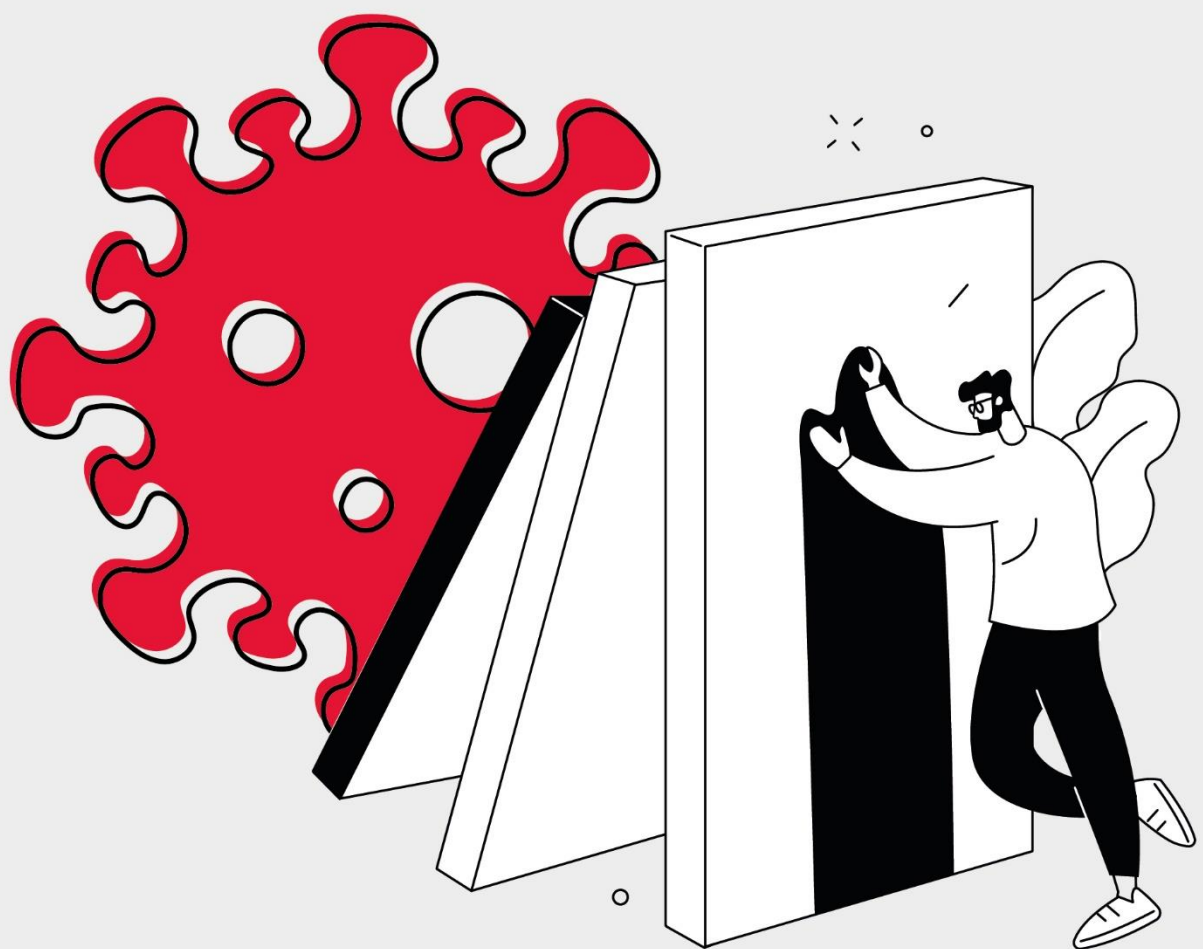


TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD DURING COVID-19:

Background and Early
Findings from the
ULTRAGEN Project



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The Working Paper draws on the research project entitled “ULTRAGEN. Becoming an adult
in times of ultra-uncertainty: intergenerational theory of ‘shaky’ transitions” conducted at the
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Transitions to Adulthood during COVID-19: Background and Early Findings from the ULTRAGEN Project

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to present theoretical and methodological grounds as well as initial findings of the ULTRAGEN project (full title: 'Becoming an adult in times of ultra-uncertainty: intergenerational theory of 'shaky' transitions'). We discuss that the COVID-19 pandemic and its social and economic consequences have undoubtedly impacted on the individuals' lives. Based on the fact that crises tend to affect young people to a greater extent, the project focuses first of all on the lasting effects of societal crises on intergenerational differences and family relations during transitions to adulthood.

Having assumed the significant relation between age/generation and attitudes towards social crises, we juxtapose the perspectives and experiences of young adults (18-35 years old) and their parents (who are in their 40s to 60s). We investigate their paths to adulthood in different social and political contexts, with an explicit interest on (a) the key factors shaping the process of transitions to adulthood in the time of ultra-uncertainty; (b) types of social and intergenerational solidarities born from crises, and (c) intergenerational similarities and differences in attitudes and practices of (non)compliance during unsettling events.

The ULTRAGEN project implies a multi-method approach to answer the research questions and develop a new theory of transitions to adulthood which can be described as 'shaky': unsteady, faltering, tentative or provisional. Through a dialogue between empirical data and theory, ULTRAGEN offers a way to gain a better understanding of the experiences, factors and conditions that determine how young people reach adulthood during social crises. The study combines literature review and secondary data analysis (WP1), qualitative longitudinal research (two-waves of in-depth interviews with 35 pairs/family dyads of young adults and their parents, WP2); analysis of Twitter content about the pandemic-related topics (WP3); representative online survey for Poland (WP4). Additionally, the project aims at setting up the first qualitative longitudinal archive data in Poland 'Time & Transitions' (WP5).

In this Working Paper, we elaborate on the theoretical basis of the project, present subsequent components (Working Packages, WPs) in more detail. Furthermore, we offer preliminary findings from two components (WP1 and WP2) at the half-year mark of the ULTRAGEN project's implementation.

Keywords: transitions to adulthood, pandemic, COVID-19, intergenerational relations, solidarity

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About ULTRAGEN Working Paper

This Working Paper stems from the ULTRAGEN project¹, which studies transitions to adulthood during the crisis intergenerationally. To clarify, the idea behind the Working Paper is two-fold, as it (1) contains an overview of the ULTRAGEN project and (2) offers preliminary findings from two research components.

In other words, the paper serves as a broader introduction of the ULTRAGEN project to the scholarly community and public debates pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the realm of vast research tackling different aspects of how the global health crisis has changed our lives, the paper justifies and explores the scientific and social necessity to acquire new knowledge on how transitions to adulthood occur during social crises, exemplified here mostly by the pandemic. As such, this Working Paper situates the ULTRAGEN research in the broader landscape and highlights its main contribution. In doing so, we elaborate on the theoretical basis of the project, present subsequent components (Work Packages, WPs) in more detail, and elaborate on the expected contributions of ULTRAGEN to social sciences.

Moving on to the second objective of the Working Paper, it should be noted that the ULTRAGEN project began in early 2021 and managed to reach first milestones in autumn 2021. Therefore, it is worth presenting preliminary findings from the first two components of the project, namely WP1 and WP2. These span an expanded literature review and summations of secondary data analysis, as well as the most pressing findings pertaining to young adults in the midst of transition during the COVID-19 crisis. By the pandemic/COVID-19 crisis, we mean not only the epidemic of the virus, but also its economic, political and social consequences. Importantly, the first stage of our analysis in the frames of the Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) conducted for WP2 was explicitly focused on current experiences of transitions to adulthood in the pandemic era.

¹ This work was supported by Narodowe Centrum Nauki/National Science Center Poland under the grant number 020/37/B/HS6/01685. While the Working Paper aims to present the entire project, it is also a deliverable from WP1 component focused on literature review paired with a secondary data analysis of the existing qualitative and quantitative findings.

Research Questions and Key Components of ULTRAGEN

To address the first goal of the Working Paper, which is to introduce the ULTRAGEN project, in this section we present the main characteristics of ULTRAGEN as a wide-reaching research endeavour. Attention is given to main goals, research questions, components, as well as its envisioned contributions.

The key objective of the ULTRAGEN project, with its full title *Becoming an adult in times of ultra-uncertainty: intergenerational theory of 'shaky' transitions* is to empirically examine transitions to adulthood through an intergenerationally comparative lens focused on social crises. In ULTRAGEN, we underscore that intergenerational relations are crucial for young people's capabilities of becoming independent and autonomous (see also Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1996; Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005; Scabini et al., 2007; Sørensen & Nielsen, 2020). In addition, due to the fact that young adults tend to experience greater worsening of their situation in the face of a crisis, we investigate if and how the conditions connected to the COVID-19 pandemic translate to a particular 'shakiness' of young people's paths.

Acknowledging the dynamic social realities, corollary to continued - as of autumn 2021 - unpredictability of possible scenarios linked to the novel coronavirus (e.g., the dynamics of subsequent waves, vaccination rates, new lockdown measures), we employ Beck's (1992) theorizing of the risk society as the overarching frame. Rather than subscribing to a certain vision of what the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis may entail, the project treats the pandemic as an 'unsettling event' (Kilkey & Ryan, 2020) in people's biographies. Thus, ULTRAGEN plays particular attention to an experience-based understanding of the crisis and its both immediate and long-term bearing on individual lives and generational experiences. The approach is consistent with recent OECD data, political events and prognoses, which all point to a further economic downturn and growing socio-political instability in the third decade of the 21st century.

ULTRAGEN is underpinned by both an intergenerational (Mannheim, 1952) and a temporal theorizing (Adam, 1990). In this theoretical frame the COVID-19 events experienced by young Polish adults (ages 18-35) are juxtaposed with the previous socio-historical circumstances that their parents witnessed during their transitions to adulthood (e.g., economic and political crisis in the 1980s Poland, social protests and movements, the period of martial law 1981-1983, and the 1989 turmoil caused by democratic and economic transition, 1997 flooding, past epidemics). While by no means directly comparable, the events narrated by members of different generations are often described through the same prism of social solidarities (see e.g., Dunn, 2004; Penn, 2006) and, retrospectively, often had a lasting impact on youth identities and generational formation of Polish cohorts (e.g., Świda-Ziemba, 1995; Wrzesień, 2009).

Focusing on two generations – 18-35-year-olds and their parents of varying ages (being in their 40s to 60s), we will gauge the impact of various short and prolonged crises. While the older cohort can issue retrospective views of the former communist system as regards shortages, strikes, Solidarity movement and Poland under martial law, they also gauge them prospectively against the COVID-

19 experiences. Next to this, the younger cohort in Poland – which as a country was little affected by the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 (e.g., Duszczuk, 2014) – experiences lockdown and recession as the new ultra-uncertain and shaky reality. Both are nevertheless seen as developmental turning points that model future behaviors, thus strengthening the predicative, added-value of the conducted research.

ULTRAGEN seeks to investigate temporal dynamics, wondering about the effects of pace and tempo timescapes (Neale, 2019) in terms of sudden versus slowly unfolding crisis, as well as conflation of immediate dangers and emerging risks. Taking COVID-19 as an example, we can trace how lockdowns were abrupt and all-encompassing for mobility, health, political agency, economic situation and relational challenges.

Finally, we also conceptually tie them with sociological disaster studies, through Kirchenbaum's (2006) claim that researchers 'have long recognized that the family unit, based on the interaction of household, gender and kinship networks, is a critical linchpin for understanding and predicting disaster behavior' (p.113). From this vantage point, the project is rooted in an understanding of becoming an adult as an increasingly 'joint enterprise' (Scabini et al., 2006), happening through intergenerational cooperation in families. It also broadly means that newly emerged 'feathered nest' settings in the families of origin (e.g., Avery et al., 1992), which have been additionally cushioned by the economic growth, welfare and stability in Poland over the last decades, may be upended by the forecasted recession, exacerbated by mobility restrictions and health risks.

Consequently, ULTRAGEN's **main research question** concerns the **lasting effects of societal crises on intergenerational relations, particularly solidarities, in the processes of becoming an adult**. We are unpacking the main question through subsequent specific research areas, namely:

- 1) **What are the key factors shaping the process of transitions to adulthood in the time of ultra-uncertainty?** ULTRAGEN will engage with both objective and subjective markers of transitions to adulthood, doing so through the prism of ultra-uncertainty and lens of crises. By focusing on the young adults aged 18 to 35 (prospective; COVID-19 crisis) and the generation of their parents (retrospectively chosen historical events), we pose questions regarding the markers and processes within what we deem shaky transitions.
- 2) **What types of social and intergenerational solidarities are born from crises?** The fundamental issues that came to the fore during the pandemic related to family conflicts and tensions, spatial separation vs. coresidence, care and gender dynamics, as well as transmission of aspirations and values. We will explore these in relation to resources, such as memory of past crises, social capital and socio-emotional competences, which can shape attitudes and elicit certain intergenerational coping and support practices.
- 3) **How do younger and older Polish cohorts vary in their attitudes and practices of (non)compliance during unsettling events?** We examine fundamentals of defining freedom, responsibility and solidarity at societal levels during and after a crisis. Through the lens of the pandemic and recession, we will observe and then forecast diverging social practices driven by age as a function of the generational experience and belonging.

Connecting temporal theory (Adam, 1990), social solidarities (Crow, 2002) and intergenerational relations (Scabini et al., 2006), this project advances social theorizing of transitions to adulthood during ultra-uncertainty caused by major social crises. The broad theoretical approach of the project

lies in ‘making sense of social solidarities in unsettled societies’ (Crow, 2002, p. 113), highlights the framing of the COVID-19 epidemic as an unsettling event (Kilkey & Ryan, 2020). Akin to other pivotal and profound shifts that dramatically change the understanding of the surrounding social world, the events of COVID-19 pandemic have made people move forward differently in the risk society marked by a fundamental shift ‘from the solidarity of need to the solidarity motivated by anxiety’ (Beck, 1992, p. 49). In other words, ULTRAGEN follows Beck’s (1986) theorizing in how the risk society is a ‘catastrophic society’, wherein the state of emergency threatens to become ordinary or normal.

It can be hypothesized that the COVID-19 pandemic and its long-term social, cultural and economic effects will be a formative, generational experience in the sense defined in classic theorizing by Mannheim (1952; see also Pilcher, 1994), especially for those who have just started independent or semi-autonomous life. The crisis creates ‘early impressions’ in young adult life that ‘tend to coalesce into a natural view of the world. All later experiences then tend to be evaluated through this original set, whether they appear as either its verification and fulfilment or its negation and antithesis’ (Mannheim, 1952, p. 298).

To gauge short- and long-term effects of the COVID-19 crisis, as well as to advance intergenerational and temporal theorizing, the ULTRAGEN project has been implemented over the period of three and a half years, through the completion of six interrelated Work Packages (WPs) linked to specific research components and approaches (see Figure 1 below).

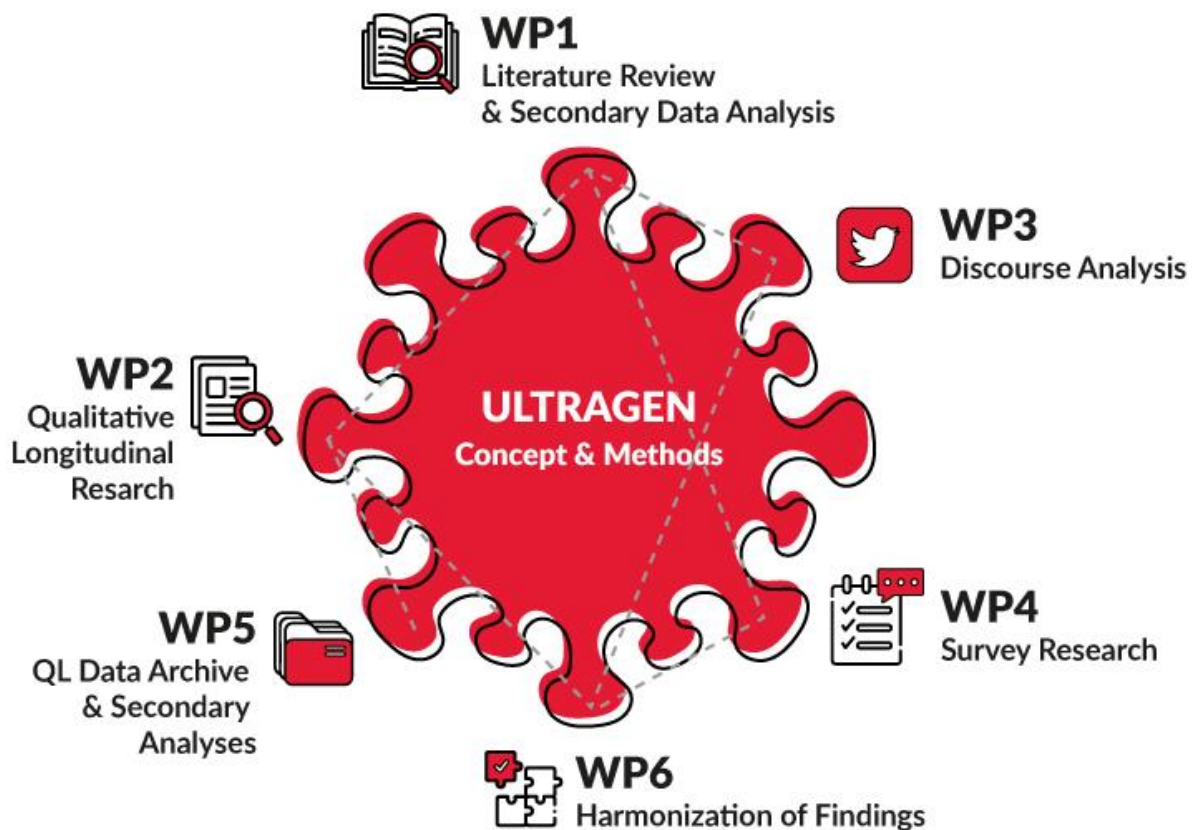


Figure 1: ULTRAGEN Components

ULTRAGEN acquires reliable, rich quantitative and qualitative data on the key social processes in varied age/generational groups, looking also at the significance of socio-historical context for transitions to adulthood. We 'unpack' the research questions through three subfields corresponding to three, interrelated levels of micro, meso and macro social worlds, drawing from youth studies, family studies and sociological disaster studies. The results will be crucial for understanding social and individual reactions to crises, yielding additional explanatory power for relevant policies and forecasting, and contributing to Polish and international youth & generation studies, temporal research and disaster studies.

ULTRAGEN Methodology

The overarching methodology of ULTRAGEN is a **mixed-methods research (MMR) design** (Creswell, 2009) **with parallel components of quantitative and qualitative substudies operating under an integrative MMR logic** (Mason, 2006). As such, an interplay of qualitative and quantitative components is clearly envisioned, with alternating and complementary components. ULTRAGEN brings together three methodological paradigms by striving for a good balance between ethnographic/in-depth accounts (qualitative components), representative/statistically significant and numerical approaches (quantitative), as well as mixed approaches (Creswell, 2009). A range of research methods and techniques is used, akin to the concept of investigator triangulation suggested by Denzin (1989). In connecting data and theory, this approach fits into the ‘revolution of dynamic thinking’ about the persistence of a society ‘in flux’ (Berthoud, 2000) fittingly characterizing (post-)pandemic social (r)evolution. Timeline and milestones of ULTRAGEN can be consulted on Figure 2.

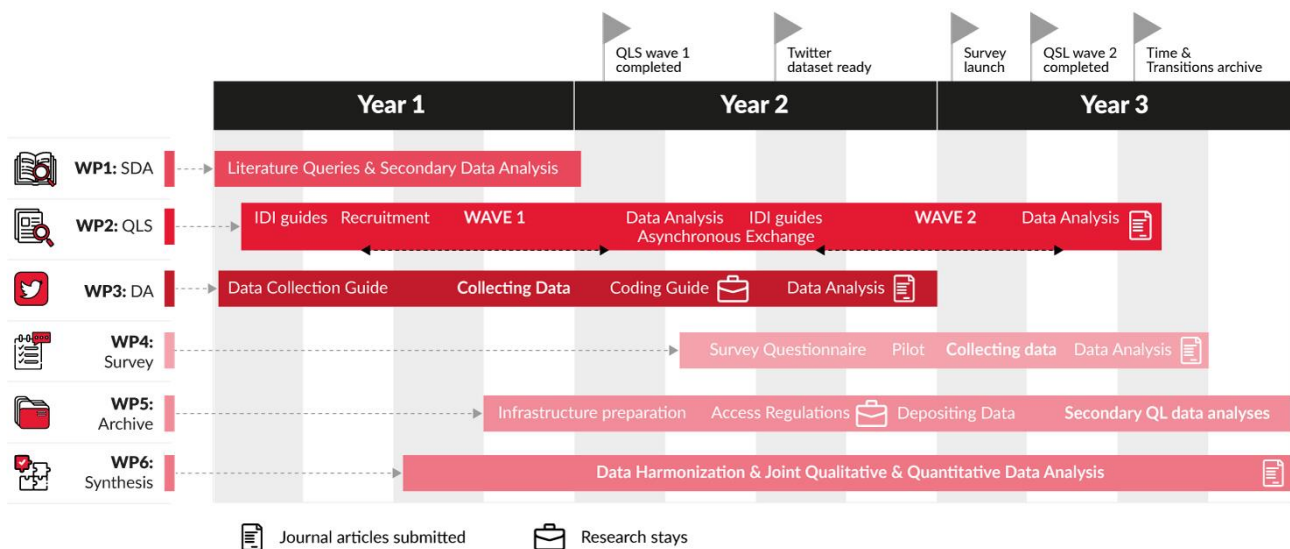


Figure 2. Timeline and milestones of ULTRAGEN project

In **WP1, literature queries and secondary data analysis** are conducted to grasp emerging and existing research pertinent to the situation of different generations of Poles during the pandemic. This means acquiring an up-to-date data-driven framing of social solidarities and intergenerational relations. The goal of WP1 pertains to grounding the context of the younger and older generations’ changing views and attitudes since the beginning of the pandemic. We probe for adaptive mechanisms to lockdown and later ultra-uncertainty, therefore conducting a mixed-method literature and secondary data analysis. We analyze available data concerning public attitudes towards the pandemic through an ongoing dialogue between empirical research and theory, relying on Layder’s Adaptive Theory Approach (1998).

The qualitative **WP2** module is driven by the notions of **flexible time** (Adam, 1990; Neale, 2019). As argued by Hammond (2012), time ‘slows down’ when individuals are afraid. Moreover, sudden changes greatly shape people’s perception of the past, present and future. It is argued that a temporal plane remains important regardless of the actual epidemiologic scenario, since the risk of further restrictions always accompanies people’s thoughts, making it ‘impossible’ for the future to ever start (see Lewicki, 2018). We use ideal-types of young people’s strategies for facing an uncertain future suggested by Brannen and Nilsen (2002), i.e., deferment (orientation focused on the present), adaptability (calculation and control) or predictability (embedded in a constant pattern), which we gauge against the ultra-uncertainty/risks, as well as observing them through an intergenerationally comparative frames of the COVID-19 and socio-historical events from the past. Utilizing Neale’s (2019) conceptual tools and arguments about **qualitative longitudinal research** as a highly suitable toolbox for examining ‘social change in the making’ at micro, meso and macro levels, the **ULTRAGEN QLS** will gather intergenerational family accounts.

WP2 includes **two-waves of interviews and asynchronous exchanges** with purposefully sampled **35 families (we separately interview young adults and one of their parents, N=70 in Wave 1/W1, see Figure 3)**, in which at least young adult lives in a larger Polish city where health risks were exacerbated by population density. Purposeful sampling is used to represent heterogeneous social class settings and the methods are adjusted for online use. This component has been underway since May 2021, with Wave 1 finalized in November 2021.

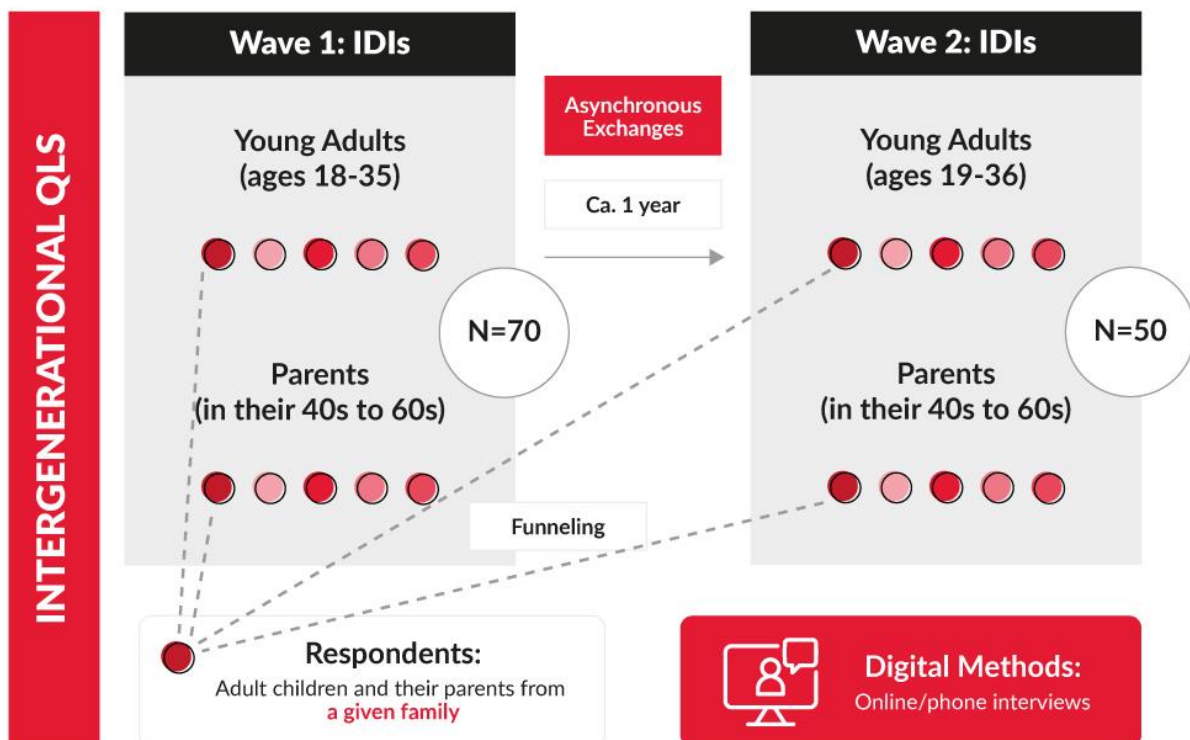


Figure 3. ULTRAGEN's Intergenerational QLS Scheme

Within W1, emphasis is placed on both the objective markers and the subjective sense of adulthood among the interviewees from the younger cohort, investigating also the effects of the COVID-19 events (e.g., lockdowns, school/university closures and transition to distance learning, disruption of the labor market) on their pursuits in the realm of leaving home, education, employment, as well as intimate relations and reproductive strategies. In addition, we include question blocks and probes on lifestyles (finances, leisure), as well as orientations and plans around the future (Brannen & Nilsen, 2002). Retrospective versions of the probes were constructed to acquire comparable data from their parents, as regards biographies during transitions to adulthood, with an explicit focus on the key historical events that could impact on the parents' transitions. We also discuss the unfolding biographies of young adults in the new Poland marked by free market economy and democracy. As the second main theme of W1, we explore family practices and strategies of solidarity during a crisis. Last but not least, the QLS in Wave 1 covers a comparative intergenerational aspect, as we probe family members from both generations for definitions, as well as the perceived similarities and differences between them and their parents or children.

After W1, we will employ qualitative asynchronous interviewing (AI; written exchanges) to pose poignant and au courant questions, acquiring spontaneous responses to pressing issues (O'Connor et al., 2008).

For **Wave 2 (W2)**, we account for funneling and attrition, aiming for **50 IDIs** and bringing the total QLS to the total of circa **120 accounts**. During W2, we will repeat the block on transitions to adulthood (with younger generations) and elicit comparative evaluations of how different generations define and experience adulthood. Moreover, due to the established trust and rapport in the field (e.g., Neale, 2019), we will be able to ask more challenging questions about family solidarities – both in terms of values and norms, as well as family practices around the intergenerational flows of emotional support and economic capital. The overall approach in WP2 is based on setting up a **social laboratory** by digitally 'walking alongside' people caught up in historical processes (see also Neale, 2019). Using the QLS tool and solidarity lens, we seek to see **how young people and their parents experience and negotiate accelerations and standstills during a crisis**. Fieldwork happens in parallel to unfolding lives of the 'new normal' of post-pandemic reality, with the potential threat of the subsequent waves of the pandemic. Audio-recorded interviews are transcribed and coded in MAXQDA with attention paid to researchers' intersubjectivity.

The data analysis for the ULTRAGEN QLS relies on the steps delineated for qualitative analysis under the interpretivist paradigm (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After meticulous transcription of recordings (voice-to-text), the conceptually-driven coding tree is created and used for initial work with data in the MAXQDA software. During the data reduction phase, the codes are applied to all material, thereby also identifying themes, patterns, and relationships concerning the created codes. Preliminary summaries are done with notes, paraphrasing and vignettes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). At the stage of creating data displays, thematically ordered approaches and conceptually ordered approaches are envisioned. Cross-case comparisons ensue to foster verifications, cross-validations and extension of the emerging findings. This hinges on a multi-level extraction and cross-checks, which offers an opportunity to create ideal types from a series of single cases (Gerhardt, 1991).

In parallel, **WP3** imposes a mixed-method approach to the study of Twitter (Schneiker et al., 2019). Firstly, in a **quantitative module**, it covers both the content and sentiment analysis in **temporal tracking of tweets' texts and the dynamic of distribution and dissemination of topics**. As social crises generate bursts of attention on **social media** (Ahmed et al., 2017), the research material will be substantive for **generative topic modelling and change of topical prevalence in time** (with

Structural Topic Modelling; Roberts et al., 2020), analysis of change of topics' content (with Dynamic Topic Modelling; Blei & Lafferty, 2006; Dieng et al., 2019), emotions towards the epidemics (Ahmed et al., 2019) and using opinion mining for identifying clusters of users with similar attitudes (Ahmed et al., 2021). Using the analysis of retweets and likes, we plan to study the most popular types of information and framings, as well as user-related impact.

Taking into account that similar studies are conducted in different national contexts (cf. Abd-Alrazaq et al., 2020; Boon-It & Skunkan, 2020; Wicke & Bolognesi, 2021) or present a comparative, cross-national perspective (Kruspe et al., 2020) we will be able to juxtapose the findings from Poland and see what similarities and differences can be distinguished here regarding spatial and temporal dimensions. To date, studies on attitudes of Polish Twitter users towards the pandemic constitute a part of broader research on perception of the COVID-19 on Polish Internet in the first stage of the pandemic (Jarynowski et al., 2020; Burzyńska et al., 2020) or individual studies (Jarynowski & Płatek, 2021; Probiez et al., 2021). Several cross-country research projects (e.g., Alshaabi et al., 2021; Babić et al., 2021) analyze the case of Poland from a comparative perspective, but none of them deals directly with the subject matter of ULTRAGEN.

Due to unequal access to the Twitter platform for different age groups (Blank, 2016), WP3 primarily studies the **attitudes of the younger cohorts**. We look for the trends emerging at different moments of the social, health-related and economic crisis. The data will be collected throughout the duration of the project, not only using direct mentions of the epidemic, but more broadly looking at concurrent implications and frequently co-occurring topics (e.g., related to lockdown, education, economy, crisis, unemployment).

The data extraction process is automated, WP3 allows us to broaden the scope of the planned database of tweets by identifying new terms and frames related to social crises as they emerge. Moreover, we are able to see what valence (sentiment polarity) appears in the COVID-19-related tweets and how it changes over time (see: Wicke & Bolognesi, 2021). This research component specifically helps us answer the question about people's views and reactions in face of unsettling events. Secondly, having an overview of COVID-19-related topics and general patterns with respect to the tweets generated about it, we will apply a qualitative method for an in-depth study of these topics. A more detailed, discourse analysis of selected topics related to the pandemic and youth situation will be conducted at this stage of the research. It will allow us to present a more comprehensive picture of discussions going on Twitter, differences of attitudes and their change in time.

The second quantitative module (**WP4**) is an **online survey on a representative sample**, with a survey questionnaire informed by the results of WP1, WP2 (W1) and WP3. The tentatively planned thematic blocks, which are to be developed by the ULTRAGEN team, are: attitudes towards social crises, including a specific COVID-19 example (knowledge, emotions and behaviors), as well as people's views on matters impacting on transitions to adulthood, such as co-residential and family dynamics, work/education-life balance; patterns of change of intergenerational relations and mutual perceptions; roads to autonomy and maturation in the realms of housing, education and labor market pursuits, etc. The process of entering adulthood during crises will be investigated in the perceptions of younger and older generations.

Administration of the survey will be outsourced to an external company specialized in CAWI & CATI surveys, with a reliable, diverse panel of respondents and quality control certificates. As the project team is aware of the problem of distortions in sample characteristics in online surveys (Blasius &

Brandt, 2012), we will select a research agency, whose research panel was created by searching for respondents through various channels and/or using a mixed-mode CAWI & CATI panel. **The random stratified sample of 2000 respondents (aged 18+) used in the survey will be representative for the Polish society.** A large sample is necessary to achieve the project's goals as it allows statistical analyzes on different age groups. To ensure high quality of collected data, the survey questionnaire will be subjected to cognitive testing and pilot study. Survey and social media data will be analyzed with IBM SPSS Statistics (at the disposal of SWPS University) and RStudio (open source software; RStudio Team, 2020) using a range of statistical methods including generalized linear models, latent variable models (structural equations models, latent class analysis), cluster analysis and multilevel analyses.

As an added value to the project, **WP5** has the ambition of setting up **the first qualitative longitudinal data archive focused on Poland.** The WP5 archive will be set up at the Youth Research Center (YRC, in Polish: Młodzi w Centrum Lab) and is preliminarily called **'Time & Transitions'**. It offers several major advantages and innovations. First, drawing on best practices, we will set up an archive dedicated to longitudinal and time-centered data, **conducting secondary data analysis** for ULTRAGEN and fostering availability of **replicable** data and studies for subsequent generations of researchers. The YRC is the leading QLS-implementing institution in Poland, with ULTRAGEN being the fourth NCN-funded QLS implemented at the Center. While the main focus will be on archiving the ULTRAGEN project's empirical material, it is envisioned that other projects will also feed into the archive as the foundation for temporal reanalyses in the research fields of youth, transitions and mobilities. Thus, advanced secondary analyses of longitudinal qualitative data about different cohorts will be completed. In connection to this, the archive will secondly leverage the existing cooperation that the YRC has with the University of Leeds where the Timescapes Archive is located (see Neale et al., 2012). Additionally, paired with robust IT infrastructure available at the SWPS University, the archive will be built with infosec concerns in mind. The approach promotes open science policy, especially when considering public research funding and transparency. It should be noted that there are only few such initiatives in Central and Eastern Europe, and the 'Time & Transitions' archive has a great chance to become a significant institution in that region and beyond.

Finally, **WP6** is envisioned as a process of **data harmonization under mixed-methods analytical strategies** (Creswell, 2009; Mason, 2006). As such, WP6 will tease out main themes recurring across components and encompasses dedicated, **in-depth and comparative analyses of quantitative and qualitative data** to answer the research questions. On the whole, the ULTRAGEN project offers a bespoke research strategy which, thanks to the various data-collection techniques, leverages the advantages and minimizes the pitfalls of the stand-alone methods (Brewer & Hunter, 2006). Adhering to data security rules, WP6 will assure that empirical material is safely handled on the cloud drive with encrypted access and then properly archived, following anonymization principles. Through **advanced cross-sectional and thematic analyses** (Saldana, 2003) of the datasets from WP1-WP5 components, WP6 will ensure that all research questions posed by ULTRAGEN will be answered in relation to robust data, offering a possibility of theory building, as well as outputs and dissemination activities in leading international outlets.

Previous Research & Emerging Findings in the Context of ULTRAGEN (WP1)

The project is undergirded by existing theories, previous research and emerging data broadly related to two main crisscrossing themes of (1) solidarity, including intergenerational solidarities and social solidarities during crises (2) young/emerging adulthood, with an explicit focus on transitions to adulthood are experienced ('lived' and changed) by the current coronavirus crisis. In Figure 3, we offer a map of how three areas of crises, emerging adulthood and solidarities intersect in ULTRAGEN and in what sense they relate to broader social theorizing in the subfields of youth studies, family studies and disaster studies, at the respective junctions of societal micro, meso and macro levels.

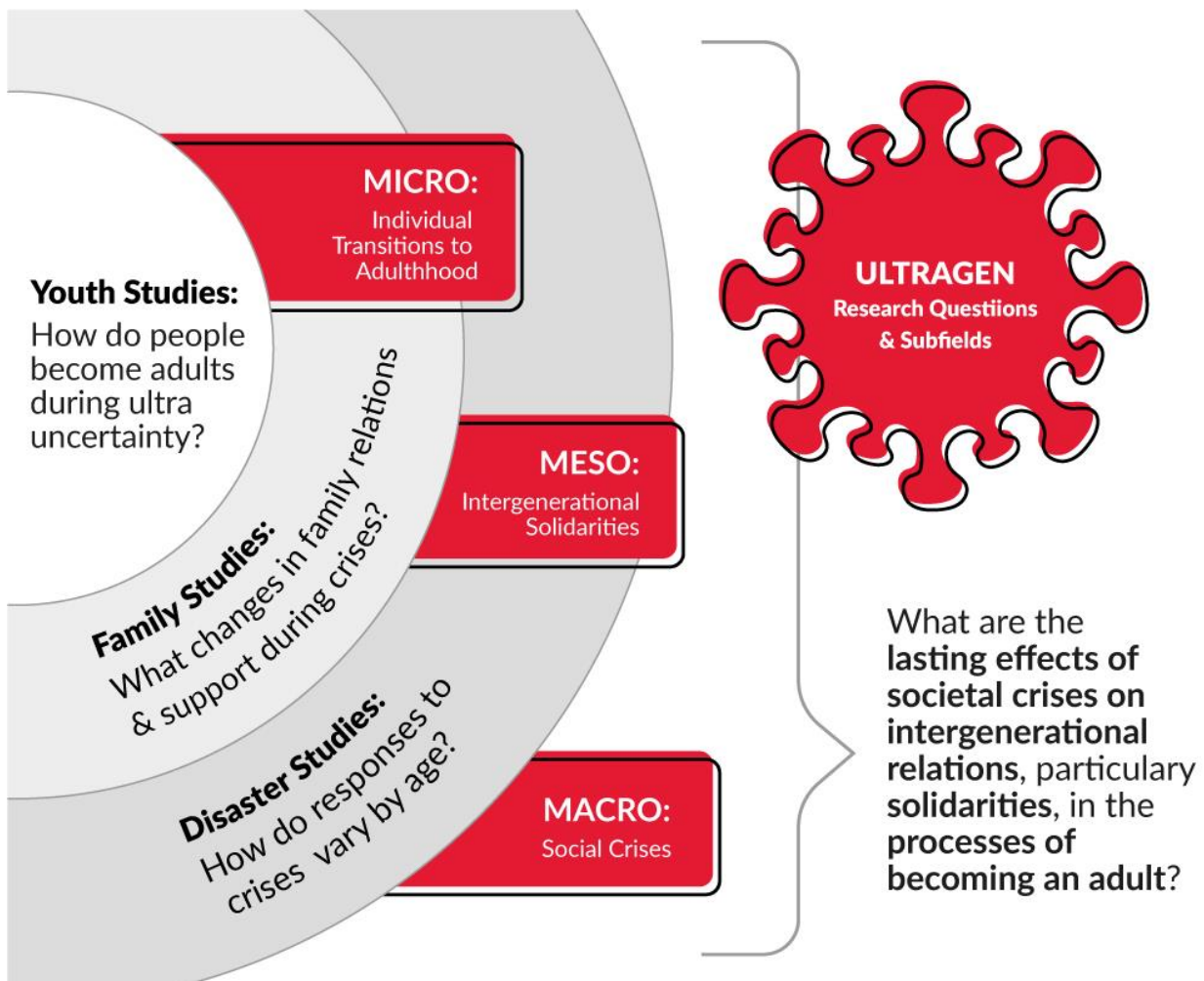


Figure 4. ULTRAGEN Research Questions in the context of Social Theorising

In the following subsections, we elaborate on the concepts informing our work. In effect, we present the results of literature review and selected queries into existing data relevant for WP1, pointing out key past and present research findings. Main subfields and topics are integrated into three subheadings, namely social solidarities, intergenerational approaches to transitions to adulthood, and studying transitions during the COVID-19 crisis.



Defining and Researching Solidarity

Starting at the praxeological level of the concept, solidarity relates to the effectiveness of achieving objectives, whereas the focus on the junction of solidarity, interaction and social ethics foregrounds the significance of bonds connecting people through shared values (Ossowska, 2000). Thus, recessions challenge the backbone of solidarity rooted in partnership, agency, voluntariness, co-responsibility, reciprocity and proactivity (Radzińska, 2014; Solnit, 2010; Wildt, 1999). More precisely, the pandemic reinvigorates critical debates on what Baldwin (1990) deemed the politics of social solidarity, which can now be observed in how welfare state regimes (macro), communities (meso) and individuals (micro) reorient themselves in the face of the crisis (Abel & McQueen, 2020; Kickbush et al., 2020).

This is evident in the isolation discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is paradoxically 'strengthened by antagonistic relations with other groups' (Wrong, 1994, p. 201) because exteriorized conflicts and threats create 'solidarity within' (Crow, 2002, pp. 11-23). This might not be immediately clear for that the pandemic has been often associated with thinking about a 'global' threat affecting everyone. However, the 'antagonisms' and inequalities between how different nation-states were trying to prevent or offset negative implications of the crisis were evident, for instance when border regimes portrayed migrants as 'others' who are potential carriers of the virus (Ullah et al., 2021). In addition, the pandemic engendered 'otherness' related to age, wherein reactions of 'younger' vs. 'older' society members were pitched against one another. Ellerich-Grope et al. (2021) have recently argued that

The concepts of intergenerational solidarity and responsibility seem to be almost ubiquitous in the current European discourses on appropriate measures to counter the

COVID-19 pandemic. They constitute central normative points of reference in policy statements, civil society debates, and public media discourses (Ellerich-Grope et al., 2021, p.168)

At a theoretical level, the pandemic on the one hand suggests arguments in line with Giddens' (1991) critiques of contemporary 'damaged solidarities' stemming from individualization. On the other hand, there could be a potential for solidarity rebirth concurrent to the revival of unity and cooperation within the civil society revival.

These notions are evocative of the practical need for the 'ethics of care' (Gilligan, 2015; Noddings, 1984) and the urgency of promoting solidarity and care in the public sphere. They also mirror the possibilities of crisis being a major force that introduces social revival and reconceptualization of previous social orders and community-boundaries, as described on the basis of post-hurricane New Orleans by Solnit (2010), but also – in a way – can be evoked in the community taking a stance against social inequalities, in spite of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis (e.g., Women's Strike protests in Poland in the fall and winter of 2020). Rapid responses to the current pandemic suggest that solidarity acts as a cementing force in developing a collective consciousness in a society and can, therefore, balance deficits caused by social distance (Mishraa & Rath, 2020).

Destabilisation at a country level, which in Poland has meant, among other things, restrictions in regard to spatial mobility, possibilities for earning an income, and access to services (see also Buler & Pustułka, 2021; Popyk & Pustułka, 2021; Radzińska & Pustułka, 2021), is significantly connected to both social status and family situation. Political responses and social engagements crisscross more generalized attitudes towards social distancing, embracing slogans such as 'stay at home' and adherence to sanitary rules in public (Marroquin et al., 2020), which vary by age/generation, gender and social class (e.g., Radzińska & Pustułka, 2021; YouGov, 2020). On the one hand, young people in general, and young men in particular, are less likely to comply with COVID-related restrictions (Brouard et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2021; Sobol et al., 2020). On the other hand, Einberger et al. (2021) further differentiated young people in regard to adherence to COVID-19 restrictions. Although most youngsters reported strong adherence to government-imposed regulations in the initial months of the pandemic, young adults with previous challenges (e.g. those engaging in high-risk behaviors) were less likely to take the physical distancing measures on board.

In addition, culture seems to play a significant role when explaining differences in compliance with guidelines and measures issued by governments to fight the spread of the COVID-19 (e.g. quarantine, social distancing, wearing masks, washing hands). One cultural aspect that may explain the disparity in mortality rate among different countries is the individualism-collectivism continuum. It has been demonstrated that a higher level of country's individualism (vs. collectivism) is tied to more COVID-19 cases and mortalities (Jiang et al., 2021; Maaravi et al., 2021). In addition, the more collectivistic individuals are, the higher the chances they would adhere to epidemic prevention measures and sacrifice for the common good (Maaravi et al., 2021). Cultural tightness-looseness (Gelfand et al., 2011) might also explain the success of some countries in limiting the consequences of the virus spread. Tight cultures, which are characterized by more strict norms and are less permissive for deviant behavior, had fewer COVID-19 cases and deaths per million as compared with loose cultures (Gelfand et al., 2021).

Poland is often considered to be an individualist society (e.g. Hofstede et al., 2010), however the collectivist values are very present, which makes it difficult to unequivocally categorize it as either individualist or collectivist country (Kwiatkowska, 2014). There is a dispute among cultural

psychologists as to whether individualism and collectivism are the ends of one dimension or two orthogonal dimensions, however more data support the second option (Kwiatkowska et al., 2014). This means that cultures can be characterized for example as highly individualist and collectivist at the same time. The simultaneous presence of both types of values in Polish culture can be due to socialization both to cooperate with others and to care for one's own interests. Regarding cultural tightness-looseness, Poland as a former communist country is classified by Gelfand (2018) as a loose country, however its score is relatively high (which means it is tighter) when compared to its Eastern European neighbors.

Before moving on to the current pandemic reality, it is important to note that Polish families have been often described as traditionally hinging upon intergenerational contract, not in the least because of the roll-back of the state in neoliberalism, which ultimately placed the burden of care over youngest and oldest dependants on families (e.g. Grotowska-Leder & Roszak, 2016; Kotlarska-Michalska, 2017; Plomien, 2009). Although some claim intergenerational bonds have been weakened by urbanisation, mass-migration and individualisation (e.g., Radziwinowiczówna et al., 2018), there is evidence that these close family ties developed through the communist period remain stable and ongoing economic problems reinforce the influence of family obligations on individuals. Currently, 72% of Polish families remain territorially concentrated in the same or neighbouring communes. Moreover, 62% of those who have grandchildren see them at least once a week and the same holds for 59% of adults visiting aging parents whilst living apart (CBOS, 2019).

Importantly, despite the expectations, COVID-19 has not necessarily significantly decreased the frequency of intergenerational contacts. As quantitative, comparative research shows (Vergauwen et al., 2021) older adults' level of intergenerational contact remained stable or even increased during the pandemic. However, it is important to note that the pandemic has had a worse impact on already disadvantaged social groups and specific groups of seniors (i.e., men, less educated people, residents of nursing homes, and those living in countries with less stringent COVID-19 measures) were more likely to report reduced intergenerational contact.

In the Polish case, 51.5% of the respondents increased their intergenerational contact, as compared to 15.4% of the respondents who had less frequent contact with their non-co-resident children during the pandemic than before. Another 33.1% of the respondents reported no change in their level of parent-child contact after the COVID-19 outbreak (Vergauwen et al., 2021). Emerging research into family practices and intergenerational solidarity during COVID-19 confirms that Poles use various means to maintain bonds or even reconnect with family members via technology (Eldén et al., 2021; Gilligan et al., 2020; Radzińska & Pustułka, 2021; Settersten et al., 2020), mirroring broader shifts worldwide (e.g., Brandhorst et al., 2020). However, given that seniors are under particular threat from the negative outcomes of catching the virus, 'bubbles' of protection are being created through different policies and regimes, as argued by Gulland (2020) for the UK case, or Eldén et al. (2021) for the Sweden case. As the corona pandemic can be seen as a 'filter' over practices of care, resulting in strain and changed strategies of care, as well as worry and relief for the actors involved in intergenerational relationships (Eldén et al., 2021, p. 2), solidarity flows might shift, especially when various generations are vulnerable. This is the case, for example, for young women who struggle with the gender gap in relation to home and work (Knize et al., 2021). Those who become mothers during the pandemic and might either be at the center of care when they experience crisis or - in the majority of cases - are actually divested of support for the sake of isolation, protection and assistance towards seniors (Pustułka & Buler, 2021). In some cases individuals look for strategies for doing care and trying to reduce a risk at the same time (e.g. by the abovementioned ways of using digital devices or creating safe 'bubbles'), in others they decide to continue pre-pandemic care

practices when 'the risks of not doing care *outweigh the risk of getting corona*' (Eldén et al., 2021, p. 17).

As with earlier epidemics, for example SARS 2003 or H1N1 2009 (cf. Cava et al., 2005; Pfefferbaum et al., 2012), COVID-19 has caused a deterioration in the state of mental health across the board, although intersectional factors such as gender, social class, family situation or even access to technology has positioned individuals and families differently, possibly mitigating some of the effects of social isolation - especially in the middle class (Marroquin et al., 2020; Radzińska & Pustulka, 2021). The existing findings ground this state-of-the-art in the aspects of vertical and horizontal social solidarities (Crow, 2002; Torrance, 1997), which are particularly evident in family milieus (Grotowska-Leder & Roszak, 2016; Krzyżowski, 2011; Kwak, 2017; Scabini et al., 2006; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997). Theory-wise, we employ Bengtson and Roberts' (1991) seminal work to unpack normative, associational, affectual, consensual, functional and structural solidarities as key reflections of mutual orientations in intergenerational dyads (see also Kwak, 2017). Looking at six types of solidarities within a family (Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997; Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Szukalski, 2019) underpins empirical investigations equally centered on attitudes and practices across qualitative and quantitative components.

To elaborate, the first type is *associational* solidarity which specifies frequencies and means of family members engaging in interactions, with an inherent responsibility for *familyhood* or togetherness of the kinship unit (McCarthy & Edwards, 2010) as the backbone of this solidarity type. For a while now, research into associational solidarity includes virtual contact (Finderman et al., 2011), which became even more significant in the context of social distancing (Radzińska & Pustulka, 2021). Next, *affectual* solidarity concerns the type and degree of positive sentiments about family members, pointing to the underlying emotional aspects of reciprocity, warmth, closeness and trust in a given bond (Pustulka & Buler, 2021; Szukalski, 2019). Third type in the model concerns *consensual* solidarity, often seen as a predictor of intergenerational strain (Peng et al., 2018) because it measures family (dis)agreements on values and beliefs. Cohesion in how different members define fundamentals - for instance the meaning of home or family - contrapuntally fosters ongoing support in crisis (Pustulka & Buler, 2021). As the fourth type, *functional* solidarity is the most palpable flow of assistance - be it monetary or emotional, while *normative* solidarity envelops the strength of commitment to practicing family roles and meeting obligations (Szukalski, 2019) that lie behind societal visions of kinship and 'familism' (Daatland & Herlofsen, 2003). It can be closely linked to *displaying* family (Finch, 2007) through rituals and practices for the outside world (see also Buler & Pustulka, 2020), which is said to be divested by the pandemic (Settersten et al., 2020). Lastly, spatial propinquity, family size and members' health frame *structural* solidarity of actual opportunity structure of support (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Szukalski, 2019).

Gilligan et al. (2020) offer a broad overview of how different types of intergenerational solidarities conceptualized by Bengtson around the 'beanpole' family structure in late modernity may unfold during the COVID-19 crisis. Using mostly Anglo-Saxon research contexts, the authors address solidarities between parents and adult children. Similar to Pustulka and Buler (2021), they suggest that family solidarities in this context cannot be fully borne out of the pandemic but are rather a reflection of the pre-existing flows, particularly in terms of consensual solidarity (see also Bengtson & Roberts, 2009; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1997; Szukalski, 2019). The agreement on values between family members is applied to the attitudes towards the pandemic, meaning that lack of consensus about what should be done about the virus can cause significant intergenerational strain. At the same time, physical proximity is a mitigating factor, since families living close together usually have pre-established routines of both instrumental and emotional assistance (Gilligan et al., 2020). In that

context, moving back home observed among some young adults can be a trigger of new constellations in family relationships and other social bonds in the place of origin (Vehkalahti et al., 2021).

Hence, drawing on Bengtson and Oyama's work (2007) on family solidarities in the dynamically changing social environment, ULTRAGEN uses process structuring to unpack how cohort affiliation, socialization as well as historical events are interconnected within an intergenerational framing of a family. As a conceptual toolkit, it fosters intergenerational comparisons of socialisational conditions and effects during transmission and support. It also connects 'self to society' (May, 2011) with an intermediary of generational belonging that affects individual, family and socio-historical levels of a given life-course (Neale, 2019). First, *period effects* that encapsulate 'the impact of socio-political events, such as wars, economic shifts, and political causes, which affect all groups within a society' (Bengtson & Oyama, 2007, p. 6). By tracking period effects, one can discern the meanings of historical events and implications of socio-political context. In ULTRAGEN, they contain generalized and macro-level shifts in the corona-societies. For example, the COVID-19-related recession engenders period effects for everyone.

Next, *cohort* experiences or effects link an age group/generation with the reception of an event - in our case the COVID-19 crisis. In other words, young adults and their parents will have different cohort experiences because external occurrences become specific 'to a group born during a certain time period, and are therefore experienced at a common level of their biosocial development' (Bengtson & Oyama, 2007, p. 5). 'Becoming an adult' during corona is a cohort experience, reflecting the collective 'we' or a voice of a generation whereupon members of a certain group (e.g, young adults) narrate the effects of the event that are not only important for them as individuals but rather for their entire peer group and peer network (cohort) setting. Finally, we also acknowledge that intergenerational solidarity changes are conditioned by *lineage effects*. These 'represent the bidirectional nature of intergenerational socialization, which can lead to continuities despite cohort and maturation differences' (Bengtson & Oyama, 2007, p. 6). Rooted in socialization and intergenerational transfer, as well as reflecting social class/status positioning, they demonstrate connections between generations.

In ULTRAGEN, we examine whether the coping strategies that the parents' generation acquired during their transitions to adulthood in response to crises (be it the 1989 transition, martial law, etc.), can assist their offspring with handling the COVID-19 crisis. These theoretical considerations explain why COVID-19 should be seen as impactful for the new picture of intergenerational solidarity (see also Gilligan et al., 2020). Taking into account earlier scholarship linking solidarity and reciprocity to family togetherness and family practices (Finch & Mason, 1992; Morgan, 1996) - also in relation to the aforementioned lineage effects (Bengtson & Oyama, 2007), we argue that solidarity is hardly 'a given' but rather illustrates 'tremendous tensions triggered by efforts to organize' (Douglas & Ney, 1998, p.109), which are exacerbated when a crisis must be tackled. Simultaneously, the 'blood is thicker than water' sentiment affects practices which rarely contest one's solidarity towards family members (Crow, 2002, pp. 51-70).

Studying Transitions to Adulthood Intergenerationally

During 'critical moments', family of origin is a key institution of support and socialization, operating alongside school, peers, religious/legal system, media or/and local community. Parents act as vital socialization agents (Handel, 2006) with direct and indirect (verbalized/ nonverbal) normative input, as well as by forging webs of opportunities and constraints in terms of resources that can be mobilized or capitalized on (Pustulka & Sarnowska, 2021; Pustulka et al., 2021). Both age-heterogeneous (i.e., families with different generations) and age-homogeneous (peer networks, same-age friendship) groups operate with the same function: 'to be the instances of the socialization of the individual and the mechanism of the community in the social system' (Eisenstadt, 1956, pp. 60-61).

Socialization is connected to the notions of intergenerationally transmitted capital. In Eisenstadt's terms, 'the transfer of identification and expansion of solidarity' (Eisenstadt, 1956, p. 67) happens during one's youth, with the shift from influences within the family (lineage) to those coming from peers (cohorts). In recent years, however, prolongation and changes in family models - especially in intergenerational relationships - seems to cause a certain avoidance of the full shift, instead making young people somewhat 'suspended' between family and friends. This is because socialization incorporates the widened notion of cultural capital (Abrantes, 2013) which now includes parenting practices (Lee et al., 2014). As such, socialization and parenting practices constitute determinants for the reproduction of social class inequalities (see also Lareau, 2011; Roksa & Potter, 2011; Sarnowska & Pustulka, 2021). With the economic decline, especially as regards the rise in unemployment among the school-leavers, better-off parents with professions less-affected by the crisis and/or outlooks towards prolonged youthful explorations, may act as safeguards of the young adults' capacity to remain in education (e.g., paying tuition), pursue unpaid professional experience (e.g., internships), or continue independent living (providing housing and/or paying rent). Conversely, the parents from lower social strata, or those whose own occupational and financial positions weaken during the recession, may focus on pragmatism, encouraging returns home (i.e. saving on accommodation costs) or postponement of educational/professional dreams (see also Pustulka & Sarnowska, 2021). Unpacking these distinctions is at the core of ULTRAGEN.

In relation to the pandemic, young adulthood may explicitly hinge upon intergenerational conflict and intergenerational solidarity discussed above (Rudolph & Zacher, 2020). In ULTRAGEN, we are interested in how the health crisis, mobility restrictions and impending recession intersectionally alter the dynamics within families along the lines of gender, age and social class. In doing so, the project sheds light on the overlapping spheres of life and the tensions it generates, which we believe will anew force younger and older generations to 'learn to manage' and 'successfully overcome disadvantage in their lives' (Elder, 1998, p. 9). This may constitute a departure – or even somewhat of a regression – in intergenerational solidarity as a value which has been gaining traction since the war and resulted in parents supporting their children way into adulthood (Avery et al., 1992; Billari et al., 2001; Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005). In the process of changing family solidarities, there has been a clear shift from structural hierarchies, to emotional 'mutuality', closeness and affection between parents and children (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014; Iacovou, 2010). Even though the crisis is unlikely to completely revert these processes (see Pustulka & Buler, 2021), it is likely to exacerbate hidden inequalities and shortages related to social class, as well as emotional and financial capital that is at parents' disposal. This 'shakiness' of support will impact on solidarities and transition processes for

young people from privileged versus defavorized households (see also Silva, 2016; Sarnowska & Pustułka, 2021).

Regarding transitions to adulthood, generational understanding of the markers of adulthood and resources in the families of origins must be viewed as pivotal factors that can significantly differentiate younger and older Polish cohorts, in this case the 18-35-year-olds and their parents. The two groups grew up in societies distinguished by political and economic system, as well as societal and personal values, attitudes and practices (e.g. Szafraniec, 2017; Wrzesień, 2009; Zielińska, 2020). For the parents' generation, transition was understood to be a straightforward path with a clear direction for an individual sequentially achieving the 'Big Five', 'objective' or 'traditional' social markers of adulthood (Mary, 2014; Moroşanu et al., 2019; Settersten, 2011). As defined in seminal paper by Modell et al. (1976), these include: graduation/completing education; leaving the parental home; entering the labour market; getting married; and having children (see also Benson & Furstenberg, 2007). Reaching these milestones signalled a cessation of youth and the beginning of adulthood and previous generations' formative experiences were quite homogeneous between individuals born in similar times (Hofmeister, 2013; Settersten, 2011).

As argued by Sarnowska et al. (2018), 'a critical mass of similarities made particular sequences of events and their corresponding temporal frameworks a social norm in Poland' (p. 112). This means that current 20-30-year-olds grew up watching a specific set of social expectations about markers and timelines of different life-phases (Kohli, 2007; Zielińska, 2021). Those, in turn, bring forward a revised understanding of when a given life-stage should begin and end from a socially accepted temporal stance (see also Adam, 1990). However, especially after 1989, traditional trajectories of chronological, sequential, temporally ordered adulthood markers have collapsed (Mach, 2003, p. 11). Following the fall of the Iron Curtain, previous patterns of intergenerational transmission were no longer applicable, yet the new ones have not been fully formed or readily available to the Polish parents. The pace of societal shifts caused clefts in the divergent and competing normative orders, resulting in what Szafraniec (2017) deems a symbolic chaos. Therefore, the intergenerational transmission happened when norms were blurred or obscured, with no stable reference points at hand (Szafraniec, 2017; see also Sadura, 2018).

Moreover, from the economic perspective, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) region experienced a pathway to a capitalist development that skipped over the stage of resource accumulation (Szafraniec, 2017) and the families moved from the conditioning of constant shortages pre-1989, to 'resource galore' in the 1990s. As such, they rarely learnt about amassing resources under the ethos of hard work and delayed gratification (Szafraniec, 2017; Sarnowska & Pustułka, 2021). However, the benefits of moving to a market economy model were very unevenly distributed among the groups in society. Radical neoliberal economic shock therapy, accompanied by the dismantling of extensive social systems from the communist period, resulted in very high unemployment, widening poverty and increasing economic inequalities in the first decade of transformation (Milanovic, 1996, 1998). Large groups of people with low education and lacking marketable skills have been permanently pushed to the margins of society (Sztompka, 2000). The resulting division into winners and losers of transition (Zaborowski, 2003), which has persisted so far, has influenced a strong differentiation of opportunities for young people in education and on the labor market (Baranowska, 2011; Kogan et al., 2012; Kwiek, 2015), and thus their paths and pace of entering adulthood (Slany, 2006; Szafraniec, 2012).

In a risk society of reflexive 'late modernity' (Beck et al., 1994), the life course is no longer sequential or predetermined. The transitions observed today are occurring differently in personal timelines,

becoming fragmented, fractured, discontinuous and highly heterogeneous (e.g., Brannen & Nilsen, 2002; Du Bois-Reymond & Lopez Blasco, 2003; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Hodkinson et al., 2013; Mary, 2014; Robertson et al., 2018; Walther, 2006; Wyn & Dwyer, 2000). The profound changes affect not just one but all aspects of an individual's biography, spanning longer education, more fragmented employment history and alternative forms of family life (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005; Sarnowska et al., 2018). As argued by Heinz (2009), '[t]he discontinuity of biographies becomes obvious at transitions between life phases, where age-related criteria, rules and rites concerning the timing and procedures of status changes only survive in some institutional contexts' (p. 6). This necessitates new conceptual approaches drawn from broader youth studies (e.g., Wyn & Dwyer, 2000; Furlong et al., 2011) and viewing youth an extended period of 'semi-adulthood' (Heinz, 2009) rooted in cultural and economic context and as a dynamic 'process of becoming' (Worth, 2009), characterized by a temporal evolution of one's orientation toward the future (e.g., Brannen & Nilsen, 2002; King et al., 2016). Individualized and tailor-made pathways to adulthood are a feature of Arnett's (2003, 2016) seminal work on 'emerging adulthood', which views the transition as related to a sense of maturing and mental independence, distinguished by relative freedom from social roles and normative expectations.

In fact, the current generation of young Poles has typically been described through the notions of 'emerging adulthood', characterized by permissibility towards young people experiencing prolonged periods of exploration and experimentation (see also Arnett, 2000; Brannen et al., 2004; Swartz & O'Brien, 2009). On a broader scale, there have been major alterations to the demographic markers. Notably, 56% of people aged 25-29 lived with their parents in Poland in 2019 (Eurostat, 2021d). In comparison to other European countries, Polish youth today leave their family nest quite late, with the average age at 28.1 in 2020 and men were, on average, 2.5 years older than women when they ceased to reside with their parents (Eurostat, 2021c). In addition, leaving home does not symbolize cessation of intergenerational solidarity in Polish families (Grotowska-Leder & Roszak, 2016; Pustułka et al., 2021). It is reported that as many as 72% university students lived off financial support from their parents (Sztanderska, 2014).

The process of delayed housing transitions out of the parental home is closely linked to the data on marriages and children born. There has been a massive drop in the number of new marriages from 8.6 in 1980 to just 4.8 per 1000 inhabitants in 2019 (Eurostat, 2021b) and a significant increase in the age at both first marriage and first-time motherhood. Polish women born in the 1960 statistically married at the age of 22, with bachelors being two years older on average. Today's newlyweds are respectively 28 (women) and 30 (men). Similarly, they became mothers at 24 in just 2000, while that age stood at 28 in 2018 (Eurostat, 2021d). The long-lasting low fertility rate, which has been particularly decreasing in recent years (GUS, 2021), results in Poland having one of the strongest changes in the age structure of the population in the European Union (Kotowska, 2019). As a related factor influencing these social and demographic changes (Kolasa, 2020; Kotowska et al., 2008), youngest generations are particularly well-educated, with 42.4% (in 2020) in the 25–34 age-cohort holding university degrees (compared to 22.6% in 2004; see Eurostat, 2021a). Those shifts are also linked to feminization among the holders of diplomas (Sztanderska, 2014).

Altogether, the above indicators explain the expanded age ranges of young adults in ULTRAGEN going as high as to 35, nevertheless seen with a caveat that the capital and value-shifts allowing 'cushioned' landings are not universally applicable to all (see also Sarnowska & Pustułka, 2021; Silva, 2016). This is concurrent with ample research suggesting a growing stagnation of upward social mobility and the conflation of being born privileged and remaining privileged in the Western hemisphere (e.g., Lareau, 2011; Major & Machin, 2018; Ule et al., 2015; Thomson et al., 2002). In

this context, the Polish 1989 transition initialized an extreme transformation of social structures and resulting aspirations of parents and children. While it was first believed that it could lead to greater equality in educational opportunities, the neoliberal shifts of the 1990s in fact had an adverse effect (Kwiek, 2013, 2015; Pustułka & Sarnowska, 2021; Sadura, 2018).

Unlike the 'objective' approach, Arnett (2000, 2003) offers psychological/subjective theorising of adulthood. Transitions today are viewed as transformation processes within identity – opportunities and relationships shaped by people's aspirations, as well as imagining the future through time (Robertson et al., 2018). The subjective traits of maturity are achieved by the experiences of an individual; they cannot be equated with rights procured by turning 18, getting an ID, or becoming a partner, parent or employee. Psychological maturity is achieved by overcoming the so-called developmental crises (Erikson, 2012; Levinson, 1986; Havighurst, 1981) and involves the ability to tolerate frustration, accepting deficits and knowing how to satisfy one's basic psychological needs. In the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Deci & Flaste, 1996), these needs concern relatedness, competence and autonomy. Self-determination theory (SDT) is a metatheory of motivation focused on individuals' growth resting upon the satisfaction of the three basic, universal psychological needs mentioned above (Deci & Flaste, 1996). Its core consists of the assumption that there is a natural tendency to grow and develop in all individuals. This tendency may be either supported or restricted by environment and experiences in different stages of life. An individual coming across supportive factors will develop in a healthy way, meaning integration of self and satisfactory interpersonal relationships in the process of synthesis – the interaction between a person and an environment which enables the optimal growth (Deci & Flaste, 1996).

At present, modernity, individualization and risk society (Beck, 1992; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997) all contribute to the sense of being 'in a limbo' or a state of liminality during young adulthood, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005; Mulder, 2009; Swartz & O'Brien, 2009; Wyn et al., 2011). In this research stream, it has been widely noted that intergenerational support plays a crucial role in how the transitions unravel (e.g., Brannen et al., 2004; Scabini et al., 2006). In other words, moving towards autonomy – be it in the form of own housing, financial independence or starting one's own family of procreation – always happens against the backdrop of parent-child relationships. This brings us back to the pre-pandemic era, which made such slow and personal transitions possible for today's youths in most affluent, peaceful and settled societies. Being young has become a socially respectable time for exploring a variety of possible life directions in love, work and worldviews.

For many young people living in the Global North, little about the future has been decided for certain (Arnett, 2003) for a long time. However, the COVID-19 crisis and expected recession may bring stop to this empowered youthfulness, instead showcasing the drawbacks of liquid modernity – characterized by privatization, ambivalence, uncertainty and permanent fluidity (Bauman, 2000) – which produces a liquid generation (Bauman & Leoncini, 2018). In this context, those born since the middle 1980s are already prone to existential crises in the face of multiple burdens and choices shifted onto individuals. In the face of a crisis, sociological theorizing on individual agency and the malleability of social reality may be increasingly questioned, in line with critiques that have demonstrated that gender, social class, race and ethnicity limit and predetermine people's pathways to a great extent (Sarnowska & Pustułka, 2021; Thomson et al., 2002). Already existing paradoxes transitions today will come to the fore as modern societies chase 'youthfulness', while also imposing new structural changes and challenges of global flexibilization (e.g., Kovacheva, 2001) and global recession forecasted as an unavoidable and unescapable consequence of the COVID-19.

Transitions to Adulthood in the COVID-19 Era

In August 2020, International Labour Organization (ILO) called young age cohorts (18-29 years old) the lockdown generation to demonstrate school-to-work transition in the shadows of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is in line with the Global Risk Report which called young people *pandemics* and drew the picture of the youth generation as 'scarred', 'vulnerable' and potentially 'double lost' because of economic and societal shockwaves they experience (Global Risk Report, 2021). To reiterate, emerging research supports the notion of COVID-19 being a major disruption for young lives. However, a more focused review of recent work dedicated to the intersection of youth transitions and COVID-19 evidences a clear heterogeneity of the experiences and responses. While the discussion of data and research presented here is by no means comprehensive or conclusive, it offers a glimpse into the main themes relevant for ULTRAGEN.



Starting with a life-course comparative lens, Settersten et al. (2020) predict that young people and their parents may blame the pandemic for suboptimal transitional outcomes, which stand in contradiction to the imagined futures resulting from socialization that underlines agency and aspirations. Since the pandemic highlights the narrowed scope of life-possibilities, 'the disruption to young adults may feel especially heavy, however, because they do not yet have a long history of experience or accumulated resources to fall back on as they rework life goals or adapt to life's disappointments' (Settersten et al., 2020, p. 4). Another broad perspective is presented by Vehkalahti and colleagues (2021) who argue that young people 'feel like their life has been placed on hold' (p.400). Similar to Settersten et al. (2020), the authors draw on ILO 2020 data as a backbone for seeing young adults as particularly at risk when it comes to economic fallout and recession. Luppi et al. (2021) offer similar findings on delayed transitions in terms of the 'leaving home' marker, confirming that not only the objective conditions of the current restrictions or lockdown, but also pessimistic visions of the future, overlap in the revisions of life-plans that young people effectuate in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As Bristow and Gilland (2021) added,

'being caught in a situation where it is possible only to 'think about the future', rather than ground those thoughts in the lived experience of the present, is potentially destabilizing - particularly in the context where the future is framed as uncertain, frightening, and likely to be grim' (Bristow and Gilland, 2021, p. 41).

In a panel study of 20-year-olds that started pre-pandemic and was repeated for the same youngsters at age 22 (during the pandemic), Shanahan et al. (2020) found that young participants reported increased levels of perceived stress and anger. Besides mental health (emotional distress), the pandemic exacerbated economic and psychosocial stressors, causing an increased sense of hopelessness. Importantly, coping strategies highlighted the importance of young people being able to maintain daily routines, engaging in physical activity, as well as positive reappraisal from others (i.e., socialization agents, including parents). A study by Ranta et al. (2020) confirmed these results for Finnish young adults, further identifying a gender dimension in that young women had a higher disposition for mental health concerns, whereas pre-existing economic situation (social class background) was the strongest predictor of the levels of worry during the pandemic, independent of gender. Compared to older groups in the sample, young adults reported lower satisfaction with their lives, perceived their financial situation as worse, had higher levels of task-avoidant behavior and lower levels of generalized trust (Ranta et al., 2020). Similarly, a survey conducted among Polish university students shows that older students (25+) used active coping strategies to deal with the pandemic situation more often than younger ones. It can result from the fact that the latter group - because of having accumulated less life experience - have not yet developed their own coping strategies. Additionally, as women are more prone to cope with the situation by looking for emotional and instrumental support, men used humor as a coping strategy more often (Babicka-Wirkus et al., 2021). From an intergenerational perspective, findings from a German survey reported by Walper and Reim (2020) link the subjective experiences of the crisis with the pre-pandemic family climate. Beyond confirming that pre-existing 'temperature of relationships' is crucial for outcomes in terms of positive versus negative changes in young adults' family homes, the study also shows non-uniform outcomes towards the issue of well-being: almost 40% of those surveyed reported more loneliness (compared to a year before), yet a similar number of respondents stated that their stress levels have decreased.

Qualitative research proposes some more fine-grained approaches to the transition/pandemic junction. Interviews with Irish graduates from the 2020 cohort in the work by Timonen et al. (2021) support those conclusions and offer a catalogue of coping strategies adopted by young adults who see the COVID-19 as a major hurdle. In this group, young adults were found to engage in reflexively individualized strategies focused on self-care and family bonds. Interestingly, there was evidence of detachment from the wider surroundings (media, news, politics, society) in response to the crisis, expectedly paired with an 'impulse to centre on one's immediate circumstances' (Timonen et al., 2021, p. 362). Once again, the young adults with advantageous family backgrounds were found to adhere to COVID-19 rules and reported high concern for vulnerable groups. Longitudinal research into emerging adulthood by Vehkalahti et al. (2021), which began in Finland before the pandemic and focuses on rural youth, identified two main themes in the area of transitions. The first encapsulates more yo-yo behaviors being observed due to larger-scale rearrangements, especially in that ongoing education or other engagements have been moved online or ceased. Temporariness of housing linked to studying in cities was manifested in young adults making personal decisions to move back home (Vehkalahti et al., 2021). Reflecting the dominance of the cultural (Finnish) models of early independence, interviewees who started living with their parents again due to the corona crisis experienced negative emotions such as anxiety, anger or frustration. In many cases, return migration to rural areas was associated with personal failure or stagnation of the previous upward trajectory (see also Jones, 1999; Pustulka et al., 2019).

Young adults in transition base their decisions on a combination of factors, from emotional challenges of lockdown that made them crave close connection and boomerang to parental home, to more structural factors. The latter had to do with worsened economic standing (e.g., lack of job

opportunities, especially in the service sector), poor housing and systemic challenges within education (e.g., quality of online lectures, postponed graduations) (Settersten, 2021; Vehkalahti et al., 2021). Crucially, not all young adults see these challenges in the same way or even as 'regressions' (Timonen et al., 2021; Vehkalahti et al., 2021). Qualitative work on this topic is complemented by the international survey in the frames of the Youth Project (see Luppi et al., 2021). Across all five national groups partaking in the study, young adults largely postponed their decisions to live independently, with around half of all participants making that choice (ibid). Country differences related to welfare regimes were noted in terms of those who were able to maintain the plan to leave versus young adults who completely abandoned their plans. As a snapshot, 35% of young Italians but only 13% of the French participants treated the COVID-19 pandemic as a decisive factor in changing their moving-out plans. In contrast to only 1-in-5 Italian and Spanish adults in transitions who confirmed their intention to move out, this was the case for roughly one-third of the German and French respondents. According to Luppi et al. (2021), precarious employment situations and bad financial prospects of young individuals and their families caused by COVID-19 crisis were associated with a negative revision of the leaving home plans.

It is vital that, to date, studies on social shifts and attitudes during the pandemic are scattered and yield mixed results. On the one hand, polls suggested that senior citizens were the group least worried and most ill-informed about the epidemic early on in 2020 (Swant, 2020). On the other hand, two Polish surveys showed (CBOS, 2020; Maj & Skarżyńska, 2020) that older respondents are more restrictions-compliant while young people underestimated the dangers of the epidemic. SentiOne data from March 2020 indicated an increasingly high concern that the coronavirus presented in a long-term perspective, especially as regards 92% of those surveyed expecting its adverse economic effects.

According to YouGov (2020) data, Poland had the highest level of distrust in COVID-19 national response and was one of only five countries where citizens believed that the epidemiological situation was still worsening by May 2020. Key issue of note for ULTRAGEN is that Poles are the only studied nationality where health professionals are trusted less than family and friends on the pandemic-related matters. Generational themes were highly visible in the rhetoric surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, also with regards to the OECD data (2020) were broadly prognosing the largest recession in a century as a backdrop for young people's transitions.

Even though young people did not feel threatened by the possibility of getting infected with the SARS-COV-2 (e.g., Bristow & Gilland, 2021), their socio-economic situation has been significantly altered by the eruption of the pandemic. Introduction of the lockdown signified the beginning of online/remote education. Research conducted by ILO (2020a) indicated that as many as 86% of young Poles still in education have been emotionally touched by the closure of educational institutions they normally attended. Over 40% of the sample in this study concluded that they were experiencing a delay in the learning process. Inequalities in access to education-critical infrastructure, as well as discrepancies in support provided by parents (see also Popyk, 2021), have increased once distance learning started.

Young adults, who are one of the groups most vulnerable when it comes to unemployment, have significantly sensed the worsening conditions of the labour market in light of the pandemic (ILO, 2020a). First, most young people - who are still in education or a few years after their graduation - take up entry-level jobs where it is easier to replace an employee. Hence, during the pandemic companies are less interested in retaining less qualified employees, because after the economic situation improves and the demand for work in their industry increases, they will be able to train new

people to work. In addition, in Poland, it is mainly young people who are employed under civil law contracts without a notice period and social guarantees or temporary, short-term employment contracts. In the age group of the 15-24-year-olds, almost 60% people work without an employment contract for an indefinite period (Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny [Polish Economic Institute], 2020). These types of contracts are easier to break or simply not to extend than standard employment contracts.

It is estimated that the number of work-inactive young Europeans has grown by 3 million on the continent. Public statistics and commercial studies (e.g., Deloitte, 2020; ILO, 2020b), specified that even one in three young persons has lost their job when the COVID-19 crisis started. Among Millennials and Gen Z surveyed by Deloitte (2020), over 30% of the former and 40% of the latter reported changes for the worse in terms of employment status and income. About 25% had been forced to cut their work hours, which had an impact on salaries. People working in services, sales and tourism/gastronomy were more affected, with more prominent implications observed for recent hires (ILO, 2020b). Concentration of employment of young people in industries that have been most severely affected by the pandemic - in Poland it means primarily trade and gastronomy, hotel industry and transport, tourism, hairdressing and beauty services - is another factor that has worsened the situation of young people on the labor market post-March 2020. In Poland, about 30% of professionally active young people up to 24 years of age worked in the three sectors most affected by the lockdown: trade, gastronomy and hotel industry, while only 15% of people aged 25+ did so (Szewczyk, 2020).

Compared to older age cohorts, young people were more likely to report negative material consequences of the pandemic. This had to do not only with one's own diminished financial gains but also because of the lowered salaries of their family members. During the pandemic, the incomes of households in Poland decreased significantly: in the April 2022 study, 30% of them declared lower income, 50% the same as before the epidemic (Brzeziński et al., 2020). With the context of prolonged transitions and co-residence with parents way into adulthood, it is clear that labour market performances of young people and their parents are interwoven. In the study by Pew Research Center (2020), 46% of households of young Americans in the ages 18-29 were affected by the lowered salary or job loss due to COVID-19. Research on young Poles suggested that young women were more susceptible to losing their jobs with the ratios being 30% for females versus 25% for males. Young women were also more likely to experience worsening financial situations in connection to the pandemic, which - overall - suggests that gender inequalities on the labour market have deepened.

As education and work are interlaced with well-being, changes in the realm of mental and physical health of adolescents and young adults have been tracked as well. Cited statistics on material well-being are complimented by the research into emotions and psychological implications of the COVID-19 crisis. According to the International Labour Organization (2020), the sense of uncertainty towards one's career future has increased and now applies to 34% of young adults. Distance learning engenders a strong sense of isolation among young generations (Liu et al., 2020). National 4-H Council's American study (2020) found that 71% of youngsters experienced anxiety and depressive states in connection to schoolwork done remotely. Almost half of the young Polish men and women (46%) reported worsened psychological well-being. Subsequent 15% declared that they suffered from fear or depression due to COVID-19 implications (N4HC, 2020). A study by Deloitte (2020) highlights that 48% of the surveyed Millennials and 44% of the generation Z members constantly grappled with stress globally. In Poland, in the study conducted just after the most restrictive

lockdown was eased, people in the 18-24 age group were the group with the highest levels of depression and generalized anxiety symptoms during the epidemic (Gambin et al., 2021).

Adolescents and young adults are moreover overwhelmed by information about the pandemic, with the stream of news causing negative emotions, as well as fatigue and withdrawal (Liu et al., 2021). Support for youngsters who find themselves in difficult situations has also been limited, as noted by UNICEF (2020). It was estimated that assistance linked to mental health was disrupted in almost 70% of cases where support was needed.

The above findings can be also seen through the lens of profound differences in transitions of contemporary young adults and their parents. These often relate to the fluidity and tardiness of reaching the 'Big Five' markers (Mary, 2014; Settersten, 2007) by the former group, which may again cause tensions in intergenerational relations. Contrary to the previously foregrounded portraits of young generation being raised in 'feathered nests', permitted to reach subjective maturity through emerging adulthood (see Arnett, 2000; Avery et al., 1992; CBOS, 2019a), emerging work illustrates that the COVID-19 crisis engenders habitual risks and causes alterations to the envisioned pathways to adulthood (e.g., Settersten et al., 2020).

For Poland, it can be expected that parents will fall back to traditional framings of chronology and stability, while the independently forged sense of adulthood derived from youthful experimentation may no longer be possible (see also Mary, 2014). In other words, the hybrid patterns of transitions to adulthood (Wiszejko-Wierzbicka & Kwiatkowska, 2019), 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett, 2000) and semi-adulthood (Heinz, 2009) might cease to apply. Across various areas of social and family life – for instance housing, education and employment, we will concurrently look for signs of 'freezing' and 'acceleration' during the social standstill.

On the one hand, we expect to witness sudden 'yo-yo' transitions, extended nesting and boomeranging (e.g., Kaplan, 2009; Berngruber, 2015) caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance in the shape of young adults falling back on co-residence and financial dependency on their parents. This tendency is confirmed on an international scale: young workers rather dropped out of the labor force or delayed their entry into it than moved into unemployment (ILO, 2021). In Poland, out of 135 thousand about which the number of employed youth people decreased, only 35 thousand registered in labor offices as unemployed, but over 100 thousand simply disappeared from the labor market, becoming professionally inactive (Unton, 2021). On the other hand, we will observe separately dwelling family members and determine if the crisis could act as a social accelerator, e.g. when intimate couple dyads are pushed towards cohabitation by the crisis. In the latter, we consider the COVID-19 pandemic as a particular trigger and a turning point (Neale, 2019) for, albeit 'shaky', move towards autonomy and maturation. Finally, during a pandemic or another crisis, people can choose 'intermediate strategies' (Heinz, 2009) in terms of fulfilling adult roles and achieving social qualifiers.

In the following parts, we apply some of the concepts and data amassed in WP1 component and discussed above to the empirical material collected through interviews with Polish young adults during the COVID-19 crisis, specifically offering preliminary findings from Wave 1 of the ULTRAGEN QLS (WP2).

Preliminary Findings from Interviews with Young Adults (WP2)

In this section, we present a selection of discoveries made in the frames of the ULTRAGEN's Qualitative Longitudinal Study (WP2). The initial analysis of the empirical data collected for WP2 of the ULTRAGEN project (QLS Wave 1) generally confirms that the transitions to adulthood among the younger generation of Polish men and women (participants aged 18-35; G2) have become more shaky, whereas their parents (G1) seem less affected by the crisis for the most part. In the face of persistent uncertainty, there seem to be some cohort effects (Bengtson & Oyama, 2007) in how transitions to adulthood are structured and jointly tackled within intergenerational solidarity flows and family configurations (see also Pustułka & Buler, 2021). Importantly, while we plan to explore parents' perspectives and intergenerational dynamics of transitions in upcoming works, this Working Paper zeroes in on how young adults have been experiencing the COVID-19 crisis thus far.

Therefore, in the following sections dedicated to preliminary findings, we focus most on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young adults, drawing on qualitative interviews with them conducted during Wave 1 of the ULTRAGEN's Qualitative Longitudinal Study. The analysis presented below is based on twenty-eight interviews (EA=20, SA=8) completed and transcribed by October 2021, but the full number of interviews with young adults collected from late May to early November 2021 is thirty-five². Simultaneously, thirty-five interviews with young respondents' parents were collected. Although we do not elaborate on the parents' experiences in this paper, we perceive that empirical material as a point of reference for our analysis.

Given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic's unpredictability, digital research methods were planned and used (see also Howlett, 2021; Moran & Caetano, 2021) in the ULTRAGEN QLS. Specifically in-depth, individual interviewing techniques were adapted to an online research setting. Participant recruitment followed a purposeful qualitative sampling (Marshall, 1996) and accounted for several criteria. First, all interviewed young adults had to reside in large cities. Second, heterogeneity and balance guided the selection process for gender, education and age among G2, with two cohorts delineated as 18-25 and 26-35. Thirdly, in G1 a representation of both mothers and fathers, as well as parents with different socio-economic backgrounds was also strived for.

Regarding the socio-demographic characteristics of twenty-eight interviews analyzed for this Working Paper, thirteen men, fourteen women and one non-binary person took part in the study (i.e., in the interviews amassed between May and October 2021). Twenty were younger than twenty-five, while the average age for all participating young adults stands at twenty-three. Sixteen out of twenty-eight respondents lived with their parents. In terms of education, seven were continuing or finishing secondary education during Wave 1, nine were enrolled in Bachelor-level university programs, six were in pursuit of further (Master's or PhD) degrees. Three respondents had exited education with a secondary school or vocational diploma and were not continuing studies at the time of the interview. Among people who were high-school or university students, eight did not work, whereas fourteen

² An overview of the young adult research participants' characteristics can be found in the Appendix 1. Note that the Working Paper used the available transcripts of 28 interviews, while the Table already specifies socio-demographic characteristics of all 35 interviewees. In other words, the QLS Wave 1 was completed between the preliminary analyses and publication of this Working Paper.

had various jobs (usually of a part-time/temporary nature). All non-studying interviewees were active on the labour market.

After highlighting the pandemic as a cohort experience and presenting inner-differentiation of the interviewed young adults in the ensuing empirical section, we then move on to offering a selection of narratives about the general perception of the COVID-19 crisis. Next, we analyze data on three key settings that bring together the experiences of transitions to adulthood and the backdrop of the ongoing crisis. Here we discuss (1) the sphere of education, (2) experiences related to work and, last but not least, (3) issues concerning housing and personal lives.

Pandemic as a Cohort Experience

The most evident discoveries concern the variable of age, in that the pandemic has very different implications for the members of one generation but split into two cohorts. While the global public health crisis causes period effects for all, it also entrenches what Bengtson and Oyama (2007) would consider as divergent cohort experiences.

In particular, we argue that there is a pressing need to disaggregate and de-universalize statements about young adulthood during the COVID-19 pandemic era, instead proposing that the so-called emerging adults (18-25-years-olds) are typically much more affected than young adults aged 26 and over which is in line with the previously discussed studies and data on Polish youth in the pandemic (Gambin et al., 2021; ILO, 2020a, 2021; PIE, 2020; Szewczyk, 2020). For the purpose of the analysis, we distinguish two cohorts of young adults described through a sociological lens below.

- **EA: emerging adults**, ages 18-25, born between 1997 and 2003. In this group, participants largely continue to be in education and have limited labour market experiences. If they have worked, their jobs were part-time, temporary or seasonal, with no permanent contracts noted. What is particularly important regarding the situation of young people on the labour market, employers hiring students aged under 26 on civil law contracts do not have to pay neither social security nor health insurance fees. Thus, employers prefer such kinds of employment rather than permanent one. Moreover, compared to the second cohort, EA representatives have a greater preponderance for living together



with their parents or - if they migrated for higher-education - they do not see their accommodation in the university towns as their own households separate or distinguished from parental homes. As a group, they are single or dating but unmarried and childless. Through a conceptual lens, it can be seen that parents of this cohort of Poles - as members of the wider generation - have embraced the ideas of youth being a prolonged stage of the life-course, with a lot of exploration and delays allowed by intergenerational support into adulthood (see also Arnett, 2000). While this way of defining youth is frequent in their parents' framing, emerging adults themselves are much more heterogeneous in their definitions. On the one hand, some of them cling to objective, legal definitions of adulthood, stating that they have come of age when they turned 18. They underscored the newly gained subjective freedoms of going out and similar leisure activities. On the other hand, other interviewees questioned their adulthood because of the fact that they did not feel independent, responsible or on the path towards the 'objective' markers of being an adult, for instance in relation to autonomous living, completing education, financial self-sustenance and so on. In summation, emerging adults are generally ambivalent about their adulthoods.

- **SA: settling adults**, ages 26-35, born between 1986 and 1996. Shifts towards adulthood - seen both through a prism of objective markers (Mary, 2014; Settersten, 2004) and in terms of subjective sense of maturation (Arnett, 2003) - are much more common in this cohort. Many of the participants in this group have made the transition out of education and see work as their primary task and identity-defining aspect of life. They managed to collect various experiences on the labour market and lean towards stability defined on the basis of permanent and FT job contracts. In particular, the difference between EA/C1 and SA/C2 in our study seems to be about the temporal lens and the idea that being in education means that one can take 'any job', while exiting schooling empowers an individual to pursue 'good jobs' in line with qualifications (see also Sarnowska et al., 2018; Wiszejko-Wierzbicka & Kwiatkowska, 2017). In other realms of intimate lives, the transitions are more in flux: while some respondents are married and have children, others remain in less formalized relationships or are single. For the most part, however, they have their own households, either via renting or property investments. It can be argued that transitioning adults have solidly set out on the path to independence. Their reflections on their sense of adulthood are also more grounded and focused on self-as-adult, albeit the narratives do not disregard shakiness and uncertainty about the future.

Key finding coming from the analysis is that the lives of young adults are typically much more affected by the global pandemic than the lives of their parents. This, of course, is not to ignore the vulnerability experienced by other groups such as seniors (see e.g., Gulland, 2020) or parents and particularly first-time mothers (Pustułka & Buler, 2021) or those without the possibility to work remotely. Instead, our findings draw attention to the **possible generational impacts of the pandemic in the long-term.**

Young Adults & Pandemic Shock Wave

A temporal lens is crucial for discerning the ebbs and flows of impressions that young people interviewed for ULTRAGEN are gaining in regard to the pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis can be conceived of as a shock wave: the eruption of the virus had multiple repercussions across various life-spheres, yet the consequences in people's lives were by no means universal or unanimous. For the most part, however, the youngest cohort in our study - i.e. Emerging Adults (EA), ages 18-25 - talks about the COVID-19 lockdowns as the unambiguously strange and often wasted time. Younger interviewees have an eerie sense of uncertainty and frustration:

Having gone back to school now, I have this feeling that this entire pandemic period was a very long dream. To be honest, if I tried hard enough and others complicitly helped me, I could actually believe it (...) Among peers, we complained that this year was somewhat wasted. There were many opportunities which have not been realized and they will not come up ever again. The pandemic was certainly related to a major sense of frustration.
(EA, Anita, high-school student)

Based on the amassed narratives, it can be said that the young adults definitely feel like they have been living in a risk society (Beck, 1992), in which one constantly experiences shifts and threats from various directions. The interviewed young adults - in both age cohorts - expressed a conviction that long-term planning was pointless.

Young adults' views and feelings about safety, security and agency were negatively affected by the COVID-19 crisis. Thus, even they represent a deferment type of orientation (Brannen & Nilsen, 2002) when dealing with the pandemic situation. At the same time, some of them - particularly in the older cohort - tended to believe that they could learn more about themselves during these trying times. The orientation on the present could help them develop strategies that can serve as a toolkit of coping and resilience during an uncertain future. More generally, these strategies could benefit them during transition to adulthood:

For sure I learned many things about myself from this pandemic. [The pandemic] has certainly stopped me. A lot of people were doing things while they had free time, but in my case, it threw me off my game. It was so new for me, so unusual that I had to stop and think about what I wanted to do with it and how to just be. Do I feel very grown up? After the pandemic, I don't think so, but I feel more mature because I am more aware of myself. I learned something new about myself and I know how I can react in similar situations. I will be wiser in the future. (SA, Sandra, full-time corporate employee)

This level of reflexivity is clearly a sign of the times: given the changes in the post-1990s Poland, which quickly started to 'catch up' to the Western models of parenting (e.g., Sikorska, 2019; Szafranec et al., 2017), today's 18-25-year-olds have grown up under newly-minted socializational conditions (Sarnowska & Pustułka, 2021). The parents have adopted the ideas behind longer youth and often communicate (verbally or indirectly; consciously or not) to their children that they are free to explore, experiment and be carefree during their formative years. COVID-19 largely upends the messages of this intergenerational transmission. Thus, as some young adults from our research tried to continue their transitions to adulthood, they exhibited more open-ended and broad - in Arnett's sense (2000) - orientations towards the future (see also Brannen & Nilsen, 2002).

First, we see a predictability type of dealing with uncertainty that marks planning focused on the events, patterns and routines that are bound to stay constant (Brannen & Nilsen, 2002). One example of this can be seen in students (EA group) maintaining their class schedules, regardless of whether they take offline or online form:

It was easier to pass [some courses]. It was not some sort of an idyllic setting that you did nothing and somehow passed, this was not the case (...) Actually I believe one had more work to do. Every day I was equally, if not more, fatigued, even though it was not the case that one had to be very focused during each class (...). But it was more positive than negative. (EA, Damian, student)

Young adults are, in essence, strategizing for what can still be planned under the given conditions. Similarly, most working people (especially SA) see their workplaces as one of the anchors that make them keep life routines.

Secondly, some strategies are more reminiscent of the deferment type (Brannen & Nilsen, 2002). In both EA and SA cohorts, many interviewees experienced the sense of being “frozen” at the current life-stage. Increasing uncertainty meant for them that planning made no sense, so they were more oriented towards the present:

I'm planning to stay at this company, but you never know what's going to come out of [the pandemic]. Something may happen, e.g., positions may be cut. It may be nothing I have control over, so I just try to plan as little as possible, because if I plan something or I set my mind to something and it doesn't work out, then I'm disappointed. If you don't plan and you don't set your mind to anything, then you're not surprised. (SA, Mieszko, full-time retail worker)

In a type of vicious circle, living without any - even short-term - plans is no small feat. A sense of ‘floating’ may bring another wave of uncertain feelings:

My mum always says that I am the kind of person that, if something doesn't go according to my plan, [I'm seeing it as] all broken and all to be thrown away. I think that now...[my attitude towards planning results from] my experiences of this pandemic and how I, at first, thought my life had collapsed. Maybe it's not worth setting myself up for anything. Maybe I need to learn to just go with the flow. [Finding] something in between, some kind of a golden mean in this. I don't want to set my mind to a plan too much, because that doesn't work for me. On the other hand, mentally, I don't think I can let everything flow the way it just does. (EA, Julia, student/part-time worker in gastronomy)

Some respondents mentioned a more general problem with decision-making and shaping their educational and professional paths. On the one hand, they appreciated freedom of choice and a variety of possible options rooted in emerging adulthood’s exploratory, self-focused and individualised sense of self-creation (Arnett, 2000). On the other hand, those who had not yet found their own path (especially EA), faced the challenge of choosing the specific field of study or job which suits them the most. In light of sudden changes and reorganization of labour market sectors (see e.g., Brzeziński et al., 2020; Deloitte, 2020; PRC, 2020; ILO 2020a, 2020b; The Global Risk Report, 2021), they were doing this with a lot of hesitation:

When I was in primary or secondary school, I had good grades. I was a good student, and everyone said that I should be a doctor. I have the predispositions to be this and so on. I think that's what made me kind of dumb and I don't really have an idea of myself. I mean, it's not that I don't have an idea at all, because I always thought I would just play football professionally. I think it is still possible. (EA, Kamil, construction worker)

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic evidently limits the scope of youthful experimentation. Young people cannot easily pick and choose between different dreams they have in the pipeline. The events that could have been transformatory as *rites de passage* - such as going abroad to study, trying out for somewhat risky professional paths in sports and arts, often ceased to happen due to either hygiene restrictions and event cancellations, or in connection to the immobility regime (Merla et al., 2020).

I had a plan to travel for a year, and I got permission for that from my work. They told me that I can come back but I had a plan to look for another job. I wanted to start another path. But I had to stop travelling half way through and came back earlier. It was that moment when no one knew what was happening, if it caused a crisis on the market. I wasn't sure how I would find a new job. (SA, Laura, full-time corporate employee)

Broader generational changes contribute to the dilemma of employment choice as well. The young adults refer to the paradox of choice that is evocative of the liquid generation (Bauman, 2000). In general, the interviewees believed that their transitions to adulthood happened against a backdrop of both high demands and numerous structural obstacles:

Nowadays, I have the impression that transition to adulthood is much more difficult. (...). And finding oneself in all this, in the multitude of all these [possible options] is much harder and a person, I feel, needs more time to develop. On the other hand, this older generation does not always understand this. It seems to me that transitioning into adulthood is a bit harder. (EA, Klara, recent high-school graduate enrolled at university)

We recognize that the pandemic engenders challenges in specific and often somewhat contained areas for other age groups as well - for instance in health for seniors, personal finances for defavorized workers, intergenerational family support for parents and so on (see Settersten et al., 2020). Acknowledging that intersectional dimensions are always at play, we, nevertheless, propose that young adults, especially those being Emerging Adults (EA), might not have experienced rapid or huge implications at one go. They are rather divested of opportunities and chances across **multiple life-spheres**, as the metaphoric shock-waves of the pandemic reverberate. Because the pandemic is still ongoing, even minor or phased effects tend to accumulate, resulting in the overall **major generational vulnerability**. Through the presentation of our initial findings related to transition to adulthood we highlight the **key consequences of the COVID-19 for young adults**. As noted, the results were classified into themes of education, work, and housing and personal lives.



Educational Consequences

Starting with education, the interviewees who attended final years of high school (18-19-year-olds) and university students (19-24-year-olds) equally found their educational institutions unprepared for distance learning:

I was very nervous [about the Polish classes in remote education]. Nothing has ever upset me as much as this situation. Because, for me, it was such a waste of our time. We were thinking and just typing, sending some answers to nonsense questions. And, in my opinion, it was a huge waste of time. We didn't study, we just did some bullshit and it bothered me terribly. I was terribly angry. To this day, it really gets me when I recollect it. But the rest of the teachers were ok, so I only have such experiences with Polish classes. Some of them [teachers] tried harder, some less, but it didn't turn out so tragically bad. (EA, Pola, high-school graduate waiting for the exams results/call centre worker)

Similarly to other scholars' observations (Bristow & Gilland, 2021; Popyk, 2021), we see the youngest age cohort often reflecting on the educational disadvantages: inability to prepare for exams, more challenges to grasp knowledge, increase in number of tasks without teacher's assistance, as well as limited chances of benefitting from school/university atmosphere:

There was this panic and fear everywhere, for everyone. Disinfection, not leaving the house and so on, transition to completely remote learning, and nobody knew how to do it - neither lecturers nor students. So there was a huge amount of work, a huge amount of everything, a huge amount of sitting in front of a computer, almost 24 hours a day, with some assessments all the time. To be honest, there were a thousand of newly created [assessment] items, so as to possibly prove something to the Ministry in case of a control. (EA, Dominik, student/part-time retail worker)

On the whole, young adults interviewed for ULTRAGEN in Poland believed that the quality of education has diminished. Some discrepancies emerge in this realm as well, albeit the dominant narrative is about the losses. One interviewee in particular (EA, Kamila, student) stated that in high school she was mostly focusing on learning achievements, which were crowned with getting into university. However, when she was finally ready to become more involved in social relations with peers, the pandemic made it impossible for her to achieve. Thus, the respondent had the feeling that a year-and-a-half of her life 'was stolen' at the junction of educational and personal spheres.

Despite the challenges regarding limitations of social relations, some interviewees stated that remote education does not necessarily mean worse quality of knowledge. Moreover, some students evaluated remote education as better for them and were hoping to continue it. According to these who expressed such a view, studying from home might be less time-consuming (no need to commute), as well as more adapted to their personal needs and time:

I don't have to leave the house at all, so for me it's a great thing, and, actually, the only minus is that you don't have your peers [with whom you can] just talk, do something. At the moment, [meeting peers face to face] is not there, so everyone is on their own. Does it bother me so much? Independence satisfies me, a way of learning in pandemic. Actually it's impossible to do lab classes in that way, it's even pointless when someone just plays a video for us [during the classes], but in case of regular lectures, where you just go and note I don't see the difference between remote and on-site education. (SA, Karol, production worker/part-time student)

It is worth noting that the interviewee quoted is the only representative of the older cohort (SA) who experienced some changes in his studies during the pandemic. Others were either graduates, continuing their education but in e-learning mode, or they were at the stage of planning to start additional courses. In addition, one participant had a more pronounced attitude focused on how to develop and capitalize on the learning approaches and attitudes during the COVID-19 era. It seems that this was a continuation of the pre-pandemic practices rather than developing new ones because of the pandemic circumstances. Some of the interviewees simply benefited from the opportunities offered by their workplace:

I'm learning all the time. Now more professionally, because I work in a company that allows me to develop, e.g., they financed a foreign language course for me, so that I returned to the language I learned in high school and which I did not use later on. Well, I did the Scrum Master course too. (...) Now, I also plan another educational step, because I think I would be able to go into design thinking. I learn something generally all the time, because even if the company would not enable me to do something, I would definitely look for something to improve my skills on my own. Anyway, I am looking for some courses all the time (...) Most of them are for free. I generally try to find them to learn new skills, but without burdening the budget. (SA, Sandra, full-time corporate employee)

More generally, it appears that the SA respondents are better prepared than EAs to embrace the educational paths they see as required of them in the competitive labour market. They display attitudes founded on the needs for lifelong and continuing education, acquisition of new skills, as well as becoming more attractive as employees. This attitude appears to be independent of the pandemic and driven rather by the already clearer outlook on professional paths discussed next.

Labour Market Woes

For both cohorts, the labour market situation had worsened. However, a distinction should be made in terms of the pre-pandemic work situation of individuals impacting greatly on how their work lives are unfolding over time. In broad terms, the COVID-19 crisis increased marginalization of those who had precarious positions before the viral outbreak. This mostly applies to young adults on temporary contracts, those who pursue seasonal work opportunities (e.g., in the tourism sector), combine work with education, as well as those whose university exit coincided with the start of the pandemic spread in Poland. As a result, they were unable to amass relevant experience in their field before the beginning of the crisis:

Because of the pandemic, my salary has dropped a lot. Not only do I have a mandate contract, but very often I get such random time off that I have the weekend off because you just have to fill up the schedule with people who are contracted and have to work those hours, so my earnings have gone down by about 40%. That's a big difference for me. (EA, Szymon, student/part-time worker in gastronomy)

The situation is different for the respondents working (or finding a job during the pandemic) as e.g., couriers, drivers or remote part-time workers. They rather experienced intensification of work because the demand for delivery and similar services has grown over the course of the first months of the lockdown.

I also decided to start a job as a courier because of that [pandemic], that I had a lot of work as a courier. Sometimes I think it was too much, because I sometimes worked for 12 hours a day, or even more. It was also conditioned by the increasing orders on the Internet. That's why couriers had a lot of work. As a result tips were big. That's why I thought I would earn a lot in this job. (EA, Kamil, construction worker)

Conversely, in the older group (SA), particularly graduates who managed to accumulate some work experience aligned with their qualifications under their belt before March 2020, reported a less pronounced sense of defavorization:

[Pandemic changed] Totally nothing. When the pandemic started to widely spread the world, I worked in a warehouse in a hair cosmetics company, so we had no contact with customers or anything like that. At that company, the pandemic almost doubled our sales, because not only did pharmacies order from us, but private individuals also started ordering directly from us, without leaving their homes. (SA, Mieszko, full-time retail worker)

Some of the SA respondents referred to experiences linked with new restrictions (wearing protective gear like masks) at work or challenges of remote jobs warranting reconciliations with other life spheres like home-life or leisure. The latter was especially evident in the case of interviewees who were parents of young children, as the combining work-from-home with care duties required much effort:

It was not easy, there were moments of really great frustration, stress, such blockades that I didn't know if I would get through, because I had to work and do something with

the children at the same time. Because my children are at an age where they still need help in preparing meals and doing homework. I got a lot of support and a lot of understanding from my boss, and it turned out that I can organize my work remotely. I had to learn how to do this. I had to get used to this. (SA, Sandra, full-time corporate employee)

It is crucial that some Settling Adults also shared the stories in which the pandemic disrupted their professional lives. For instance, they linked it to the prediction of the upcoming economic crisis, which, in turn, has made them more inclined to stay at their current workplace. In other words, they might be avoiding job-changes, even if they planned them before the pandemic:

I think [the pandemic] calmed down my professional situation paradoxically. When I started working here, at the University, and I started my PhD, those were not easy moments either. And I was also grappling with the fact that it was probably a mistake. I even started going to some job interviews. I even got a job offer last year, but at that time the pandemic started. We were locked at home. That was also the moment when I felt that it was probably not a good time to make any sudden moves, and it was better to stay there, where it was peaceful, and where, at least for a while, I had guaranteed employment. That somehow made me calm down. I learned to be more accepting, calmer about what frustrates me. So, I changed my point of view a little bit. I don't think it affected me in a negative way. (SA, Dominika, PhD student)

The argumentation presented in the quote can be interpreted through the lens of adaptability as a strategy for facing the changing and uncertain context (Brannen & Nilsen, 2002). Generally, job stability became a more common aspiration linked to risk avoidance in the face of the predicted economic fallout of the COVID-19 crisis.

Housing & Personal Lives

The relational sphere of people's personal lives (May, 2011) is today largely conditioned by the spatial dimension of their everyday surroundings. Therefore, the discussions about familial and intimate connections are seen as very much connected to the context of who the young people happened to be living with when the COVID-19 started. Crucially, this had often determined with whom they continued to live during the lockdown and ensuing periods.

However, independent of the young respondents' pre-pandemic housing situation, this aspect of transitions to adulthood seemed to be the least prone to dynamic changes and biographic triggers during the pandemic. Immobility regime made it harder to consider internal or international migration, as well as caused a certain freeze on the property market in terms of starting to rent or fulfilling the idea to make real estate investments. Given the structural context and the fact that the pandemic might still last awhile, radical moves in this life sphere were somewhat avoided thus far.

Those who lived with their parents and did not plan to move out, and those interviewees who already had their own housing or more stable renting options, experienced no significant changes. Most of the representatives of the younger cohort (EA) co-reside with their parents and they remained at family homes throughout the lockdown and Wave 1 of the interviews. In some cases, the decision to stay was not caused by the pandemic, but was rather a continuation of a pre-pandemic plan to move out only after graduating, finding a job and amassing some savings (see also Pustulka et al., 2021; Scabini et al., 2006).

I would like to move out as soon as possible. It's obvious, I mean maybe there are people who don't want to move out. I would really like to live with my woman. She also wants to. But, as you know, the prices of apartments are sky high, so, for now, I'm putting money aside as much as I can. I think there's still a long way to go before I can move out to my own [place]. (EA, Eryk, student/temporary jobs)

In some cases, staying with parents is pictured as a safer, cheaper and more comfortable option, since it enables people to feel like a child for a little bit longer. However, people who have been thinking for a while about moving out - especially those having few-years long relationships or changing from high-school to university education in a city different from the place of origin - expressed the problems affecting their financial situation and increasing prices on the housing market. Despite the pandemic and lower numbers of students looking for housing, the interviewees



stated there has been no general decrease in rental prices in the university cities and towns. Based on this, some interviewees have delayed their decisions in the realm of leaving home:

Housing prices went up terribly and I hoped that the moment that we were hit, we would finally be able to rent an apartment because the students are gone, everyone is working remotely. I didn't know that there could be such bubbles as there are now, so [the pandemic] definitely had an impact, it definitely prolonged the whole process. I also couldn't, I mean theoretically I could, but I didn't want to take the risk to look for such a stationary job during the pandemic. I just knew that my mother was unvaccinated and I was afraid for her, mainly, that I would bring something home and it would be bad. (EA, Bartek, student)

For older interviewees (SA) the situation is quite different as these participants live independently from their parents. Most of them shared their own or rented apartment with their partners, and the pandemic had not influenced their housing situation. Only two SA respondents talked about changing flats during the pandemic. References to the increase in the rental prices are significant here as well:

Until June, I rented a room with one of my workmates and another girl, whom I didn't even recognize because we just missed each other. But the rental agreement was ending and the prices before the summer holidays went up so much that I asked my friend if I could live with him for two months to wait. The prices before July were terrible for renting apartments and I waited for two months at my friend's place. I was able to do it also through a friend, because her father was renting an apartment and one of the tenants resigned. And he wanted someone familiar, he didn't want any strangers. And I took it. (SA, Mieszko, full-time retail worker)

Despite housing becoming more expensive, the supply of apartments on the rental market was greater and another SA respondent was able to take an advantage of that:

It was probably easier to find a room during the pandemic, because there were no students, but it didn't change anything here [in a decision to rent an apartment with her partner]. (SA, Laura, full-time corporate employee)

As the pandemic and uncertain situation on the labour market had made Laura stop her gap year and return to Poland earlier to go back to her earlier workplace, she had to find a place to stay. Thus, she could benefit from the given conditions.

Quarantine was a specific time for housing experience during the pandemic. It was experienced differently in both cohorts, largely depending on the conditions of the apartment and the network of relationships:

Once, I was in forced quarantine because Ann [my flatmate] got COVID. It was not my fault but I had two weeks off without leaving the house (...) I was terribly bored. (...) The beautiful weather was drawing me to the forest to make a fire, cook something on the fire, shoot a bow, sit and listen to the birds. I was terribly bored. I watched everything on Netflix. It was a tragedy, it was really a tragedy. I don't like sitting still. (SA, Mieszko, full-time full-time retail worker)

Undoubtedly, the pandemic has influenced social relationships as lockdown and social distancing were one of the key strategies of limiting the spread of the virus. People were supposed to stay home, not go out and meet with others without socially justified and serious reasons. Based on the collected material, we observe three main types of relations affected by the situation: family relations, intimate relationships and friendships.

In the case of family, most of the respondents living independently, both SA and EA, mentioned limitation of face-to-face contacts with parents, yet it is grandparents who were even more protected (see also Pustulka & Buler, 2021). If the young adults did not live together with parents, they often limited or altered family practices of spending time together:

During the pandemic, it [meetings with parents] was maybe less frequent. We were more distant, [decided] not to go somewhere because we didn't know where [the parents] had been either. In a smaller town it's a different perception of the pandemic than in big cities (...) In general when there were these [high numbers] of infected, we tried not to see each other. (SA, Karol, production worker/part-time student)

The fear of being the carrier of the virus has made young people very careful in these relations, especially in the beginning of the pandemic and towards seniors:

I didn't visit my grandma during the first part of the pandemic either, because you know, there was a fear connected to visiting an elderly person. I would not know whether I had [the virus] or not, whether I could infect her. I think that this was the most important aspect, that it was the fear that something might happen to my grandma and I always try to visit my grandma otherwise, I usually come to her place for coffee, we sit and gossip, then we watch some Wheel of Fortune or Family Feud. But [due to COVID] I couldn't come and sit with her anymore. I think I did not see her for half a year and only later I came to talk to her in a mask, on an open balcony, only for a while. These were not the meetings I used to have. Only now, when my grandmother is already vaccinated and I am vaccinated, we have returned to these old forms. (EA, Eryk, student/temporary jobs)

While most of the respondents noticed that their relations with parents remained the same, some saw the positive effect of less frequent meetings and reported a lower number of conflicts:

[During the pandemic] we go less often [to see the parents]. (...) Relations with my parents were too close. Simply uncomfortably close. (...) I used to live with their problems, it was unhealthy to our relationship [with my husband] and, above all, mentally unhealthy for me. This relationship was simply unhealthy. (...). It has done us all some good to see each other less often. (SA, Zofia, PhD student/researcher)

As regards intimate relationships, the young respondents portray the pandemic more frequently as an opportunity for consolidating their pre-existing relationships than as a time for starting new romances:

I mean, it seems to me that first of all we would get along rather well, assuming there is no pandemic (...) I would probably end up on Tinder anyway, but due to the fact that we both have slightly different lives, I bet we might not get along at this initial stage, as if there was no pandemic. (SA, Laura, full-time corporate employee)

Increasing quality of intimate relationships during the pandemic was seemingly related to the stabilizing effect of spending more time together:

We started to spend more time with each other, because what else are we supposed to do other than sit at home and watch some movies? There were some walks, more walks, although we always walk a lot, but there were even more walks during the pandemic, because there were no meetings with friends, and with a girlfriend you could go out without any problem (...) We talked more, generally our relationship even improved a little bit during the pandemic, I would say. (EA, Mateusz, student/temporary jobs)

Breakups are less common than new loves, friendships and bonds beginning, yet the latter also occur. More importantly, the experience of self-isolation is very different for people who do not have partners as they felt the pandemic as a force that inscribes singlehood. Single young people highlight that it has become more difficult to meet new people and go on dates.

The most noticeable changes were experienced in the case of friends and acquaintances, and this has stronger effects on the younger cohort (EA). Online education together with the restrictions (and the fear for relatives' and own safety) limited the meetings with other people:

So, overnight we stopped seeing each other at school. In fact, I've noticed that school contacts have weakened terribly. At the beginning, we used to stay in touch when we went to school, but when the pandemic started I lost touch with almost everyone outside of school. With only a few people from school I managed to maintain some contact, but then almost all contacts somehow died. (EA, Stefan, recent high-school graduate enrolled at university)

As Bristow and Gilland (2021) noticed, the online communication can be more selective and "damaging to the weaker relationships that are vital to people's daily life, with those you don't directly rely on but encounter and converse with frequently, who keep memories alive and things moving on" (p.48). Staying at home and limiting contact with others seems to be one of the most shared negative experiences of the lockdown. Younger respondents (EA), especially those who did not have a partner or faced some psychological challenges before, reported feeling lonely, depressed, or frustrated:

I have problems with myself. Depression. Pandemic got me down a bit, too. It was very hard for me to find motivation and get into this new mode. Pandemic also influenced the fact that I have much less contact with my friends as the only contact with people is through work. (EA, Szymon, student/part-time worker in gastronomy)

Some interviewees tried to negotiate the restrictions and - at least at some point of lockdown - met with friends to catch up or compensate for 'the lost' time. They also noticed the 'normalization' of the pandemic:

Maybe at the beginning, when it started, I was at home more, but it normalized and actually it picked up a bit because now I see my friends even more often. When the pandemic started, we didn't even see each other for a couple of months, where normally we saw each other once a week. Now, we see each other very often, even every two or three days. (EA, Mateusz, student/part-time worker in gastronomy)

In the beginning, it was mom who was the first one to say: “Eliza, don't leave the house because it's like this and not like that”, then dad joined in. They were very strict about me not leaving the house. That was the time when I was running away under some pretext, and then it all started to go back to normal, because everything had already become so commonplace. The pandemic has become such an element of life, not something new. (EA, Eliza, part-time student/retail worker)

Although limited contacts with friends are also reported by older young adults (SA), the fact that almost all of them had partners with whom they lived could be seen as a ‘cushion’ that made their personal situation during the pandemic easier to cope with. Surely, future analyses are needed to account for the aspect of mental health as the emerging and vital challenges of young adults’ lives in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis.

Conclusions & Outlook on Faltering Transitions to Adulthood in the COVID-19 Era

To sum up the preliminary findings from WP2 related to **shaky transitions to adulthood**, the respondents reported the significance of pre-pandemic stability and its influence on the way of dealing with the new circumstances emerging from the coronavirus crisis. Stable work, financial situation, living/housing conditions and absence of relational crises (e.g., conflicts with parents, problems in intimate relationships) constituted 'cushions' that have the capacity to protect individuals from negative consequences of the pandemic. In other words, the structural (education, employment) and relational (partnerships, friendships, family bonds) 'stability buffers' can offset 'shakiness' to a certain extent. As such, young adults - especially those in the 26-35 age cohort - could follow an adaptability or predictability type of facing an uncertain future rather than being oriented solidly on its deferment (see Brannen & Nilsen, 2002). On the contrary, the representatives of the youngest cohort (EA; 18-25) who had no chance to build their stability prior to the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, were the most affected by the ongoing changes and profound uncertainty.

Importantly, regardless of the age cohort, the pandemic has influenced a hesitancy towards long-term planning. The image of an unpredictable future is by now very much inscribed in the new way younger cohorts are thinking about their lives. The crisis often meant grappling with the suddenness of unfulfilled or postponed plans, missed opportunities and negative emotions. The consequences were that much harsher because they are ongoing and likely to recur. In fact, young people recognize that next COVID-19 waves and possible restrictions need to be accounted for in planning. Thus, young people were rather reluctant to have specific ideas about the next few years. We can hypothesize that - regardless of the increasing role of individualization in contemporary social life - the pandemic made young people more aware of their dependence on external conditions, social relations, sources of support and structural positions. In a way, after decades of moving towards prolongation and permissibility of exploration and experimentation for 'emerging adults' (Arnett, 2000), Polish young adults at the beginning of the 2020s are increasingly forced to think about specific and less fluid paths within housing, education, employment and family as the aforementioned 'stability buffers'.

It must be underscored that recessions and political shifts tend to have the largest impact on younger cohorts, especially in relation to opportunities on the labor market (e.g., Bell & Blanchflower, 2010) and in education (Di Pietro et al., 2020; Reimers, 2021). These are - in turn, closely entangled with choices young people make regarding their personal/intimate lives and lifestyles (Nilsen et al., 2012). Moreover, the unprecedented trait of the health crisis as signifying lockdowns and 'nation-level' thinking about citizenship and identities is also exacerbated by other political events. Being 'locked' in one's home happens in parallel to a broader shift towards immobility regimes in Europe (Blachnicka-Ciacek et al., 2021; Brandhorst et al., 2020; Ullah et al., 2021), as exemplified by Brexit or the ongoing crisis on the Polish-Belarussian border.

From a structural standpoint, the pandemic removes the option of international mobility, which previous Polish young generations utilized as a way of escaping adverse conditions in their home state in the past (e.g., Szewczyk, 2015). Mobility as an independent, exploratory and experiential 'rite de passage' to adulthood (Pustulka et al., 2019) loses its appeal, becoming a risk rather than an aspiration. For many young adults, this means a future grounded in the locality of origin, perceived as a more familiar and supportive setting for 'sitting out' precarious times.

In sum, young people in particular find themselves confronted with ultra-uncertainty as a way of life. In this context, the process of becoming an adult is marked by intermittent accelerations and standstills. The examples of events that upend biographies and transitions include boomeranging in and out of a parental home, floating and stabilizing on the labor market, turbulences in intimate relationships, as well as alternating plans and abandoning transition processes that began prior to the crisis (see also Furlong et al., 2011; Mary et al., 2014). Therefore, **the ULTRAGEN project is developing a new theory of ‘shaky’ transitions as a way to gain a better understanding of how young people reach adulthood during social crises.**

Drawing on preliminary findings, we see the EA cohort as somewhat faltering across all transitional domains in the long-term, whereas the SA interviewees experience fewer shifts. From a temporal perspective, it can be stated that it is not the pandemic itself, but rather the point in one’s transition to adulthood that determines the main effects of the crisis - both immediate ones and those surfacing over time. We contend that having more tentative plans, alongside unfinished and provisional setups across education, employment, intimate relations and housing, has positioned the emerging adults at a comparatively greater disadvantage for the pandemic-related transitional delays in the future.

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Appendix 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of young adults interviewed for WP2

	<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Age cohort (EA/SA)</i>	<i>Educational/Labour Market Status</i>	<i>Household situation</i>
1	Marek	25	EA	PhD student /currently not otherwise employed	room rental
2	Zofia	29	SA	PhD student/works as a research assistant	own flat (paying mortgage)
3	Szymon	23	EA	student/part-time worker in gastronomy	living with parents
4	Anita	18	EA	high-school student	living with parents
5	Julia	20	EA	student/part-time worker in gastronomy	living with parents (alternating custody)
6	Sandra	36	SA	full-time corporate employee	own flat
7	Laura	26	SA	full-time corporate employee	flat rental
8	Luiza	28	SA	full-time corporate employee/PhD program dropout during the pandemic	living in partner's flat (during the pandemic purchased a flat, pays mortgage)
9	Gosia	29	SA	full-time/project employee (working shifts) in call center/ part-time student	own flat

10	Pola	19	EA	high-school graduate waiting for the exams results/call centre employee	living with parents
11	Klara	19	EA	recent high-school graduate enrolled at university	living with parents
12	Dominika	30	SA	PhD student/ works as a research assistant	own flat (paying mortgage) building a house
13	Dominik	22	EA	student/part-time retail worker	rental flat
14	Ela	22	EA	student/working as an assistant/job changes during the pandemic	rental flat
15	Bartek	24	EA	student/looking for a job	living with mother
16	Wojtek	19	EA	recent high-school graduate enrolled at university/ part-time worker in the hotel industry	living with parents
17	Mieszko	28	SA	full-time retail worker	rental flat (moved during the pandemic)
18	Karol	31	SA	production worker/part-time student	own flat (paying mortgage) building a house
19	Nikodem	18	EA	high-school student/ summer jobs	living with mother
20	Damian	23	EA	student/looking for a job	living with parents
21	Mateusz	21	EA	student/part-time worker in gastronomy	living with mother
22	Eryk	23	EA	student/temporary jobs	living with mother
23	Stefan	19	EA	recent high-school graduate enrolled at university	living with mother

24	Kamil	20	EA	construction worker/previously courier/pandemic-related university dropout	own flat (family property)
25	Kamila	21	EA	student/summer job in a call center	living with parents
26	Tymoteusz	24	EA	mobile phone service employee	living with parents
27	Nina	18	EA	high-school student/summer jobs	living with parents
28	Eliza	21	EA	part-time student/retail worker	living with parents
29	Magda	20	EA	intern at the tax office/previously odd jobs	living with parents
30	Weronika	31	SA	self-employed in tourism/corporate employee for several months during the pandemic	multigenerational household: living with one's parents and own family
31	Adela	26	SA	office administrator/assistant/ previously odd jobs	own flat (mortgage)
32	Mirek	27	SA	new entry-level job in logistics /previously a taxi driver and courier	own flat (mortgage)
33	Borys	29	SA	full-time employee in IT sector/PhD student	own flat
34	Ala	28	SA	student/ not working but has extensive professional experience (incl. work abroad)	own (inherited) flat; renting a second flat
35	Igor	31	SA	hospital employee	living with parents