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THE LEADERSHIP ROLES OF THE "MAN OF KNOWLEDGE": NAVIGATING POLARITIES AND POLARISATIONS IN POLISH ACADEMIA*

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In recent decades, the question of academic leadership has become a familiar topic in the works of prominent scholars (Bloom 2008; Fuller 2000, 2016, 2023; Haidt & Lukianoff 2018; Kennedy 2020; Nussbaum 1997; Turner & Chubin 2020; Ziman 1994, 1995). However, I propose to revisit this subject through the lens of Florian Znaniecki, author of *The Social Role of the Man of Knowledge* (1940), a work that predates contemporary debates by nearly a century. My aim is not simply to rehash old ideas but rather to demonstrate that established theoretical frameworks can offer fresh insights into contemporary challenges. While Znaniecki's work is best known for its typology of knowledge roles (technologist, sage, explorer, etc.; Wierzchosławski 2016a, 2016b, 2017), I will focus on the underlying theory itself. This approach serves a threefold purpose: to articulate, operationalise, and apply Znaniecki's theory of social roles to the specific challenges faced by Polish academic leaders.

The foundations for the theory of social roles were laid by the pioneers of American pragmatism, including William James, G.H. Mead, and Charles H. Cooley. The theory steadily gained importance and was further developed by the most influential sociological theorists of the time, such as

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Talcott Parsons, Robert K. Merton, Alvin Gouldner, Samuel Stouffer, and Erving Goffman (Biddle 1979, 1986: 67–92; Biddle & Thomas 1966; Raffel 1999: 113–124). Nevertheless, despite significant refinements and elaborations in the second half of the twentieth century (Goode 1960: 483–496; Sieber 1974: 567–578; Snoek 1966: 363–372; Marks & MacDermid 1996: 417–432), the theory of social roles has gradually lost its dominant status. At the same time, its key ideas, such as role strain or role balance, have become commonplace in the vast literature on well-being (Briggs & Reiss 2021; Seligman 2002, 2011), work–family life (Bednarz-Łuczewska 2013), work quality (Kowalik et al. 2022), or the highly influential job demands–resources (JD–R) theory (Demerouti et al. 2001: 499–512; Bakker and Demerouti 2017: 273–285), which also includes the question of (academic) leadership (Tummers & Bakker 2021). This trend further shows that while the socio-psychological theory of roles was losing its status in sociology, its main insights were being developed by psychologists.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the theory of social roles was applied to a vast number of fields. In its early, crucial contributions, we find *The Social Role of the Man of Knowledge* both as a classic in the theory of social roles, which was arguably the most elaborated part of Znaniecki's system (Jakubczak 1966: 251–269; Piotrowski 1976: 99–109; Szacki 2002: 768), and as a pioneering study of leadership in general and academic leadership in particular (Neiman & Hughes 1951: 141–149). Among the books of which Znaniecki was the main author, this one has remained the most influential (Chmielewski 2009: 223–231; Szacki 1984; Wierzchosławski 2016b: 111–130).

/// The Theory of Social Persons

While Znaniecki's work became the standard reference for the sociology of knowledge and the sociology of intellectuals (Eyal & Buchholz 2010: 117–137; Kurzman & Owens 2002: 63–90), mentions of it are conspicuously absent from the growing body of literature on leadership in general and on academic leadership (Holcombe et al. 2022; Kezar et al. 2006). Even among the few scholars who still utilise role theory, Znaniecki's work is rarely referenced (Hoyt & Price 2015: 531–539; Hoyt et al. 2013: 712–723; Boardman & Bozeman 2007: 430–463).

One possible reason for this neglect is the structural bias of the whole theory of social roles, which has been the subject of growing criticism among social theorists (Jackson 2011: 49–55; Raffel 1999: 113–124). Over more than half a century of developing his sociological system, Znaniecki

diverted from his initial fascination with symbolic interactionism, which was focused on the Self, and became one of most prominent representatives of the structural theory of roles. The turning point was *Social Actions*, where Znaniecki (1936) abandoned his previous psycho-sociological approach in favour of a purely sociological theory of roles. It is this version of his theory that became known in the Anglophone world, as he codified it in *The Social Role of the Man of Knowledge* (1940; Neiman & Hughes 1951) and later in his posthumous magnum opus, which was intended to summarise his project of theoretical sociology: *Social Relations and Social Roles* (Znaniecki 1965). Znaniecki's daughter, Helena Znaniecka-Lopata (2006: 230), an eminent representative and continuator of the theory of social roles, summarised Znaniecki's concept as follows: "A social role is a set of patterned, mutually interdependent social relations between a social person and a social circle involving negotiated duties and obligations, rights, and privileges." Znaniecki's structural bias resulted in an overemphasis on social relations to the neglect of theorising about the Self and human agency (Jackson 2001: 49–55; Raffel 1999: 113–124).

The paradox was that in his earlier – philosophical, sociological, and psychological – writings, Znaniecki (1925, 1987, 1988) was one of a few social theorists who creatively leveraged the polarity between two seemingly rival types of theories about social roles: structuralism and symbolic interactionism. He was thus able to combine an analysis of (sociological) roles with the (psychological) Self. This is where I see his originality and most significant contribution to the theory of social roles, and therefore, in my exposition of his theory of social roles – or more precisely, social persons – I will refer to his earlier, unique socio-psychological or psycho-sociological version.

Specifically, I will draw on the theory that emerged during his analysis of academic leadership. I find this rendition of his theory to be particularly elegant and comprehensive, as it creates a novel and much-needed theory of social persons, which is free of the reductionism and one-sidedness of structural theories of roles (Marks & MacDermid 1996; Jackson 2001; Raffel 1999). This version of his theory is not well known beyond Polish academia, as Znaniecki's report, titled *Education and Social Change*, remained in manuscript form until 1998 (Znaniecki 1998), with only a small excerpt ("Przodownictwo i zwolennictwo"; Znaniecki 1934; "Leadership and Followership in Creative Cooperation" in Znaniecki 1998: 122–138) and a summary in Polish (Znaniecki 1935) being published.

/// Methodology

In accord with Znaniecki's methodology, I based my analysis on 36 biographical documents, that is, in-depth interviews conducted with Polish academic leaders and international experts on leadership. In the preliminary phase of our research, Piotr Czekierda and I conducted 14 interviews with Polish academic leaders, and in the second phase in 2023 we added 22 more interviews. The interviewees were selected based on two criteria: their institutional positions of authority (past or present) as rectors, directors, deans, or chairs, and their experience as leaders of research teams and benefactors of prestigious grants, such as those from the ERC (Hoeing 2017). We focused thus on a particular group, as we believed that the role strain generated by the academic system would be very visible in it (Bennett & Elman 2006: 455–476). The interviews were complemented with four focus group interviews (FGIs) with representatives of Polish academe and ten interviews with international experts on leadership.

Our sample had its limitations. The process of recruiting the interviewees revealed to us how special Polish academic leaders are as a group and how overburdened they are. Many potential interviewees did not have time for an interview ("When I look at people who represent STEM, they often seem completely focused on their work and often, from my experience, treat such conversations as distractions" [R1][1]). With others, the negotiations at times lasted months, and some of our interviewees could only allot us time very early in the morning.

Though we aimed at having a gender-balanced sample (Raftery & Valiulis 2008: 303–307), it proved to be impossible. A typical and instructive negative reaction to our query for an interview was formulated by an ERC-grant recipient and mother of young children: "Thank you for the invitation, I appreciate it very much. I must admit that in the coming months, I am already so overloaded with various commitments that I lack the time for even my most important scientific work, so I have to decline." In the end, we interviewed nine women.

As we were interested in the inner life of leaders, in order to get to know the polarities our interviewees faced, including the shadow of academic leadership, we moved beyond the standard, sociological interview to include more challenging, direct questions typical of coaching dialogue.

[1] Respondent no. 1 – other respondents will also be labelled numerically.

As a rule, those leaders with whom we had some previous bonds of trust were more willing to be open about the tensions they had personally experienced. We devoted from one to three hours to each individual interview.

/// Introducing Polarity Thinking to Leadership Studies

To articulate and visualise Znaniecki's theory, we can use a polarity-thinking paradigm with its signature tool: a polarity map (Johnson 1992, 2020). I find this tool pertinent to Znaniecki's theory of social persons because in *Education and Social Change* (Znaniecki 1998: 45–46), he defined social persons (or social personalities) in a remarkably symmetrical, dynamic, and indeed polar way. Polarity thinking was inherent in Znaniecki's dynamic, and creative logic (Łuczewski 2023), which he shared with American pragmatism: Charles H. Cooley (1918: 43–51). Znaniecki wanted to overcome one-sided particularisms with a holistic, "organic view."

The polarity map consists of a left pole and a right pole, together representing polarisation (EITHER/OR) or polarity (BOTH/AND). Each pole has an upside (values) and a downside (shadow), with the downside defined by fears – negative outcomes resulting from overemphasising the left/right pole at the expense of the right/left pole. Conversely, the upside is defined by values, that is, positive outcomes resulting from emphasising the left/right pole. The objective of polarity thinking and polarity management is to transition from polarisation (OR) to polarity (AND) and thus to move from reinforcing negative fears (a negative feedback loop) to reinforcing positive values (a positive feedback loop).

Let's apply the polarity map to the theory of roles. Znaniecki (1998: 45–46) defined social persons through a set of polarities. He started with distinguishing two aspects of a social person: the social role (described by sociology) AND the Self (described by psychology). Accordingly, he then went on to distinguish two aspects of the social role: social position AND social function, while pointing out two aspects of the Self – the reflected Self AND the reconstructed Self.

Znaniecki defined social position as the set of an individual's rights, which include the right to be recognised as socially valuable (social standing), the right to have one's material needs satisfied (economic status), the right to be protected from the harmful activities of others (the sphere of security) and the right to engage in activities without being controlled (the sphere of privacy). For its part, a social function entails a set of obligations: to act on values characteristic of one's circle (objective task), perform social actions

bearing on other individuals (moral goodness), and refrain from actions that are contrary to the group's values (moral integrity; see Fig. 1). All the elements of a social role might also be considered to be polarities.

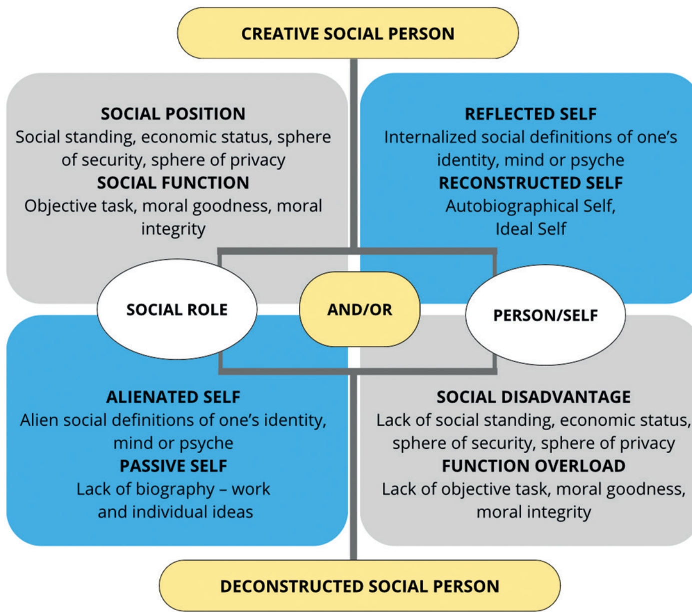

Figure 1. Polarity Map of Znaniecki's theory of social persons. Upsides and downsides of each pole

Source: own work. Illustration designed by Karolina Bialecka.

Now, there are polarities between social AND psychological aspects of a person as well as within the social role AND Self. This polarity has long been recognised in the theory of social roles in the form of the concept of role strain or role tension (Snoek 1966: 363–372; Creary & Gordon 2016: 1–6). If the polarity between and within roles is creatively leveraged, we will experience role balance (Marks & MacDermid 1996: 417–432) or even role accumulation (Sieber 1974: 567–578). On the other hand, if the polarity (tension, strain) between the social role AND the Self is not leveraged creatively, then we will experience the downsides of each pole, that is, role conflict (Hecht 2001: 111–121; Jones 1993: 136–141; Karkkola et al. 2019: 456–463; King & King 1990: 48–64; Stouffer & Jackson 1951: 395–406; Van Sell et al. 1981: 43–71). Role conflict happens when we overfocus on one pole (role) to the neglect of the other (Self), and thus we suffer from role overload (Creary & Gordon 2016: 1–6; Kelly & Voydanoff 1985:

367–374; Matthews et al. 2014: 72–91; Sales 1970: 592–608). For instance, if an individual focuses on social position and social function to the neglect of their Self, they run the risk of becoming a conformist, a social machine, or a "one-dimensional person," of being blended with their position and function, while their Self becomes alienated and deconstructed. In the language of the theory of roles, we discover that by overemphasis on the social role, we are inadvertently consumed by our latent role (Gouldner 1958: 444–480). By the same token, if an individual focuses on their Self to the neglect of their social position and function, their identity will become idiosyncratic, without relevance to the social world as such, and thus the individual loses both their social position and function (see Fig. 1).

If a leader stays in the two lower quadrants (downsides) they are stuck in a vicious circle (Hagan & Palmgren 1999; see Tummers & Bakker 2021). This phenomenon is described variously as self-undermining, a maladaptive regulation feedback loop, self-reinforcing negative path, or loss spiral, which might lead to burnout (Bakker & Costa 2014: 112–119; Bakker & Wang 2020: 241–251; Bakker & de Vries 2019: 1–21). On the other hand, if a leader stays in the two upper quadrants, they experience a virtuous circle (Hagan & Palmgren 1999), that is, role enhancement (Bednarz-Łuczewska 2013), an adaptive regulation feedback loop, a positive self-reinforcing spiral or gain spiral (Wrzesniewski & Dutton 2001: 179–201; Tims et al. 2012: 173–186), which can also be experienced in academia (Hobfoll 1989: 513–524; Van Wingerden et al. 2015: 51–67).

/// Leadership

Znaniecki's theory allows us to define four polarities characteristic of academic leaders, that is, (a) the fundamental intra-person strain between social roles and the Self, which splits into two sub-tensions: (b) the intra-Self strain between the reflected and reconstructed Self and (c) the intra-role strain between social function and social position, which in turn entails also (d) moral strain between moral obligations and moral rights. Let's now describe each of these polarities.

/// Academic Function and Function Overload

For all our interviewees, the social role of an academic represents undeniable – even the highest and noblest – values. In the interviewees' statements, we can identify all the norms of the scientific ethos as defined by

Robert Merton (1973): communality (as opposed to secrecy), universalism, disinterestedness, and organised scepticism. As one participant expresses it, "It may sound grandiose, but science makes sense in and of itself" (R3). Another interviewee explains, "What motivates me the most is pure curiosity. […] Our actions increase the understanding of the universe" (R4). A scholar who has collaborated with the leading academic figures of our time, including Nobel laureates and Fields medallists, says, "This is an incredible intellectual pleasure, because you collaborate with experts at a very high level, professionals who really know what they're doing" (R5).

When describing their work, these academics use metaphors such as "scholarship as passion," "scholarship as adventure," or "scholarship as family." An eminent Polish chemist likens the pursuit of science to sailing: "Science provides many opportunities to have the joy of understanding. Because we're always on the edge. […] When I'm sailing a boat in a strong wind […] I have that satisfaction – I'm on the edge. And this expands our pleasure" (R6).

These expressions convey the sense of the academic role, which allows scholars to discover autotelic, intrinsic values, be curious, and find joy. However, because these values are of the utmost importance, academic leaders, who are often at the forefront of scholarship, may tend to overfocus on their academic role at the expense of their Self. As a result, they may experience role tension, role strain, and eventually, role conflict.

When climbing the academic ladder, some of our interviewees discovered that the academic role became increasingly consuming, leaving less and less space for the pursuit of the values that initially attracted them. This is an example of "role ambiguity" (Kahn et al. 1964; King & King 1990: 46–64), as aspiring scholars associate the academic role with research and teaching, while in the course of their career it turns out to be more and more about managing teams and administration. A senior leader of one of the largest laboratories in Poland recalls:

> Oh, it's such a pity that you have to spend part of your scientific life saying to yourself, "…if I do some equations or take some measurements, I can draw up a list of items to buy." And I have to turn myself into a device-purchaser for six months or a year […]. I had to turn the whole team into a team of instrument purchasers. (R2)

Another, younger leader is even more critical of "administration, overloaded administration, absurd administration" and admits he gets carried away when he starts to comment on "bureaucratic gibberish with ten different layers":

> All the promised administrative simplifications end up causing more complications. When they tell us, "Okay, now we'll simplify the process of [...] purchasing international tickets; it will be easier," it turns out that instead of having one form to fill out, we now have two. [...] Twelve people had to sign it. [...] It's absurd, and I ordered a computer, for example, back in August, for one of my postdocs, but I still don't have it. I still don't have it. I have four people sitting in a room with four monitors because monitors are cheap and easy to get, and they don't have computers. [...] Maybe they'll come in March. Why, when I order office chairs, do I have to wait six months? (R7)

Academic leaders are not eager to take up key management roles, as these are considered to consume valuable time needed for research and teaching. It's understood that scholars burdened with administrative tasks cannot remain academically creative. An accomplished chair emphasises that she cannot expect that "such a busy administrative person and also a scholar" will be able to just sit in front of a computer and write a good article. Without creative freedom, time to reflect, and the peace needed for creativity, individuals in this position must develop extreme resilience and self-discipline to survive intellectually (R8). One of the leaders admits:

> I miss the time for scholarly work, which I sometimes manage to snatch. But maybe I'm wrong – it's not about time but rather about intellectual stamina. Intellectual stamina. When I'm very tired, I admit, I read detective novels or watch movies (the latter less often), but crime stories are the texts that draw me in with their plot. That's how I rest. (R9)

One interviewee expresses a similar sentiment, describing his tenure as director as "the biggest challenge," "the most down-to-earth and boring" job. He says that "[i]t was bad even back then, and it's worse now in terms of bureaucracy" (R10). Another interviewee who served as a department director for two decades concurs and elaborates:

> I see tension […] between teaching and, on the other hand, bureaucracy: the whole mass of bureaucracy – this nasty process in which the University becomes a corporation. […] I ask students if they've read the syllabi? "No, we don't read them." But we have to write them, right? – Modify them based on various new requirements and so on, and I have this feeling of wasted energy. […] That's the sort of thing that generally occupies our time. And I remember at the beginning of my academic and teaching career, something like 80%–90% of my time was devoted to teaching and research, and 10% to minimal bureaucratic requirements. That was at the beginning of the 2000s. Unfortunately, these proportions are reversing. I mean, we live in some kind of Matrix; we increasingly create something that no one really needs for someone, and we all pretend that it's important. […] Yes, and I see this tension growing. I see it in my friends – that some people are ready to leave academia simply because they don't want to live in the Matrix anymore. (R11)

The latter interviewee describes not only role overload and role ambiguity, but also the deep loss of meaning of academic work. Previously, he had compared scholarship to a lover. Now he feels that he is in a Matrix. The loss is the more striking the greater was an academic's promise of finding meaning. To be sure, not everybody is as critical as the above respondent. Our interviewees, though experiencing the overload and ambiguity of their functions, are generally not leaving academia, as they skilfully leverage the polarities inscribed in their functions and keep on returning from the downside of their function to its upside.

/// Academic Position and Social Disadvantage

In the global competition for excellence, talent, and funding, Polish academic leaders quickly realise the marginal, semi-peripheral position of Polish scholarship (Warczok & Zarycki 2016; Zarycki 2022: 363–369; Kolasa-Nowak 2022: 357–361). Even among those who have reached the pinnacle of their field on a global scale and have entered the race for Nobel prizes, there is a growing sense of challenge in keeping up with the pace of the globalising academic field:

> We are at the forefront of global science. However, […] the future seems to belong to large international teams. […] When you're in

> a team of a thousand people, everyone has their small part of responsibility, but overall, there are those more responsible, like the Nobel laureates, who are associated with it […]. That's what science looks like today, unfortunately. (R1)

Under such circumstances, Polish academia faces difficulties maintaining its academic standing while struggling to attract talent from around the world: "When someone from the West comes, they are considered second rate" (R12). Upon returning to Poland from one of the best Western universities, a leader in the Polish academic field felt as follows:

> My personal mentor, […] Professor Y, in front of people (this is important), told me that she had looked at my CV, and it's so bizarre. […] Because there is this notion that when someone returns from abroad – even if they were a professor there – something must have gone wrong, damn it […]. Something must not have worked out.

In the Polish semi-peripheral position, it is not only challenging to attract talent from global academic centres, but it is also easy to lose talent to these centres (Jałowiecki & Gorzelak 2007: 299–308). A leader of an ERC research group describes his most talented students, who surpassed him in many ways, leaving Polish academia. This brain drain resulted in growing challenges in building competitive teams at Polish research centres.

The low social standing of Polish academia is closely linked to its low economic status. The overall financial state of Polish academia is portrayed in very bleak terms. One leader in the Polish university field, an internationally recognised academic, has witnessed the growing impoverishment of Polish academia among her peers:

> In most cases, it is difficult to live comfortably as a Polish scholar […]. When I think about the situation of some of my friends in academia, it really seems that on retiring they'll have to sell a kidney to afford their medications. It's depressing. (R14)

The lack of funds is experienced by interviewees both early in their careers and even after they have established themselves as leaders in their fields. The director of one of the leading Polish social science departments has noticed that students have been making fun of the professors' antiquated cars

in the parking lot, and a growing number of faculty members are taking unpaid leave to seek better-paying jobs outside academia: "We are a fairly quickly pauperising social group" (R11). This, in turn, leads to "intellectual depletion, narrows ambitions, and does not encourage thinking about collective destinies from a broader perspective" (R15). However, only one among the leaders interviewed acknowledges contemplating leaving academia:

> It's even harder, even though I have tenure. It's not rosy at the university. Fewer and fewer grants – it's getting harder to get them, and the cost of living is rising. [...] The university can't keep up with salary increases. [...] It's getting harder. Maybe I should take another job, but who would employ an old professor? (R12)

Even in this dramatic situation, the interviewee did not change his job, instead opting to relocate to a more affordable city. In general, none of the interviewees have left academia, as they employ various strategies to overcome the economic challenges of their positions. These strategies include securing prestigious grants and combining their academic work with work as experts in the policy, business, or NGO sectors (Warczok & Zarycki 2016).

/// Moral Contradictions of Academia

The originality of Znaniecki's theory of roles was based on the fact that it included specifically moral polarities, which were a concretisation of an intra-role strain between roles and obligations, that is, tension between moral rights (the rights to security and privacy) and moral obligations (obligations to perform according to a given circle's rules of moral goodness and to refrain from actions violating the moral integrity of the group). When scholars overemphasise their moral obligations to the neglect of their moral rights, their individual sphere of security and privacy is compromised. They experience vulnerability and a violation of privacy instead of security. If, on the other hand, their individual rights come to the fore to the neglect of their moral obligations, they risk being self-righteous. On the basis of our interviews, we identified three main areas where academics' moral rights and obligations come into tension: (a) the process of peer review; (b) personal politics; and (c) political polarisation.

Michael Murray, one of the world's foremost leadership experts, points to the fundamental contradiction inscribed in academic work:

> The topic of academic leadership is, in my estimation, a critical issue these days. I won't go into my explanation of why I say that except to say: I have rarely met a happy professor. There is something about life in the academy that is draining the spirit. I think it may have something to do with the tendency to analyze, criticize, find fault, focus on mistakes and errors, etc. etc. etc. The human spirit thrives, I think, on valuing, appreciating, affirming, esteeming, and the like. (Cited after Łuczewski et al. 2021: 263; see also pp. 263–282)

The expert was referring here, among other matters, to the system of giving reviews, which is the basis for determining academic excellence. In interviewing one of Poland's most prolific authors, who publishes in a stunningly interdisciplinary range of leading academic journals, I said to him, "So rejection is just part of the game, right?"

> "You expect it."
> "You expect rejection?"
> "If it goes for review, it's already a success."

Despite R14 being accustomed to the rules of the academic game, I could also sense his resentment because of the flaws of this system:

> I always create a pipeline of several journals for each text, in the order in which I will submit it. If I receive a rejection, I simply send it to the next one, unless there are reasonable comments. Lately, it's almost always rejections. […] It's even better if it's right away – I'm fine with that. Today I received a rejection […], now, maybe a week after submission. I thought it was great; they don't really know, but okay. But when you find out after four months that you [got rejected] because they couldn't send it for review, that's scandalous!

Even though R14 is one of the most resilient and skilful leaders in the Polish academic field, he was still frustrated with the review system. One of the founders of the modern Polish academic system after 1989, who has an international reputation, opined in a similar vein that

> [t]he academic environment is a school of conformity. If you stand out with something that is not accepted in the environment, they will cut your head off. To publish something original, you practi-

> cally need to be a Nobel laureate first – although even Nobel laureates, in some journals, go through a whole ordeal with successive reviews. I remember […] a Nobel laureate spending a year and a half correcting his article. It's absurd. This entire peer review system has killed original thinking in the social sciences. (R16)

Another kind of tension compromises the sphere of privacy and security and involves personal politics. From the vantage point of a university rector, all attempts at reform or even miniscule organisational changes bring about polarisations: "the institution is not a structure, but the people who create it – are very different people […] In fact, every change is received by this huge community in two ways. Some see it as good and others as bad." These tensions might spiral into deathly conflicts. The theme was often alluded to in our interviews, yet not elaborated upon. For instance, when R8 decided to comment on the struggle between factions at her university, she prefaced it with a typical caveat: "I don't want to delve into [the details] because it would become too personal." Yet, she went on to say that

> there were very serious conflicts among the older faculty in our department. These conflicts led to the elected head […] not being recognised by the dean. There was a terrible scandal. Because some people were against his candidacy, various things were happening there. […] I realised back then that it's simply impossible to work in such conditions. Constant conflict is absolutely exhausting. I couldn't find any positives in creating such factions and battling or scoring against each other. These are not conditions for scientific work. (R8)

The polarisation is to be found not only between different factions of the faculty but also between management and professors. The former rector commented on this issue:

> What's the dean as far as the professors are concerned? The same as what trees are for dogs. So they can pee on them. It's a very apt observation. Indeed, leaders are often scapegoats because you can blame them for failures. Then you choose the next one, who can't change much either, but you can put the responsibility on them again. It goes on like that. […] The idea of a scapegoat is interest-

> ing and valid, but it all seems to happen through a social contract that envisions that, except in various extreme cases, nobody is doing great harm to anyone else. So the dean or rector don't harm the interests of the faculty too much, and in turn, they forgive him later for being at fault. (R16)

The last element undermining the sense of security and privacy at the university is political polarisation. A distinguished young professor described the process, which in his view had started recently. Though he espouses "maximum ideological neutrality," he sees that all of a sudden the faculty at his institution have started revealing their political views. "They even snarl at each other. That didn't happen before. It's disgusting. Will we be tearing each other apart because we belong to different factions?" (R12). In one dramatic case, a professor reported "the use of disciplinary procedures against colleagues with whom we disagree" in order to eliminate someone. Previously these might have been "soft pressures on those who deviate," but now "a penal system and prosecution, punishment, disciplinary proceedings" are in place at the university. He had become their object, which meant "a void was created around me, a sanitary cordon. […] No one had the courage to stand at my side, to discuss [the matter]. To survive, don't stand out – like in the Communist era!" (R17). This tension might be traced back to the growing polarisation between the Civic Platform and Law and Justice parties (Tworzecki 2019: 97–119; Wilson et al. 2020: 223–228). One of our participants reported being demoted when he decided to join an advisory body of one of these political parties (R18). Another professor recalls meeting his old mentor around the time he decided to provide his expertise to politicians: "'Hi, it's me!' – We used to know each other. He terminated our relationship. He cut off contact with me […]. It was unpleasant and tactless. […]. This is delegitimisation: 'You are illegitimate.'" Later on, "a student on the Faculty Council attacked me. […] Then no one stood up fundamentally to defend me" (R19).

What is alluded to here is also a potentially growing discrepancy between professors and students, who use the weapon of slander against one another (Haidt 2017; Revers & Traunmüller 2020). Though we did not conduct quantitative research, we can hypothesise that repercussions at the academy more often afflicted conservative than liberal academic leaders (Zipp & Fenwick 2006: 304–326). This imbalance was noted by a distinguished professor: "Conservatives are being pushed out, and progressives are on the rise and fighting. It is difficult to expect openness from

them" (R15). Having over the course of his global career encountered people with different beliefs, including "true conservatives who are not radicals and do not want to overturn the world," he "was not in a bubble." He introduced himself as a liberal and a representative of a "spiritual culture" based on openness, tolerance, curiosity about people with different beliefs, learning, strategic thinking, and innovation. He was against both dogmatism and a lack of strong ideas. Ideologies emerge in "the absence of strong ideas that do not lead to dogmatism." His idea of the university was based on leveraging the polarities characteristic of the Polish intelligentsia – between conservatism, liberalism, socialism, and Catholicism (R15).

However, the most radical and extreme case of political polarisation concerned an apolitical professor who was not only criticised by his colleagues but was also personally attacked by politicians and fell prey to massive, orchestrated online attacks: "People vent their frustrations and write down their grievances there. It's unbelievable. […] People have something in them, like gratuitous envy or lashing out at another citizen, and that's everywhere, not just in Poland. […] It's not just a Polish problem, it's not some unique Polish hell" (R20).

The moral contradictions of academia are captured in the metaphor of academia as family. On the one hand, academic leaders often describe their life as based on close ties and friendships, which create a "familial atmosphere" (R1). This metaphor articulates the sense of combining security with privacy, moral integrity with moral goodness. Under such conditions, it is natural that the representatives of each generation support one another "as much as possible," so that they quickly advance in their careers, complete their degrees, get prestigious grants and go on to do post-docs abroad (R1). Another professor tells a story that seems to reflect the parable of the merciful Father. Without informing him, his most talented postdoc took some sophisticated piece of machinery from the university laboratory to another country. One day he called the furious professor, who had been unable to continue his experiments, asking whether he could visit him:

> I didn't know whether to be furious or pleased […] I told him: "You brat, you took our machine and now we have to get a new one. Have you been using it at least? […]." My goodness, the guy couldn't wait to put it to good use; he hadn't gone to sell it after all, but to do science. He's our student and is working with Italians. So things are happening and that's the real purpose – for things to happen.

On the other hand, however, the academic family might quickly turn into a toxic family, where the sense of security, privacy, and integrity is destroyed. An experienced and versatile manager recalls:

> I have worked in many different environments. I worked in an international corporation – one of the largest. I've worked in public institutions. I've worked in non-governmental organizations. Finally, I also worked in the academic environment, serving as the vice-rector of the University of Warsaw for many years. And my impression is that the academic environment is the most toxic place in the world. […] Academia is becoming cruel. Not academia itself, but the practice of academia is turning into something very cruel, very inhumane. (Łuczewski et al. 2021: 263–282)

/// The Creative Self and the Alienated/Polarised Self

In scholarship at the highest international levels of the globalised academic field, overemphasis on the academic role is a matter of course. It's impossible for an academic to have a successful career without focusing on the attached social role. However, to invest so much in the academic role one has to internalise it and thus by extension one has to overemphasise one's reflected Self as an academic. This fusion or merger between one's social role and one's reflected Self is seen in the metaphors our interviewees employed: "When you take learning seriously, well, it's like having a lover, I mean it's something you dedicate yourself to completely. You immerse yourself in it entirely" (R11).

Leaders cannot achieve high academic positions without emphasis on their reflected academic Self. There are two challenges, however. First, as the social role of an academic leader is replete with tensions, contradictions, and polarisations, once it is reflected by the Self, the tensions, contradictions, and polarisations are internalised. Second, the reflected Self might be marred by a polarisation that cannot be overcome and reconstructed. The Self will thus not create a dynamic synthesis but will deconstruct into alienated and polarised parts. In other words, if leaders focus on their reflected Self to the neglect of their reconstructed Self, they will experience this downside or shadow of the academic social role. This is the situation we wanted to elucidate in the course of our conversations with academic leaders.

Even the most effective and prolific authors recount moments of exhaustion and despair: "I have such days when I really do not want to get

out of bed. And when I remind myself how long the list of tasks is for that day, I bury myself under the blankets even further; I set the timer for 15 minutes more. But there's no escape" (R5). In a similar vein, one of the most promising Polish scientists, the recipient of an ERC grant, described his career in Silicon Valley. He had to make considerable sacrifices to change from one postdoc position to another every two, three, or five years: "But to do that, I would have to leave everything here [in Poland] and commit fully to what I have there" (R3). A similar story is recounted by another ERC recipient:

> You know, when I was in Paris, there was a fierce battle to receive bonuses. At a certain point, this battle seemed to hinge on being entirely dependent on grant results, which is partly a lottery. [...] The entire process of obtaining grants, the associated uncertainty, and also the feeling of not knowing what to do – there's a lot of pressure in Paris. But that's the reality. [...] I think it's somewhat of an open secret. To get grants, people have to know you. I mean, your chances increase immensely if people on the commission know you. So, we networked a lot. That's what it's called. (R21)

In these accounts we can sense academia being guided by neoliberal norms, with their emphasis on flexibility and mobility (Jemielniak & Greenwood 2015: 72–82; Kociatkiewicz et al. 2022: 310–330; Lekka-Kowalik 2021). In some cases, this translates into almost incessant work. An eminent medical doctor describes the transition in his work from the usual 10 or 12 hours of work a day to 20 hours a day, including Saturdays and Sundays, and of going 8 to 10 nights without sleep.

> Michał Łuczewski: "It's a bit like being in the Marines, isn't it?"
> R20: "It's not healthy. That's why the average lifespan of doctors is not impressive. Few live to a ripe old age when they work like this; heart attacks await."

By similar token, R22 described her continuous work, as both a leader in key institutional positions at the best universities in the world (where meetings alone consumed 30–40 hours a week) and as an accomplished scholar, in terms of a calling and even a spiritual vocation:

> "I think I've constructed a narrative for myself that, for institutions or departments […] to function well, I have to put in as much work as possible and take care of everything."
> "So I'll ask a tough question. Is this a calling or is it workaholism?"
> "It's both."

Such a dedication to one's role, which demands sacrifices, produces challenges in the reconstruction of the Self, which might become alienated or polarised. An example of an alienated Self is to be found in the interview with the leader who used the metaphor of science as a lover. Towards the end of the interview, he was struggling to describe his relation with his Self:

> Michał Łuczewski: And your relationship with yourself? Because you talk about your relationship with another person, and you've also talked about your relationship with God. Is there any relationship of love towards yourself?
> R11: Well, that's a difficult topic. You know, I find myself not having time for myself. I mean, I'm willing to give it to someone else, not because I'm magnanimous, but simply because I'm not fully ready to establish a relationship with myself. And that requires some work, but not everything can happen at once, you know? Lately, a few people have told me that I should be kinder to myself – not just giving, offering something to others. Yes, but I think I'm not alone in this.

The case of a polarised Self, where the Self is engulfed by the academic pursuit and at the same time torn between different commitments, was articulated by R7. It was not so much a case of role strain or role conflict but conflicting internalised parts of his psyche:

> I don't know if I'm living through my work. I mean, I'm certainly living it quantitatively because it takes up an enormous amount of time. And it's also the case that due to my family situation, which is difficult now, and family health issues, there isn't much time left. I really see here that… well, it's like two angry dogs fighting over my time and tearing it apart between themselves.

A similar tension is described by R12, who additionally reports role ambiguity not only as an academic but also as a father:

> The boundaries between home and work have become blurred. I start working at six in the morning to have a peaceful time to do research while still at home; I come back early and spend the afternoon with my family. How much time to allocate to whom? […] Every time I look at my phone, my children say, "You're addicted to work." But I have to work; we have to eat. […] It's especially challenging during travel times. Leaving your wife with the children – that's harsh. I thank my wife for allowing me to travel, but staying away for three weeks was too much for us. So I gave up on trips – one conference a year at most.

The alienation and polarisation of the Self might lead to burnout. Because this topic encroached on a most private and intimate sphere, it was not a matter that was brought up and elaborated upon. Typically, it was barely mentioned, and thus it was up to the interviewers to flesh it out:

> I realised that I need a private sphere, independent of work, where I can relieve this stress. I enjoy sports, skiing, hiking in the mountains, and having places where I can completely disconnect. I convinced myself that I can't live only through work. There was a moment when I truly saw that the stress and the workload were too much, and I experienced burnout. (R8)

The costs of an academic career included (a) those to one's own well-being, and also (b) those to the well-being of one's family. One of the leaders expands on the moment when she experienced a deep crisis:

> R22: I was at quite an important meeting, and my headache became so severe that I had to leave the meeting. I collapsed and couldn't remember what was happening at all. I couldn't have foreseen that something like this could happen to me. […] You have to experience something like this to completely start over, because for six months I had to rest. And there had never been a time in my life when I did absolutely nothing. […] I went to the doctor, to the emergency room, and then to my own doctor, and the doctor

> said, "Oh, you have typical – I don't know what it's called in Polish – post-traumatic stress disorder."
> Piotr Czekierda: Post-traumatic stress disorder. How is it that we try to be in control and take care of ourselves, but we end up in such trouble?
> R22: If I understand correctly – and I'm still thinking about it – partly in my personal case, it's related to the fact that we see work as a calling.

In our research, we came across various other stories of burnout, where the body said no:

> Michał Łuczewski: I want to ask how you managed it – working 16 hours a day, sometimes at night. A wife. Children. Media involvement. How did you survive something like that?
> R23: You know, I think I didn't handle it well. I'm not satisfied with those two years and my approach to it. I imagine myself as a calm person who devotes enough time to prayer to trust in God in this difficult situation. I take care to choose ethically, what's good and what's bad, and I go about my work peacefully […]. Maybe because I'm […] a father of children, who was completely shattered at that time. I also had the added burden of suffering from intense intestinal pain. There were times when I lay on my bed for an hour, clutching my stomach, howling in pain, not answering the phone. Maybe it was also the stress associated with it. Maybe something else. I don't know. Tough times.

Another leader reminisced about the time when he started suffering from depression, which was around the period when his kids were born:

> In that intense life, at some point, raising the children, working two jobs, and, well, a lack of understanding of what was happening around me, all of it led to me starting to not sleep well, being overly exhausted, and also irritated. […] I used to be the kind of person who thought I could handle everything on my own, you know, that I was strong, that I could handle everything. But at some point, that started crumbling, and it was like an implosion. (R24)

In our interviews, we found allusions to further personal costs of academic careers: "This is a non-financial cost. Yes, it's family. And the closest" (R11). There are also descriptions of parting ways with a partner:

> For many years, we spent a lot of time on airplanes, traveling everywhere, giving presentations all over the place, and in the meantime, you know, working. It was an exhausting lifestyle for several years, and I had a sense of burnout, an enormous level of stress. (R21)

> One thing I am sure of and one thing I regret is that I do not have children. And I don't have them because I was constantly putting them aside for later, thinking they would disrupt my scientific work. That there'd be a toddler running around and I wouldn't be able to work any longer, so I kept on postponing it until it was too late – psychologically, I would say – not even physically, but psychologically. I regret that, because I missed something of value, and of great value at that. Something very precious… But one can't have everything. (R10)

Because of the possible work–life conflict in academia, some of our respondents highlight that family might be an obstacle for a successful academic career. "The best academic is single" (R12). "I see greater opportunities for people who are childless. I mean in the academic sense; going for scholarships, etc. Even in things like arranging one's own time in the evening – rest and late-evening work"; "I am divorced and when I was deciding whether to become president of the university, I knew it would take my whole time. So my decision was very conscious" (R25). On the other hand, however, some academics see that family can be an important source of resilience: "family, and especially kids, give us an additional value that can in no way be categorised" (R26).

/// Conclusions

In this paper, we have identified four fundamental polarities, using Florian Znaniecki's theory of social persons. Polish academic leaders are facing the diminishing role of their social position in all the dimensions Znaniecki distinguished: social standing, economic status, the sphere of security, and the sphere of privacy. They additionally see that their social function is becoming more and more demanding and consuming. In other words, Polish

academic leaders are experiencing a deconstruction of the values that define the rights associated with their position and a growing emphasis on the obligations inscribed in their function. They invest more and more into what seems to give them less and less, while it demands more and more. This leads, in turn, from the upside of academic life, which attracted these individuals to the university in the first place, to three downsides of academic life: (a) social disadvantage and function overload, (b) moral contradictions, and (c) alienation and polarisation within the Self. If these downsides remain unaddressed or poorly leveraged, they can result in the deconstruction of the academic social person, that is, leaving academia (a sociological strategy) or burnout (a psychological outcome).

However, Polish academic leaders are still able to turn role strains and conflicts into creative tensions. Their example shows not only the downsides of Polish academia but also the way forward. In reflecting on their pasts, they make an effort to reorganise it creatively in the form of meaningful biography. In turning to the future, they might see the same discrepancy between their ideal Self – the Self they want to actualise – and the projection of their future Self, which will be guided by the rules of the academic field and does not allow for their imagined and projected Self-actualisation. By becoming *homines prospecti* (Seligman et al. 2016) they may reevaluate their career and find that the key to their well-being is not to allow for the merger of their Self with academia. "The key to happiness in the long run is not to allow the academic environment to dominate you. I do not allow academia to define me" (Łuczewski et al. 2021: 263–282).

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/// Abstract

This paper has three objectives. First, it seeks to reestablish Florian Znaniecki as the founding father of the sociology of leadership by emphasising his enduring relevance in this field. Second, it aims to revive Znaniecki's theory of social persons and highlight his innovative contributions to the broader theory of social roles. Last but not least, it endeavours to apply this theory to the unique challenges faced by academic leaders in Poland. To articulate and operationalise the concealed, dynamic, and creative logic inherent in Znaniecki's theory, this paper draws on Barry Johnson's polarity-thinking paradigm with its signature methodological tool, the so-called polarity map. Through an in-depth analysis of 36 interviews with academic leaders in Poland, the present study reveals the individualised approaches and strategies these leaders employ in navigating the polarities in Polish academia. Znaniecki's theory allows four principal polarities in the experiences of Polish academic leaders to be identified: (a) the fundamental intra-person strain between social roles and the Self, which splits into two sub-tensions, that is, (b) the intra-Self strain between the reflected and reconstructed Self, and (c) the intra-role strain between social function and social position, which in turn entails also (d) the moral strain between moral obligations and moral rights. The management of these strains can result in either detrimental polarisations, leading to the deconstruction of the social person, social role, and Self, or the nurturing of creative polarities, fostering the development of a more creative and adaptive social person, social role, and Self.

Keywords:
academic leadership, burnout, role strain, Znaniecki, social persons

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