

Perspectives of Romanian Students about Life in Social Isolation

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Abstract: The global crisis of COVID-19 represents, because of the measures adopted, an unprecedented social natural experiment. All over the globe, a common rule was to impose measures of social isolation at home, with a very limited and restricted possibility to go outside. The daily routine was massively changed for all the people that were not considered essential workers. A significant part of economic activities were shut down, others were moved to the online environment. Education was a privileged domain that was able to easily take the step towards distance learning. But how did the students receive the new challenges? How did they reconfigure their new lifestyle in insolation? Trying to get an answer to these questions, we designed and applied two sociological studies. First, at the beginning of the pandemic crisis (15 March - 30 April) we conducted a qualitative interview of the life-story type ($N_1=50$), followed up by a quantitative survey ($N_2=518$) in the last days of the state of emergency in Romania ($N_2=518$). The combined and compared results from both studies reflect very complex and interesting new configurations of the daily life style of students.

Keywords: social isolation, students, daily life pattern, Covid19, higher education.

Introduction

Due to its unprecedented magnitude, the forced social isolation imposed by the national emergency rules in the middle of March 2020 in order to avoid the community spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus represent a topic that will generate plenty of further research and theoretical interpretation. In Romania, the state of emergency was declared on 16th of March 2020 and it remained in force until 15th of May 2020, with a strict limitation of the possibilities to go outside of one's home, including a filled in self-assumed declaration (a new one for each trip outside) with included several reasons and mostly allowed one to go out only around their residential address.

From the perspective of the classical sociological theory, this issue can be approached at least from point of view of the paradigms of social control, public opinion theories, socialisation and Maslow's needs paradigm. The social isolation is generally a phenomenon related mostly with elderly people and usually represents a cause for deep trauma and health troubles (De Jong Gierveld & Havens, 2004, Nicholson 2012, Coyle & Dugan 2012, Steptoe et.all, 2013). A large series of studies prove that the social isolation and loneliness are directly related with depression and other psychological problems (Weiss, 1973, Hall-Lande et.all, 2007, Cacioppo&Cacioppo 2014). During the COVID-19 pandemic, a large part of population went into isolation together with family members or with friends, so the problem was not strictly related to the loneliness, but to the avoiding the social contacts with other people. In other words, a large amount of healthy people were forced to go into social isolation, quitting a normal lifestyle and thus this was surely a challenge, and not an easy one to take. Starting from a continuous source of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) because of contradictory messages provided by the mass-media, the generation of a social phobia (or social anxiety disorder) remains only one step away (Clark, Wells, 1995). The two months spent at home, with very restrictive and minimal possibilities to go outside (usually weekly or more rarely) was not an easy period.

Methodology

Starting from the European Sociological Association initiative for a special issue of the *European Sociologist Journal* to collect contributions related to this crisis under the general topic *Pandemic (Im)Possibilities*, we decided to try a similar exercise with students, about their life. Trying to collect high valuable content, the call for this research was not related to the teaching activity, and thus involved only contributors with an intrinsic motivation, of those who wanted to share their feelings related to their lifestyle during the social isolation period. The main research question for this research was: *how did the students go through the pandemic crisis and what were they feeling about it?* For this we designed two studies, a qualitative one, based on a single question interview and a quantitative one, as a sociological online survey (Ilut, 1997, Gadamer 2006).

The qualitative interview included only one question: *What do you do during a day of social isolation?* These stories covered a period of time of one month and half, from the middle of March until the end of April 2020. The contributors were students from various specialisations: sociology, human resources, economical studies, architecture, psychology, arts and so on. The answers were analysed using the social hermeneutical techniques (Codoban, 2001) through which we identified 11 different themes. This hermeneutical analysis and the full stories offered by the students are available in the volume *Student during a pandemic. 50 stories about life in social isolation* that was published as an e-book, at Cluj University Press.

The sociological survey was applied online in the last three days of the state of emergency in Romania, 12th -14th of May, 2020. The main research question was: *how did the students go through the pandemic crisis and what are they feeling about it?* For this aim, we elaborated an online questionnaire using Google Forms with 10 items and we randomly promoted it online on various groups (on Classrooms and Facebook). We collected 518 answers, coming from students from various Romanian institutions (not limited to West University of Timisoara). The approach for selecting the subjects does not allow the

postulation of the representativeness of the results, so it is just a sample of availability. The subjects were informed about the purpose of the study and they offered their consent for filling in the questionnaire. The data were anonymously analysed and the confidentiality of each person was fully respected. For this paper we analysed only three items related by the daily life style during the social isolation imposed by the COVID-19 crisis: Q2 *Compared to the pre-crisis period, how much have you changed your lifestyle?* Q5. *What new activity/thing did you do during this period of isolation?* and Q9. *If such a situation of social isolation were to be repeated, what would you do differently?*

Results

The hermeneutical analysis of these stories reflects several common topics that define the new profile of the daily life during this period. In what follows we italicized the hermeneutical interpretation of the students' papers (Nadolu, D. 2020, 8-16):

(I). the abandoned rituals: *Hand shakes. Remembering a normal day. Far away from the city and from the office. The avoiding of hugging. Dreaming of the stuff being missed. The waking up in the morning.*

One of the most frequent topic was related to various activities and habits that were suddenly cancelled due to the national rules for reducing the spread of the virus into the community. The *normality* defined by plenty of common gestures and habits was significantly changed during several days and this was a difficult adaptation.

(II). New feelings, the rediscovery of the emotion: *We learn what longing means. Panic and compassion. Rediscoveries. Literal emotions. Hiding in myself. I want to cry. Experiencing emotions. Too sad. The isolation from my mind.*

The completely new experience of social isolation has generated plenty of emotional tensions, mostly with a negative orientation due to the health risks of the situation and due to an unpredictable evolution. Under a large wave with negative news, the self-isolation at home was generally perceived as a strong negative situation.

(III). New dimensions of time: *The accelerated time. Time seems to fly by. Too much time. Falling asleep in the morning. We have time for*

everything. I have an obligation to enjoy time. Another 30 days! Time and peace. Every day is the same."

Moving inside and cancelling of almost all outdoor activities meant a large amount of time for new daily routines but also some difficulties to manage it under the uncertain circumstances. At least at the beginning of the crisis it was difficult to estimate how long it would take and what were the best ways to deal with the new life schedule.

"(IV). Between screens, online courses: *I finish with one screen and stick to another. In the virtual world. I moved to the online environment. I get bored of courses in the form of a screen. I eat and listen. Time is passing slowly. Represented by an avatar. On YouTube. A society obsessed with the visual."*

The world has never before been better prepared for physical social isolation than today, due to the spread of the Internet all over the Globe (more than half of the world population has access to the digital universe). Of course, there is still a significant percentage of population who cannot afford the digital technology or does not have digital competences. But the students, with very few exceptions, are not part of the disconnected social reality. So, higher education in Romania, due to COVID-19 crisis went complete online and all the activities followed the regular schedule. The digital screens became the new windows towards the class, one's friends, the homework and they remain open almost 24/7. The smartphone has change its role from an entertainment provider to a work tool, so it became less attractive. But the academic life did not stop during these month.

"(V). New rites, anti-COVID-19 behaviour: *Watch out for the virus! Life at the window. Nothing interesting. Now history is being written. Why are our rights taken away? Doors close. On the basis of a certificate. Always have something to do. Another delivery. Those statements... Our friend, the disinfectant. Like the surgeon. Let's listen to the doctors' advice."*

The major changes of the daily routine came with new behaviours, new home rules and new rites concerning mostly one's hygiene, but also one's usual program. Returning at home with basic provisions has become a very strict procedure related to how to manage the stuff bought, how to clean it and eventually how to let them into the quarantine space. Any person or product coming from outside were potentially contaminated and they were treated consequently.

“(VI). How did it start? - Last Saturday. I sigh for the past. A Wednesday morning. After the holidays in Italy. Life training. I'm talking to all of me. Chinese "from that" virus. Forced leave.”

If at the beginning of March 2020 the duration of the restrictive rules would have been established, probably many people would have had a more planned approach of the crisis. But the pandemic came very quickly, the restrictions were imposed and updated every several days, and it is difficult to estimate when the news about COVID-19 became a serious subject, when it became a dangerous reality in Romania, when people started to avoid going outside.

“(VII). Divine salvation, reconciliation, resignation: Relationship with Him. Everything happens for a reason. A great lesson. I like this break. I don't dislike it. Let's smile. I want to hear good news. There is also a good part. I breathe a sigh of relief. Quiet. I'm glad and I pray.”

As it happens in any major crisis in life, the re-evaluation of one's main principles and values represents a usual approach, full of hope or full of resignation. The decreasing of the everyday life speed offered the possibility for introspection, for spending time with one's own things, to re-evaluate one's main values in life. The moving to online of the religious services helped a large part of the population to take part in these ceremonies more frequently than before the pandemic crisis¹.

“(VIII). With the health of the earth in mind: The empty city. The planet is breathing. Life lesson. You can hear the birds talking. Hiking in the woods. Spring in the village. A few fir trees.”

The decreasing of the pollution level due to the reducing of the regular human activities represented another constant topic during the pandemic period. Even if this was a side effect, the pictures with clean waters from Venetia and the problems with the lack of storage capacity for not needed oil all over the Globe confirm the relevance of this topic.

“(IX). Another approach: continuous movement, financial problems, materials, job: Extroverted in times of crisis. I feel entrepreneurial. Everyone has at least one instalment to pay. Life with goals.”

¹The Easter Religious ceremony at Partos Monastery located in a very small and marginal village from Timis County, where usually there are less than 100 participants, had have over 15.000 online views.

(<https://www.facebook.com/ManastireaPartos/>).

Some of the students didn't stop working during this period, they had to adapt to the new conditions and to keep doing professional activities, even in a remote way. One of the most increased activity was the courier services and any idea of offering transport for goods was in very high demand.

“(X). No one wants to be the next one- about death and serious things: *You can't stop life. The virus does not forgive you. The end of the world. I can feel his panic in his voice. Let's isolate ourselves as much as possible.”*

The fear of death, against the background of continuously increasing of the casualties all over the world, was another common feeling, sustained by the incoherent medical responses to the pandemic crisis. One of the most expected daily news was the official announcement of the new confirmed cases and the evolution of deaths, a quite unusual and irrelevant type of content before the crisis. The idea of *plateau* and *descending trend* represent probably the most expected statistical data during this period.

“(XI). At home, always at home - the little things at home: *The smell of childhood. The rooster in grandma's garden. Home to me, home to you. I love to cook. Yoga before bed. I'm reshaping myself. I don't want to escape. A new recipe. I'm not in the mood today! There is always something to do.”*

Another very intense subject was related to the new dimension of the idea of *home* as a special space to spend the entire day, with parents and even with grandparents, as a return to childhood. From the small apartment to a house with garden, the *home* became the personal safety fortress, a very secure space which eventually became insufficient.

These are eleven subjects extracted from the fifty recorded life stories offered by the students that accepted to participate in our research. Their stories represent testimonies of their lives during the social isolation in the times of a pandemic. Their stories were also a good motivation for applying a sociological questionnaire about the students' feelings during the last days of social isolation. A part from the results of this sociological survey is presented below.

One of the questions included into this analysis was related to the changing of the lifestyle during the social isolation period, and the results are presented in Figure 1:

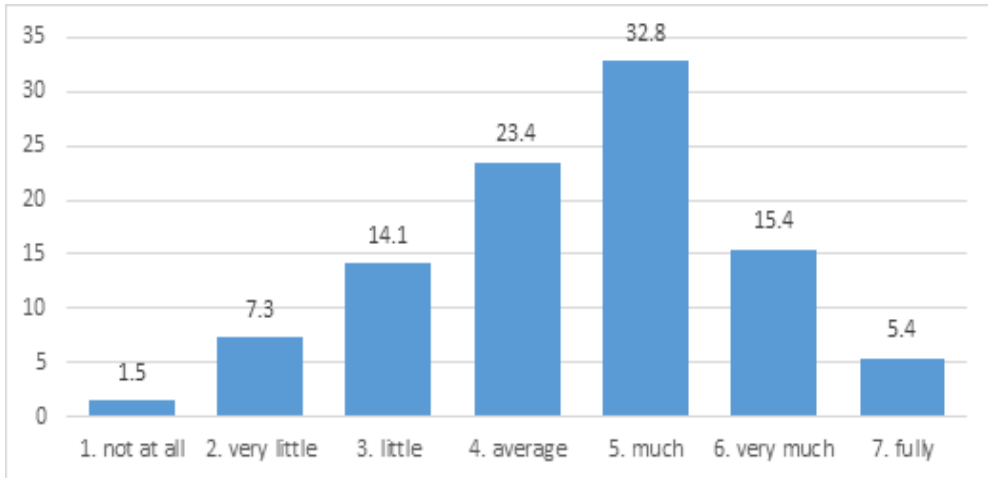


Figure 1 – *Compared to the pre-crisis period, how much have you changed your lifestyle?*

With the median value of 5 (out of 7), as it was somehow expected, the social isolation had a significant impact on students' life, firstly probably due to its novel and unusual aspects. There are statistical significant differences between genders, women felt a deeper change of the lifestyle (mean of group 4.56 for women vs. 4.06 for men and $t = -2.944$, $\text{sig} = 0.04$). There are not significant differences between age, type of studies, the place where they spent the time in isolation (the same city where they are studying or their residential city) and the persons who stay together (family, friends, relatives and so on).

But there is a significant difference in what concerns the professional status, namely the people that lost their job due to the pandemic were more affected than others (mean score 4.75 comparatively with the group that kept their jobs and had to go daily outside with a mean score of 3.88 and Pearson Chi Square = 59.842, $\text{sig} < 0.0001$). We presented into a more descriptive way this item because it was used as a distinct index for the analysis of the next two questions: what new activities did the students do during the social isolation and how did they intend to prepare for the next potential wave of isolation (expected for the coming autumn).

Concerning these new habits discovered by the students during the period of social isolation and the intentions for the next possible wave,

there were several activities that define quite clearly the new lifestyle inside (Figure 2):

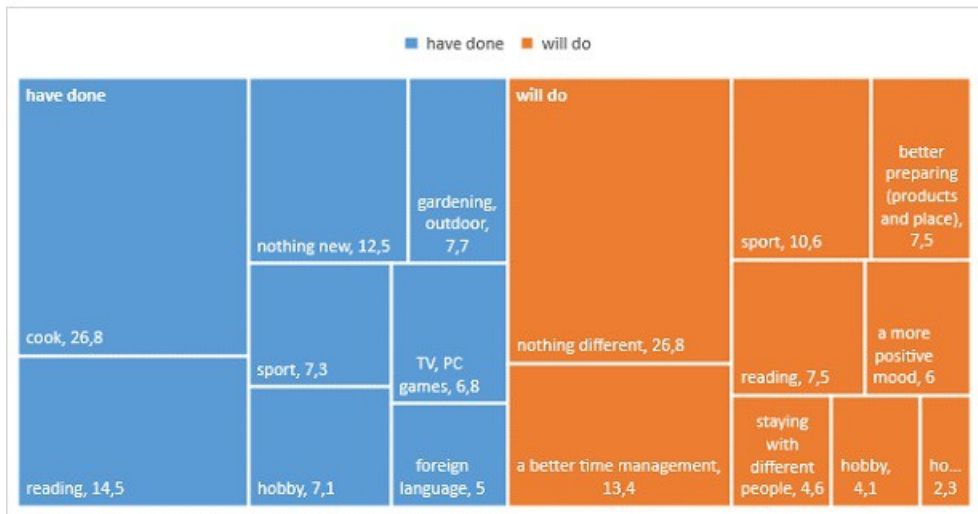


Figure 2 – What new things/activities the students did during the isolation period and what they intend to do differently if a new wave will occur

It can be observed that 85% of the subjects tried something new during this period (especially cooking and reading, that cumulate 41%). For the estimated behaviour related by an hypothetical second wave a quarter of the subjects did not want to change anything, and a significant percent of over 20% expressed their intention to have a better time management (schedule, daily program, goals) and also a better organisation during the isolation period, including the purchasing of the necessary products and the setup of a different place for isolation. The intention of cooking was transformed into a healthier lifestyle with sport and diet. A quite important percent (6%) expressed their intention to have a better emotional approach of the new (hypothetical) crisis with less panic and more rest. The students that intended to not change anything for the second (hypothetical) wave, in the previous one mostly cooked, read and also gardened and carried out outdoor activities.

The cross tabulation between these two questions and the perception of the life change is presented in Table 1 (compared mean, higher values represent a significant change of the lifestyle during the social isolation period):

Table 1 – *What the students did and what they intend to do, depending on the level of affecting of their life*

did		will do	
nothing new	4,08	nothing different	4,00
gardening, outdoor activities	4,25	hobbies	4,14
hobbies	4,27	reading	4,38
foreign language	4,46	sport	4,42
TV, PC games	4,50	homework	4,58
cooking	4,55	better preparing (products and place)	4,64
reading	4,61	a better time management	4,69
sport	5,03	staying with different people	5,04
		a more positive mood	5,23

Following these data, the students that did nothing new during this period were less affected by social isolation compared to the students more affected that carried out sporting activities. Also, the students less affected by social isolation would not change their approaching for the future hypothetical wave, compared to the students more affected that intend to have a more positive mood, with less panic and more rest.

Discussion

The social isolation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic crisis massively affected the daily lifestyle for a large amount of people. Even though higher education went online, the students were also significantly influenced by this unprecedented situation. Despite the high amount of available free time, the incertitude of the process evolution made difficult the setup of the daily routine in a more efficient manner. But, a large part from the investigated sample of 518 students discovered new activities to fill this time, ranging from cooking and other hobbies to reading and personal development. The positive

evaluation of these new habits is reflected also into a large option for not changing anything in case of a hypothetical new wave of the pandemic crisis or to have a better organization of the daily agenda and the conditions of isolation. The factors that have contributed to this quite good adaptation are probably keeping their basic professional activity functional (i.e. learning) and the high level of digital literacy.

Conclusions

The rediscovery of the social interactions and the returning to the *normality* into the public space will keep for a while the traces of the pandemic period. If for the Romanian society to meet in the street a person wearing medical mask was a strange fact until the beginning of March 2020 it is quite sure that from now, it will be a common occurrence for the months or years to come. Regardless of the subsequent evolution of the COVID-19 issue the memories related to the life into isolation will fade and mostly only the positive ones will remain, associated obviously with a negative moment in our personal life. Despite all new challenges, difficulties and innovations related to the new daily routine, it is quite clear that a hyper-interconnected world has this weakness point: the very quick contagion.

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