to exchange knowledge, contacts, ideas, insights and industry information is the lure that attracts increasing numbers of people to CSs. Great freedom, understood in terms of both space and time and, at the same time, securing the basic needs of a worker, a sense of connectedness and acceptance from colleagues make CS an attractive and desirable form of work organisation and lifestyle. Remote working has massively grown during the COVID-19 pandemic, generating new and diverse varieties of the concept that will most likely be absorbed in the post-pandemic working culture. Flexible working methods represent a structural change that will inevitably increase in the coming months and years. The post-covid era is full of opportunities for CSs. According to various forecasts, by 2030, CS and flex workspaces could represent more than 25% of the overall office market, in comparison to 1%–3% market share nowadays [Colliers International 2019]. Flex workspaces (e.g., coworking spaces, maker spaces) are at the centre of social trends and technological developments such as digitalisation, urbanisation and sustainability.

2020 was not the end of shared workspaces. CSs have been adapting new sanitation strategies to create safe environments for businesses. According to my

own research, there are two main challenges for CSs owners in the pandemic: 1) financial problems and 2) remote work. Firstly, in response to economic difficulties, owners of CSs introduced discounts for current members, allowed them to roll over any unused days to future months and adjusted cancellation policies to allow for more relaxed cancellation periods. They continued to drive work opportunities by reducing the number of people allowed in the office, e.g., by conducting a survey (to discover who will be in the office at which times). Secondly, owners of CSs offered their members daily support with remote work by organising virtual events, setting up a new virtual mail service run remotely by a concierge team during isolation, and looking for new solutions and tools, e.g., through collaborations with companies offering video conferencing.

At that time, CSs owners received aid in the form of reduced rent for the premises and exemption from social security contributions for three months following the anti-crisis shield. Coworkers and CSs owners believe that they will be able to return to their CSs and want their CSs to survive. In order to assist their members, the CSs owners adjusted the sanitary rules and relaxed subscription regulations. CS members, in turn, declared their willingness to use CSs. The maintenance of the CSs forces a change in the business strategy, but it also shows concern for coworkers. Coworkers and owners share the responsibility for CSs. Members are prepared to pay the rent, and space owners are prepared to keep the CSs open despite the difficulties. The community that is created around CSs fosters mutual responsibility and loyalty. The relationships that bind them affect their commitment, which is not enforced by labour relations but by community relations. The strategies undertaken by owners of CSs during the COVID-19 outbreak reveal the need for coworkers to be provided with some security and affiliation. I have conceptually grouped CSs strategies deployed in the context of COVID-19 economic disturbance into three response dimensions: the dimension of economic security, the dimension of healthy security, and the dimension of security resulting from a sense of belonging to a community – affiliation. They were adjusting the CSs to an ecosystem that produces the necessary social services which coworkers need, and this is crucial to overcoming the detrimental effects of COVID-19 [Belso-Martínez 2020].

During COVID-19, delivering community aspects was challenging for the owners of CSs. Social encountering was more difficult, while from the tenant's side, there continued to be a vivid desire for community, fed by social and economic needs. During COVID-19, the labour market showed many changes in working behaviour (e.g., increased remote working and increased usage of video conferencing platforms). There are various indications that post-COVID-19 many

of these changes will remain [Cabral, Winden 2022]. A key topic will be fostering a sense of community among coworkers in the coming period. This seems to be the key to the harmonious and stable development of CSs. The strategies of CSs deserve attention to understand how long lasting they are or whether they can become the "future spaces/ways of collaborating". This article should thus be regarded as a contribution both to the growing body of literature on CSs (particularly in this COVID-19 pandemic) and also to the scholarship on group solidarity and response to dealing with risk and uncertainty.

Overcoming social aspects of isolation

Nowadays, work is an integral part of building identity and self-esteem. Giddens believes that work is an essential factor in the mental construct of an individual, which consists of several aspects: work is a source of income; it allows us to acquire and use skills and provides conditions for activity; work enables us to build relationships and social networks; work gives value and allows us to build identity [Giddens 2005: 396]. Through the research findings elaborated in the empirical section above, we can point to the significance of a collective feeling within work and thus consider community building a constitutive aspect of CSs.

Following Muszyński et al. [2022], as a result of the lack of protection associated with standard employment relationships, platform workers have been left largely alone in dealing with the consequences of the pandemic. My study shows that – at least in the context of crisis, but not only – coworkers are not alone and support each other. Coworkers are afraid of getting COVID-19 on the one hand and financial problems on the other. Most work at home, but the main problem is social isolation. Most of them have social contact with colleagues from CS. Coworkers help to provide meaning in work by sharing their work-life experiences and friendships. They communicate individually and in groups, most frequently via social media. They chat with themselves and support each other by exchanging knowledge about the law, the economy and professional expertise.

Interestingly, coworkers, as a community, recognised and pooled their resources. The fact that they advise each other in law or economics shows that they trust each other. This indicates that members of CS are a community of practice. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, and ways of addressing recurring problems.

They declare a sense of solidarity with other CSs members. Perhaps this feeling translates into helping others. First, they support small local businesses but also think globally, donating money to various organisations. They share their

knowledge and time, e.g., they sew masks and do shopping for others. Everyone believes that they will return to their CSs.

What they miss the most from working in CSs is people, but also the place itself, prepared especially for work (Table 2). The isolation that was imposed on them during the lockdown is the most difficult challenge for them. The community established in the CS continues, despite the lack of personal contact. This indicates a more substantial relationship than just an acquaintance and shows it is a lasting relationship. Coworkers feel solidarity with other CS members, and when analysing their relationships, it can be seen that they also feel they are supported, which probably gives them a sense of security. Without this sense of security, they would not think about helping others. Coworkers help individually as well as in groups. This confirms what Hodson [2001] argued: that positive coworker relations are essential for overcoming social aspects of alienation through the establishment of solidarity, group cohesion, and mutual support.

Conducted research contributes to the discussions on overcoming social aspects of isolation. Hodson [2001] concludes that humans act creatively and purposefully in the world. These creative and purposive actions give people power, effectiveness, and dignity as creative, independent beings who can control their destinies. The COVID-19 pandemic has upset workers' sense of control over their destinies and hence taken away the sense of power, effectiveness, and sense of dignity. However, findings from this study illustrate that people can take control of their destinies despite the pandemic. This is possible through the emergence of coworkers' understanding of the difficulties they experience and their framing of possible solutions, which rely on resources they may possess.

The community around CSs builds strong relationships between members, giving a sense of affiliation and group support and, primarily, group solidarity, making it possible to respond to risk and uncertainty. The pandemic raises several critical analytical considerations for researchers, from the intra-individual and interactive, to the more significant organisational and cross-national implications [Baker 2020].

Implications and suggestions for future research

The intensified development of CS also points to the need to create forecasts and identify important factors influencing the essence of the phenomenon being analysed. Analysing the importance of social support, overcoming alienation, solidarity mechanisms, group cohesion, and mutual support are the significant challenges of modern social systems. The changes to levels of existential risk

and the associated patterns of social engagement brought about by the pandemic offer social scientists numerous opportunities to explore important theoretical and practical questions regarding how conditions of change and uncertainty relate to workplaces. However, such considerations about the meaning of flex workspaces (e.g. coworking spaces) in the contemporary world – and how we should approach them as researchers and theorists – can no longer be ignored.

Methodologically, many of the most vital tools available for studying the sociology of work are restricted by the need for social distancing. Now, more than ever, researchers must be resourceful and innovative in their use of digital technologies to apply qualitative and quantitative analyses, including but not limited to online archives, digital ethnography, and alternative interview formats. Online research may be an attractive option for researchers attempting to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic [Lupton 2020]. In addition, this type of research provides insights into the use of coworking networks to overcome the pandemic [Belso-Martínez 2020].

Based on these "hot studies", the directions and questions looming for the researchers are: Has the strength of CSs community bonding impacted how they deal with uncertainty? How did the different types of CSs deal with the pandemic? How is this way of working changing in the context of changes in the labour market during a pandemic? Which of these changes will turn out to be permanent? Future studies in this area should focus on a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses that can further contribute to understanding new trends in working spaces and practices. Researchers may also focus on the impacts of future waves of the pandemic on CSs, including related recessions and new health crises, that may vary across the globe.

Since COVID-19 emerged as a public health crisis in 2019, sociologists have been, and indeed are still grappling with this global phenomenon's many unanticipated and unseen dynamics. However, I hope the considerations I have outlined are the beginning of productive dialogue in the field of coworking spaces.

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COWORKING – SOLIDARNA SPOŁECZNOŚĆ W CZASACH ZARAZY

Streszczenie

Analiza znaczenia wsparcia społecznego, przezwyciężania alienacji, mechanizmów solidarności i spójności grupowej to istotne wyzwania współczesnych systemów społecznych. W niniejszym artykule rozważam istotne zagadnienie zmian w sferze pracy i specyfiki coworkingu w warunkach pandemii, zarówno w kwestiach związanych z samym prowadzeniem coworkingu, jak i tych związanych z relacjami interpersonalnymi i radzeniem sobie z niepewnością. Artykuł podejmuje problem roli przestrzeni coworkingowej i wpływu epidemii na rynek pracy, zwłaszcza wśród freelancerów i mikroprzedsiębiorców w Polsce. W szczególności, celem jest rozpatrzenie następujących elementów ery covidowej na rynku pracy: znaczenia wsparcia społecznego, solidarności, doświadczania niepewności oraz ryzyka i przezwyciężania społecznych aspektów izolacji. W związku z tym stawiam pytanie badawcze: Jakie nastąpiły zmiany w funkcjonowaniu przestrzeni coworkingowych w czasie pierwszej fali pandemii COVID-19, kiedy ograniczenia były najbardziej dotkliwe? Dane badawcze przedstawione w niniejszym artykule pochodzą z ankiety internetowej z użytkownikami przestrzeni coworkingowych – freelancerami i mikroprzedsiębiorcami – przeprowadzonej podczas pierwszego lockdownu w Polsce (1–14 kwietnia 2020 r.).

Elastyczne metody pracy stanowią strukturalną zmianę, która w najbliższych miesiącach i latach będzie się nieuchronnie nasilać. Społeczność, które ich wiążą, wpływają na ich zaangażowanie. Coworkerzy, jako społeczność, rozpoznali i połączyli swoje zasoby. Rozwijają wspólny repertuar doświadczeń, historii, narzędzi i sposobów rozwiązywania powtarzających się problemów.

Słowa kluczowe: coworking, zmiany na rynku pracy, COVID-19, wsparcie społeczne, solidarność