

The Quality of Middle-Class Social Status. An Analysis of the Diaries of the Unemployed 2016/2017 and the Diaries from COVID-19 Pandemic Period 2020/2021

The point of departure for this study is the relationship between objectively rising levels of welfare and the growing number of needs and aspirations that constitute the pattern of a middle-class vision of life. This is connected with transformations occurring in the sphere of values, driven by the processes of late modernity, wherein - alongside the significance of material position - the fulfilment of aspirations shaped by post-materialist orientations assumes increasing importance. The study focuses on demonstrating the differentiation of social statuses among individuals aspiring to the middle class. Acquiring and maintaining middle-class status entails the adoption of a specific strategy of action, one that encompasses recognized values, the cultural goals defined by those values, and the institutional means of achieving them. The outcome is social status, interpreted with respect to the economic position attained and the capacity to fulfil aspirations and needs. The empirical foundation of the study consists of diaries of the unemployed (2017) and diaries written during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021). The diaries foreground previously identified problems associated with individual functioning in late modern society: they serve as an exemplification of the dynamic and precarious situation in the labour market and they indicate difficulties in fulfilling existential needs (health-related, housing-related, and pertaining to rest), reproductive needs arising from a considerable expansion of parental and caregiving roles to encompass the education and instruction of children and covering a topic of relationships with the state. With regard to the socio-demographic characteristics of the diarists, the collected research material provides insight into the experiences of individuals with higher education, occupying specialist positions and performing complex professional tasks. The advantage is the diversity of the sample in terms of age and place of residence. A potential limitation of the studied corpus might be its gender structure - the reconstructed perspective is to a considerable degree feminised. On account of the quality of the research material, a total of 201 diaries were subjected to analytical processing (72 diaries of the unemployed, 77 diaries from the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, and 52 diaries from the second wave). The diaries were analysed using the case study method, with the research process oriented towards their reduction - that is, the ordering, explanation, and grouping of cases. This approach made it possible to identify types of social status that transcend the conventional distinction between the "new middle class" and the "old middle class." These types are: "successful people," "maximalists under pressure," "guardians of

former principles," "the ordinaries going with the flow," "searching individualists," and "the marginalised". The individual types are differentiated according to their dominant axiological orientation and the possibilities of fulfilling aspirations - both economic and those related to access to resources and support. These types are not fixed categories that describe an individual throughout their lifetime; rather, they are best understood as dominant modes of functioning that are adequate to a given situation. It is probable that, in the course of their life, an individual may be characterised by a range of different types. The typology therefore also takes into account the trajectories of adaptive strategies along with the associated potential risks and threats. In this context, it may acquire an applied dimension - for example, it may be employed in the design and communication of social services.

Keywords: aspirations, needs, adaptive strategies, middle class, social status, late modernity, social change, quality of life

Nonlewslie Joanne