

IDENTITY CHANGES IN CRISIS SITUATIONS.
ANXIETY, FRUSTRATION
AND ANGUISH DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

In this article, a review of the socio-anthropological literature on the impact of pandemics on the mental health of the population is made. Also, the way this pandemic affects the construction of identity of the population affected by pandemic is taken into discussion. The historical-anthropological perspective refers to the plague epidemic that affected Europe during the Middle Ages, to its psychological impact from the perspective of the individual's relationship with otherness - as a possible source of danger. The article presents a series of similarities and differences from the perspective of anguish, anxiety and frustration caused to the population by the plague pandemic and the Covid-19 pandemic, highlighting the results of studies published during 2020 in journals indexed in Web of Science, dedicated to the impact of the pandemic. of Coronavirus on the mental health of the population. The research focused on several dimensions of the social construction process of the Covid-19 pandemic, among which we mention: information on the pandemic, restrictions imposed by the authorities as elements of social (re)construction of the limit of the human condition, medicalization of the social life and the perception of the contemporary society as a risk society. In this article we will refer exclusively to the results aimed at changes in the identity construction of people affected by the pandemic.

Keywords: pandemic, psychological impact, mental health, anguish, anxiety, frustration

Résumé

Dans cet article j'ai passé en revue de la littérature socio-anthropologique sur l'impact des pandémies sur la santé mentale de la population. Aussi, la manière dont cette pandémie affecte la construction identitaire de la population touchée par la pandémie est prise en compte. La perspective historico-anthropologique fait référence à l'épidémie de peste qui a touché l'Europe au Moyen Âge, à son impact psychologique du point de vue de la relation de l'individu avec l'autrui - comme une source possible de danger. L'article présente une série de similitudes et de différences du point de vue de l'angoisse, de l'anxiété et de la frustration causées à la population par la pandémie de peste et la pandémie de Covid-19, mettant en évidence les résultats d'études publiées en 2020 dans des revues indexées dans Web of Science, dédiée à l'impact de la pandémie. du coronavirus sur la santé mentale de la population. La recherche a porté sur plusieurs dimensions du processus de construction sociale de la pandémie de Covid-19, parmi

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lesquelles nous citons : les informations sur la pandémie, les restrictions imposées par les autorités comme éléments de (re)construction sociale de la limite de la condition humaine, médicalisation de la vie sociale et perception de la société contemporaine comme société du risque. Dans cet article, nous nous référerons exclusivement aux résultats visant les changements dans la construction identitaire des personnes touchées par la pandémie.

Mots-clés : pandémie, impact psychologique, santé mentale, angoisse, anxiété, frustration

Rezumat

În acest articol se realizează o trecere în revistă a literaturii socio-antropologice privind impactul pandemiei asupra sănătății mintale a populației. De asemenea, este luat în discuție modul în care această pandemie afectează construcția identității populației afectate de pandemie. Perspectiva istorico-antropologică se referă la epidemia de ciumă care a afectat Europa în Evul Mediu, la impactul ei psihologic din perspectiva relației individului cu alteritatea – ca posibilă sursă de pericol. Articolul prezintă o serie de asemănări și diferențe din perspectiva angoasei, anxietății și frustrării cauzate populației de pandemia de ciumă și pandemia de Covid-19, evidențiind rezultatele studiilor publicate în cursul anului 2020 în reviste indexate în Web of Science, dedicate la impactul pandemiei de Coronavirus asupra sănătății mintale a populației. Cercetarea s-a axat pe mai multe dimensiuni ale procesului de construcție socială a pandemiei de Covid-19, printre care amintim: informarea asupra pandemiei, restricții impuse de autorități ca elemente de (re)construcție socială a limitei condiției umane, medicalizare, a vieții sociale și a percepției societății contemporane ca societate de risc. În acest articol ne vom referi exclusiv la rezultatele care vizează schimbări în construcția identitară a persoanelor afectate de pandemie.

Cuvinte cheie: pandemie, impact psihologic, sănătate mintală, angoasă, anxietate, frustrare

1. Introduction

The specialized literature in the field of social and humanistic sciences dedicated to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health of the population is very rich and topical. This paper reviews the historical-anthropological perspective on pandemics, with reference to the plague pandemic in Medieval Europe, presenting similarities and differences with the current pandemic situation. Also, a series of papers dedicated to the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of the population, with reference to studies published on this topic during 2020 in journals indexed in the Web of Science, are analyzed.

This research is addressed mainly to public health specialists who are interested in the psychosocial impact of the pandemic, especially on the mental health of the population. We wish to use the results summarized in the literature as a starting point for discussing coherent mental health policies in the post-pandemic period.

2. Pandemics and social fear - historical presentation

Over time, social fear has been directed at various manifestations of a subjective otherness, such as the supernatural (divine, demonic, or magical), the stranger (in the basic sense, as the one belonging to another culture, religion, civilization, or the one perceived to have interests divergent from those of one's own community), the dysmorphic (the one who does not share the same morphic characteristics with the fearful individual, the other race, the "sick" or even the imagined dysmorphic: pygmies, giants etc.).

Fear of illness and of the ill person polarizes social imagination, as it is generated by a threat that can take on the character of the immediate - a spreading pandemic - and about which there is a cultural memory, that includes devastating experiences for the community. The plague is one such example, a disease that has terrified Europe for centuries. Along with the plague, history has seen the devastating effects of pandemics of typhoid fever, Spanish flu, as well as recent threats of pandemics of bird flu, swine flu and their possible mutations.

3. Jean Delumeau about fear in the West. An anthropological perspective on the plague in Europe from 1348-1720

Jean Delumeau (2021), in his volume "Fear in the West", analyzes, from a historical and anthropological perspective, the collective behaviors during the plague that affected Europe between 1348 and 1720. From the fourteenth century to the sixteenth century, says Jean Delumeau (2021), the plague appeared every year in one part or another of Western Europe. The chroniclers of the time called the successive outbreaks of the disease "the first plague", "the second plague", ... "the sixth plague", in a manner somewhat similar to that in which contemporary epidemiologists count the waves of the current Covid-19 pandemic. The historical experience of pandemics, of which Delumeau speaks (2021), implies the disappearance of up to 40% of the population of the European community in a single such wave of the plague pandemic.

Therefore, the collective memory and, especially, the historiographical memory of humanity generated a feeling of strong negative emotion - especially panic - in the early stages of the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in China, Europe and then around the world.

The quoted author (Delumeau, 2021) shows that, during the plague, there was a state of nervousness and fear that covered the whole of Europe. Boccaccio (2003), in his book "The Decameron", shows that "a lot of the sick have been so little helped, because of the horror they inspired in healthy people, left to such a cruel mess that we can count, with enough ground, to more than 100,000 the number of those who lost their lives within the walls of the fortress".

4. Historical manifestations of the social fear of pandemics: undertakers

The particularly long period of the plague pandemic and the devastating violence of its waves generated a social fear of pandemics. The appearance of pandemics was attributed to the will of the Divinity, to divine punishment, to fatal astral conjunctures or to "rotten emanations of the soil or subsoil." The theory of miasmas meant that, at the time, people in charge of collecting corpses were protected with masks in the shape of a bird's beak. The image of people wearing masks, but also of isolates from the first period of the Covid-19 pandemic, resonated in the collective mind with the image of plague beaks, about which the population did not have a direct collective memory, but an indirect one, through literary and historical evocations, often exaggerated in terms of the apocalyptic dimensions of the pandemic.

5. The pandemic and the refusal of otherness. The other, as a social danger

The coverage in the media of images of the old pandemics was able to increase the degree of panic and anxiety of the population, especially in the early period of the Covid-19 pandemic, when neither the degree of mortality, nor the spreading rate were known (Rotilă, 2021). In the collective mind - medieval and modern -, the plague was correlated with two other scourges, famine and war, which associated their destructive power with that of the epidemics. Not coincidentally, the Covid-19 pandemic was more or less officially associated with biological weapons, while the president of the United States at that time made statements accusing China of producing biological weapons. Panic over food shortages manifested itself in the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic, but was quickly offset by measures of oversupply of food taken by the authorities.

Associating the pandemic with divine anger generates a feeling of guilt, which amplifies the anxiety of the population, because individuals experience a sense of guilt for the divine punishment inflicted on the community, which could have been brought on by their own sins. In the current pandemic, the lockdown measures also targeted the closure of religious activities, an issue that generated sporadic dissatisfaction, but was quickly settled by official communications and the dialogue that church institutions of most religious denominations had with both the state, as well as with their followers.

6. From former pandemics to actual pandemics: Covid-19

Historical works on the plague focused on the social transmission of the pandemic from individual to individual, an element of similarity to the current pandemic, during which, among the measures taken, was social isolation or quarantine, a measure introduced for the first time to prevent the plague. The epidemiologists consulted by Delumeau (2021) consider that the main plague transmission agent were fleas, that transmitted the disease from the infected or

the deceased to the healthy individuals, which was indeed a community transmission, but would not have made it necessary for protective measures such as wearing beak-shaped masks or quarantine to be taken, but rather hygiene and disinsectization measures - generally unknown at the time.

A significant difference between the current pandemic and the plague, described by Jean Delumeau (2021), is the level of mortality, but this level could not be known in the early period of the Covid-19 pandemic, when reports from China, Italy or Spain highlighted a significant number of cases, which exceeded the capacity of health systems to provide care to patients, and mortality was estimated to be high. Uncertainty and ambivalent communication could be sufficient grounds for panic and anxiety among the population, especially among those who inform themselves from alternative media sources, where the phenomenon of infodemic - an epidemic of false information and news - was particularly present and difficult to understand or counter by the authorities.

7. The specialized literature dedicated to the Covid-19 pandemic

An initial search in Web of Science, on June 21, 2021, revealed a number of 64,847 papers that were registered for the Covid-19 pandemic (keywords: "Covid pandemic"). Of these, 4,066 papers are indexed for the keywords "Covid-19 pandemic and anxiety", which shows a particularly broad concern for studying the psychological effects of the pandemic from the perspective of the anxiety it generates. A more refined search, for the keywords "Covid-19 pandemic and social anxiety", provided a result of 1,566 papers on this topic. Compared to these results, only 102 articles were found for the keywords "Covid-19 pandemic and frustration", which shows less interest in addressing the pandemic in terms of frustrations among the population. A total of 18 results were found for the keywords "Covid-19 pandemic and anguish", while 399 results were found for the keywords "Covid-19 pandemic and panic".

8. Stress, anxiety and depression. The pandemic as a source for psychiatric disorders

Conducting a general meta-analysis on stress, anxiety and depression among the population during the Covid-19 pandemic, Salari et al. (2020) show that this epidemic has generated a significant number of psychological disorders, that were added to the actual concern about the physical health of the population. The study shows that the spread of the virus has a significant impact on the population in various communities and, therefore, during the pandemic, psychological measures must be taken to improve the mental health of the population, especially of vulnerable groups.

The research was published on July 6th, 2020 and analyzed papers published in indexed journals in various databases until May 2020. Data on the prevalence of stress resulting from the pandemic were collected by analyzing five studies, on a total sample of 9,074 people, resulting in an incidence of 29.6% of

stress among the studied population. The prevalence of anxiety was analyzed according to 17 studies conducted during that period, on a sample of 63,439 people, and it resulted that the level of anxiety affected 31.9% of the investigated population. The prevalence of depression was analyzed according to 14 studies, conducted on a total sample of 44,531 people, being rated at a level of 33.7%.

By comparing these results with the incidence of anxiety in the United States in 2013, according to DSM-5, previously mentioned to be of 13.3%, we can notice a worrying increase in the incidence of this disorder, due to the occurrence of the pandemic. At the time of the study, it was known that the Covid-19 infection causes symptoms that include fever, chills, cough, sore throat, muscle aches, nausea and vomiting. Infected people manifested symptoms of varying severity, from simple cold symptoms - later cases of infected, but asymptomatic people were documented - to severe cases, which manifested respiratory failure or acute respiratory syndrome, that can culminate in the death of the patient. The article by Salari et al. (2020) focuses on the psychological effects of the pandemic - not the actual infection with Covid-19 -, effects highlighted for the individual, the community, the national or the international level, during the period when most states were in a state of lockdown.

At the individual level, the authors of the cited study (Salari et al., 2020), based on previous literature dedicated to the pandemics (Wall et al., 2008), considered it to be predictable that individual behaviors might appear when subjects manifested fear generated by the possibility of their own death, or of their loved ones, the feeling of helplessness and the obligation to manifest a stereotypical social behavior (Salari et al., 2020). The psychological damaging effect of the pandemic can generate a significant psychological crisis, which can be considered a real threat to public mental health (Xiang et al., 2020).

The effect of the psychological crisis is considered to be more pronounced in patients who show the early stages of mental disorders. The major health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic can lead to psychological changes, and could reach a pathological level, both for individuals who are working as health professionals and for citizens. The most likely pathologies or disorders are caused by fear, anxiety, depression or insecurity (Zhang et al., 2020).

Research consulted by Salari et al. (2020) demonstrate that people in isolation and quarantine show significant levels of anxiety, anger, confusion and stress (Brooks et al., 2020). Also, studies conducted in the early stages of the spread of the Covid-19 virus in Asia show that fear of the spread of the virus, especially in the context of a lack of information about its nature (infection rate, morbidity, mortality), can lead to mental disorders, including some severe ones (Shigemura et al., 2020). The predisposition to mental disorders and even mental illness is accentuated in certain social categories, which include patients infected with Covid-19 and their families, health care workers, children and patients with other mental disorders (Bao et al., 2020).

9. The prevalence of anxiety and depression during the pandemic in the case of health personnel involved in the care of patients infected with Covid-19

Another study on the prevalence of anxiety and depression during the Covid-19 pandemic was conducted among students at health schools in Jordan (Basheti et al., 2021). The study highlights a number of peculiarities regarding the prevalence of anxiety and depression among health personnel involved, in one form or another, in the direct care of patients infected with Covid-19, staff who, therefore, have a high risk of contracting the virus (Huidu, 2020). The cited study shows that there is indeed a high level of anxiety among the surveyed students. Among people who were psychologically tested by means of an online survey, which was based on the scale of anxiety and depression in hospitals (HADS scale), 40% of participants had normal scores for anxiety and depression, 22.4% obtained a normal borderline score, while 33.8% of the surveyed students had a score considered abnormal in terms of anxiety, and 26.2% of respondents had an abnormal score in terms of depression. Other anxious factors were taken into account, such as smoking, low family income and the use of a specific medication, which were statistically significant when correlated with anxiety. After excluding these additional anxiogenic factors, the percentage of people with high levels of anxiety remained significantly higher than normal in the pre-pandemic periods.

10. The impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on the incidence of migraines and other neurological disorders

The specialized literature analyzes the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the incidence of migraines and other neurological disorders (Suzuki et al., 2021). Suzuki et al. (2021) show that the Covid-19 pandemic caused a number of neurological disorders, including migraines, sleep disorders, anxiety and depression. These disorders were mainly recorded during the first wave of the pandemic, and the other waves did not show significant variations in the occurrence of these types of disorders. Also, during the first pandemic wave, there was a significant increase in the consumption of neuroleptics, following the increase in stress levels, in parallel with the identification of comorbidities associated with Covid-19. Studies cited by Suzuki et al. (2021) also show that the changing social conditions (social distancing, lockdown, diminished social mobility and freedom of travel) had a significant impact on people who have not been infected with Covid-19 in various countries (Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2020). An increase in the negative impact of the pandemic on hospitalized patients with migraines and acute headaches has also been noted (Kristoffersen et al., 2020). Other works consulted by the same team of researchers highlights the concerns of American psychiatrists regarding the discontinuation of treatment for patients with mental disorders, including those with migraines, an interruption caused by postponements of non-emergency therapies, which have been imposed by many states in order to limit the rate of infection with Covid-19 (Rizzoli & Grazzi, 2020).

11. The predictive role of the intolerance to uncertainty in terms of family life, marital status and health status - in correlation with the perception of the risks of the Covid-19 infection

Other research investigate the predictive role of intolerance to uncertainty - in terms of family life, marital status, raising children, state of health, chronic diseases, caring for the elderly, fear for the welfare of relatives working in health professions, for the life and health condition of relatives or close people diagnosed with Covid-19 etc. All these categories of people were perceived to be at risk of infection – and a higher risk of occurrence for depression and anxiety, because they are people physically or socially affected by the pandemic (Korkmaz & Güloğlu, 2021). The results of the mentioned research showed that the meaning of life and the intolerance to uncertainty were statistically significant predictors of depression and anxiety. Chronic illness is a statistically significant predictor of anxiety, and the frequency of hand washing is a statistically significant predictor of depression.

12. Qualitative research report

A research on the social construction of the pandemic and the role of anxiety and frustration in the process of its social construction was conducted between April and May 2020 on a number of 110 respondents coming mainly from the NE area of Romania. Along with them being in the sample were also included respondents from other counties in Romania (Cluj, Bucharest), from the Republic of Moldova, as well as Romanian citizens residing in other European Union countries, such as Great Britain, Spain, Italy, Austria, Belgium, Germany. The interviewees were mostly female (62), male (31) and a number of 7 people did not specify their gender. The occupational profile of the respondents included the following categories: salesperson (7), medical staff (6), student (35) pupil (9), teacher (5), economist (3), clerk (1), civil servant (10), trade worker (3), unemployed (4), housewife (6), retired (7), unspecified (7). As a level of education, the research participants stated that they have a formal education of higher (63) and secondary level (31), while the rest did not specify (9).

The sample was one of opportunity, its selection being made based on the snowball method. The interview operators were the students from the Faculty of Law and Public Administration of the “Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava” University, under the direct coordination of the author of this article. The research focused on several dimensions of the social construction process of the Covid-19 pandemic, among which we mention: information on the pandemic, restrictions imposed by the authorities as elements of the social (re)construction of the limit of the human condition, medicalization of social life and the apperception contemporary society as a risk society.

In this article we will refer exclusively to the results aimed at changes in the identity construction of people affected by the pandemic.

Regarding the construction of the personal identity of the subjects affected by the pandemic, we find that the anxiety and frustration generated by the pandemic threat but also by the restrictive measures imposed by the need to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus are the key elements that operate changes in this discursive instances. We call it pandemic identity. Pandemic identity is generally anxious and anguishing, the identity discourse being built around the fear of otherness as a possible source of illness.

The personal identity of the affected subjects is reconstructed by adherence or non-adherence to the limitations of their own freedom, in order to preserve public safety and health. Wearing a mask is an eloquent example of a closed identity, hiding the face, although pragmatically motivated by public health needs, and is an anthropological reconfiguration of the separation from the Other.

I suffered when I couldn't attend a relative's funeral, when I couldn't hug my loved ones, when that mask kept me from seeing a smile or an expression. I missed the Easter customs and traditions (I.E.).

Such a situation as the one described by the interviewee (I.E.), aiming at the impossibility of participating in funeral rituals, but also the impossibility of an open relationship, through hugs, transforms the spatial distance into real social distance, with profound effects on the sociability of individuals and their alienation, which is a process of dissolving social solidarity.

There were subjects who mentioned that they feel overwhelmed, imprisoned in their own home and in their own life, and dramatic aspects were recorded, such as a subject who considers that his life is over, being faced with limitations that he does not understand, although he accepts them as necessary, but which he cannot integrate in his own personality.

The fear of infection has brought to the forefront of identity construction a series of pre-existing elements in the collective mind, namely the memory of pandemics that have marked humanity throughout history and their association with divine punishment and implicitly with the feeling of personal inefficiency. This feeling of personal inefficiency contrasts with the modern and post-modern society, which, in addition to the medicalization of the social life, is based on a plea for personal development as a justification for the self-emancipation of the individual from any limitation imposed on the human condition.

Prolonged isolation has an effect on the identity construction of subjects, namely an interpretive adrift of the meaning of the notion of sociability - from "living together" and the community accents of social life, to postmodern individualism, that replaces subjectivity as a form of expression of the individual in his own community, with methodological selfishness as a rejection of the society, presented as a source of risks for the daily well-being of the individual.

The perception of the post-pandemic society as a "post-apocalyptic" reconstruction, according to the anthropological scenario highlighted by the Science Fiction literature, is exaggerated in the speeches of some respondents, by

contagion with elements of fake news and conspiracy theories, already abundant in pandemic speeches. During the research period, when the state of emergency was in force in Romania, this process became more and more acute as time passed and pandemic waves followed one another. However, the discourse on the post-pandemic society as a re-humanization of normality is opposed to the vision of a post-society, with strong migrations in the virtual sphere and the virtualization of the social space, but also with postmodern accents, inspired by the discourse of Lipovetsky (1996) on duty. A society enclosed both in its own anxieties and in the limits of public discourse, that encourages self-isolation and discourages solidarity, can have the effect of an individualistic identity construction, in which communication with the other is based on a succession of unequal transactions, with the main goal of survival and not social or personal development.

13. Conclusions

The research papers presented in this article allow us to emphasize the acute nature of mental disorders that occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic and that severely affected the quality of life of psychiatric or neurological patients, but also of people who do not usually suffer of mental disorders, whether or not they have been diagnosed with Covid-19.

The works cited in this study may lead to the conclusion that the most important variables that influence both depression and anxiety were intolerance to uncertainty and lack of meaning in life. Pandemics, both historically and at present, have a number of common elements, namely the depreciation of the individual's relationship with otherness, feelings of helplessness, guilt and lack of control over their own destiny - which, ultimately, are sources of anguish, anxiety and frustration. These feelings, once they become chronic, turn into psychic conditions from which the individual can no longer find a way out, thus gaining a pathological nature.

The post-pandemic society starts with accents of social pathology, and the post-pandemic identity reconstruction should remove the perspective of the medicalized society, that finds a therapy for any situation specific to the human condition.

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