

SUBJECTIVE NARRATIVES OF THE 2020 LOCKDOWN PERIOD AMONG ROMANIAN STUDENTS

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Abstract

Objectives. On March 11 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the Covid 19 pandemic. Limiting human contact and mobility during quarantine has raised a number of personal and collective concerns. The objective of the present study is to identify the highly subjective ways in which Romanian students presented personal narratives related to the spring 2020 quarantine.

Material and methods. The diary method (Hyers, 2018) was used to collect data for this study. This highly flexible method provided us with a unique opportunity to collect daily data from participants. Between 15 March and 15 April 2020 a total of 10 diaries were collected. The diaries were completed in both traditional format (on paper, subsequently photographed and submitted) and in digital format.

Results. The analysis indicated that the majority of subjects experienced the quarantine as a period of personal and collective fear. The same dataset indicated that the quarantine was marked by a subjective dynamic. If at the beginning, in the first two weeks of quarantine, subjects were focused on strictly recording events taking place outside their personal area, later on, the narrative focused on very personal experiences, and the negative changes induced by the situation prevailed.

Conclusions. The research raises a number of issues from a methodological perspective related to the limitation of research with human subjects during quarantine. Therefore, the social sciences will need to use more innovative research methods and find new ways of reaching potential participants - especially those with limited access to the internet.

Keywords: quarantine, personal diaries, narrative, fear, Romania.

Introduction

The COVID 19 pandemic declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) involved a number of distinct measures: limiting human mobility and human contact by enforcing a distance ranging between one and two meters between people in public spaces and at work, remote work for all non-essential activities, the usage of telemedicine service. In this context, researchers in the socio-human sciences have had to adapt their research methods in haste, either by using several of the methods already considered as fit to be used "from a distance", such as: netnography, online

interviews, telephone interviews, or they have had to think of new ways of using known face-to-face methods.

During the pandemic, Deborah Lupton (2020) proposed several new methods, succinctly presented on the YouTube channel "Breaking Methods", among which can be mentioned: story completion, map making, storyboards, TikTok, the method weaving technique, zine making, digital diaries, YouTube, and in-game interviews. These methods can be succinctly summarise as follows: story completion (online or on paper) is a method in which research participants complete a story; they write about fictional characters based on their own beliefs and life experiences. The map making method refers to the fact that participants are asked to draw a map by hand as the researchers respond; once completed the maps are used for discussion. Storyboards, this method was originally a pre-production tool for making the film, Deborah Lupton adapted it to empirical social science research, asking participants to make a comic strip (with words and drawings) on the research topic, followed by discussion. The COVID 19 pandemic has actually meant a change both in terms of the themes addressed and the methods of studying the reality in Romania as well.

Given that the limitation of human contact and mobility during the quarantine raised a number of issues at personal and collective levels, the objective of the present study is to identify the highly subjective ways in which students in Romania presented personal narratives related to their experiences during the quarantine of spring 2020. Considering the high number of changes that the society had to undergo during the quarantine, the main aim of the analysis was to answer to the following question: "What were the personal ways in which students in Romania presented their narratives in the Spring of 2020?".

Material and Methods

In order to provide an answer to the research question, data from a research project conducted during the quarantine in Romania 2020 was used. The research project was conducted between 15 March 2020 (it actually started three days after the declaration of the state of emergency in Romania - 12 March) and 15 April 2020 (the date indicated for the end of the initial quarantine). In addition, the entire research field was designed as a stage to expose the possibilities offered by the application of a standard qualitative methodology - "personal observation" - given that access to the empirical field seemed at least suspended for a certain period of time.

The choice of observation method was based on Hammersley and Atkinson's (2019, p. 3) research that ethnographic field studies involve "gathering whatever data are available to shed light on the issues that are the emerging focus of inquiry". Given the abrupt nature of the initiation of the research project (the interruption of face-to-face classes with the establishment of the state of emergency that took place the same day in Romania) the research question was not established before asking the subjects (students at the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work - University of Bucharest) to keep a daily diary for two weeks. At the beginning, the project was guided by one of the fundamental presuppositions of interpretive social science, namely that actions and interactions should not only be observed, but that they are guided by the meanings attributed to them by each observer in each particular situation (Schutz, 1962, p. 6).

In the absence of a general theoretical framework, the analysis adhered to the only possible "anchor", namely the methodological perspective of researching the real in the hermeneutic tradition. The standard meaning of the hermeneutic perspective was established as "an understanding of a specific practice that enables the reconstruction of the conferring of meaning on the surrounding world, a "historically specific self-reflexive epistemological style, rooted in the belief that there is no irrevocable, a-historically certain way of knowing, no

definitively established social theory" (Soeffner, 1996, p. 10). In the case of the research project the methodology used for data collection was qualitative in nature, specifically the diary method (Hyers, 2018). This method was chosen for its extremely flexible nature. Moreover, as Hyers (2018) points out, the diary method offers a unique opportunity to collect daily data from participants.

The sample of personal diaries thus comprised 16 diaries, written between 15 March and 15 April 2020. There was no constraint on the writing of these diaries, as they were completed in both electronic (as Word documents) and traditional format (on paper), with some participants sending photographs of their written diaries. Before starting the analysis of the results of the research project, the personal consent was obtained - verbally and in writing - from the authors of the personal diaries.

The data were interpreted narratively, according to the specific type of method applied, the analysis thus having a strong interpretative component. Considering the exploratory nature of the study, neither research hypotheses nor research propositions were established, and the sole purpose of the analysis was to find an answer to the previously stated research question (RQ: "What were the personal ways in which Romanian students presented the narrations in the spring of 2020?").

Results

From the moment the empirical data were collected a dilemma arose, that of how to analyse and interpret the data. Following Tarr, Gonzalez-Polledo, and Cornish (2018), this stage was perceived as an opportunity to see beyond the individual aspects of the data collection, recording or analysis, by identifying the research from a double conditionality: theoretical and practical. In doing so, the 'classic' method in the arsenal of the classical sciences was inevitably avoided - the diary, commonly used in projects based on the observation method - to the auto-ethnographic interpretative approach. As a qualitative method, auto-ethnography allows the researcher to present their own narrative as "a relational and institutional story" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 745).

The literature (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003) highlights that one of the aims of research based on the observation method is to conduct a causal analysis of changes at the intrapersonal level and individual differences between these changes. For the purpose of this interpretive approach a different perspective was adopted. Thus, the empirical materials that were collected for this research project were seen mainly in their subjective, highly personal side, and the creation of codes and typologies in line with the "canonical" interpretative path proposed by classical methodology (Bolger, Zuckerman, and Kessler, 2000) was avoided. In this way, the collected data revealed the manifestation and recording of tensions between elements related to rationality on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the flow of subjective feelings in which each narrator was captured. For example, the empirical data was interpreted as presentations of the self (Humphreys, 2005; Richardson, 2000), believing that, in the case of diaries, the key is that they highlight the existence of multiple multivocalities. According to the explanation offered by Mizzi (2010), multivocality guarantees the emergence of a representative space for the plural and contradictory narrative voice(s) found in each of the ones included in the research. All the students described during the month recorded in their personal diaries the daily turmoil, the continuous oscillations of subjective states that made them move in a condensed time span (a few days or even a few hours) from the rational appreciation of their situation, to the evocation of a past mentioned in extremely positive nuances and fears about the present and the future. A narrator, for example, humorously records at the beginning of his daily life (even the moments when he has to see a

doctor) and only four days later expresses in the pages of his diary his misunderstanding, which from a psychological point of view indicates his negative state of mind:

"Wednesday was very strange and unexpected, I had so much to do at the office, a delegation from abroad that I coordinated. They sent me home from the office because I was coughing a bit, and all my colleagues were scared. They started to panic, I told them I was fine ... at first I thought it was a joke, I started to laugh, I left, then they called me to tell me I shouldn't come to the office anymore and I should work from home and consult a doctor, which I did, I was fine ;-) but I couldn't believe it. I thought the bockage would last a few days ... but it seems it lasted longer than I expected" (11.03.2020).

"I want to understand what's going on, but I don't really understand, I'm hearing more and more everywhere about this pandemic, I don't even want to name it, because it's become more famous than Jesus or Michael Jackson. I'm just saying the so-called protective measures, the politicians don't know anything, they have no idea, but they keep us isolated. Why?" (15.03.2020).

Another situation is offered by another research participant. In an entry in another diary the author observed with detachment the worsening of the COVID situation, the way people adapt to the demands, the small gestures of solidarity.

"The situation is getting worse all over the country ... There is only news about COVID on all the TV stations, public service announcements about prevention methods against COVID started to appear on TV. Doctors are the worst affected, nurses are treated like trash (well, those who don't take bribes daily are not actually to blame). There is chaos in the world and somehow I am touched by our unanimity as people at a time like this. A DJ in Milan was standing on the balcony playing music for the whole neighborhood to make people feel better. In America, people are self-isolated, and in order to practice sports and outdoor classes they continue to climb to the rooftops of blocks, keeping their distance. I love it when I see that there's something good left in people ..." (22.03.2020).

A week later, the participant's relationship with the surrounding reality was completely different, the place of objectivity being taken by the expression of personal feelings, dominated by fear, preventive behaviours.

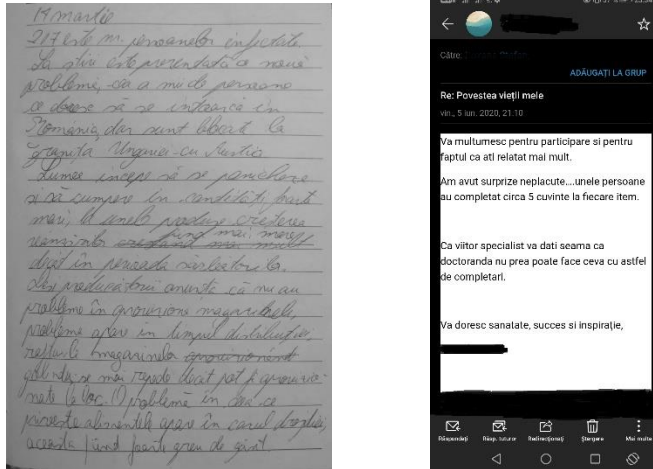
"So far nothing out of the ordinary has happened. Today is May 1st and I'm afraid of how Romanians will behave ... I watch TV, no one travels, the airports are empty and so are the beaches. At the moment we are fine, but here come the news about barbecues and the fight between police and citizens. We decided to celebrate May Day the day after the chaos. So I went to Selgros with my father, still a guard, still with mask and gloves, they allowed us in, but now they were taking everyone's temperature. We did our shopping (it was very hard to breathe that mask, but necessary). In the queue, they were walking 2m apart to signal where the customer should stand for protection. Of course, the devil doesn't follow the sign either. So I felt compelled when a lady stood brazenly in the back of my head and loudly told my father: "Do you know what annoys me about those fools who don't know how to observe the 2m distance? Everywhere there were pictures and notices, how ignorant and uneducated can you be?" A few moments later, the lady (after sniffing her nose) leaned back a few inches (thank God for that)" (01.04.2020).

Beyond the identification of these multiple subjectivities, the emergence of a new plurality of emotions was also identified. Given that each narrator was simultaneously the subject

and object of research, over time, the narrator-researchers resorted to a 'politics of emotion' (O'Neill & Hubbard, 2010), highlighting the tensions between appealing to the reconstruction of the surrounding world using various available actions and materials.

Figure 1

Example of the politics of emotions - Using two categories of digital materials: paper journal photographs and phone messages.

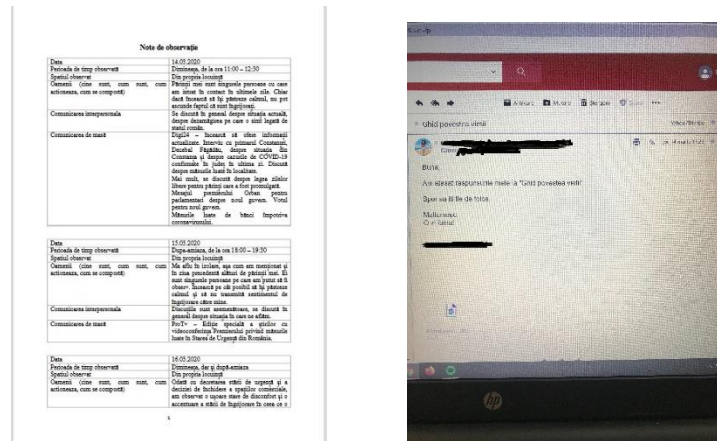


A first example is shown in Figure 1. In this case, the student narrator-writer used both a physical diary (which he then transmitted in digital form as photographs) and telephone messages (these were also later collected as images). In other cases, the narrator felt the need to participate in the recreation of reality by combining two types of narrative structure: observation notes - which tended to be highly pre-coded - with fragments of email communication as part of a dialogue (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Example of the politics of emotion

Using two categories of digital material: pre-coded observation notes and photographs of email messages.

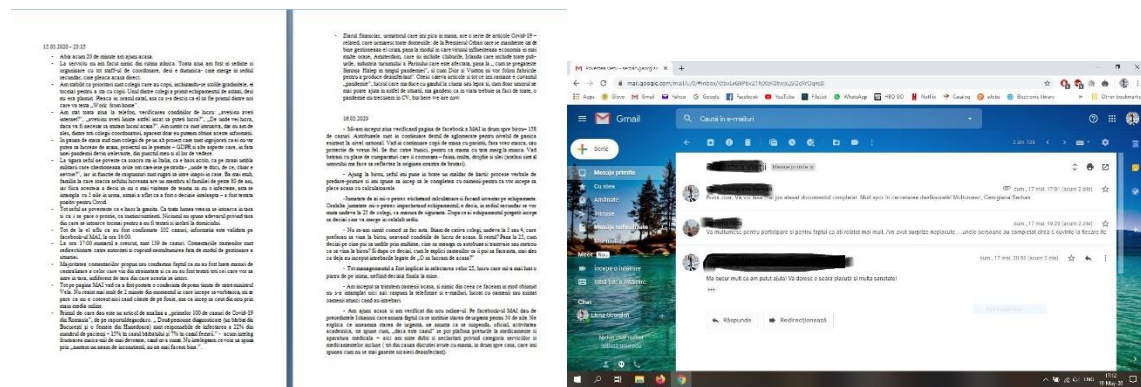


Given the limitations imposed by the digital environment, expressing emotions had its inherent limitations. Even so, student-researchers have found ways to engage in different ways. For example, one narrator-student-writer wrote very detailed observation notes that she mixed with images of the digital platforms used to conduct a series of conversations (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Example of the politics of emotions

Using two categories of digital materials: elaborate observation notes and pictures of digital platforms



Discussions

As Nielson and Rheams (2018) show, studies that attempted to combine online and offline research existed even before the COVID 19 pandemic. Being a mix between online and offline research (Dawson, 2019), this research covers a diversity of approaches and perspectives. "Visual ethnography" is a broad concept used to refer to the study of the internet from an ethnographic perspective, it can take many forms such as "digital ethnography, ethnography on/of/through the internet, connective ethnography, networked ethnography, cyber ethnography" (Dominguez et al., 2007), to name a few. Each of the forms that 'visual ethnography' takes has its own methodological approach and is based on different conceptualisations of the internet.

Regardless of their theoretical backgrounds, researchers of the internet, cyberspace or cyberspace "are faced with the need to answer very pressing questions, such as how to use heterogeneous data in their analysis or how to combine research in front of the screen and in the virtual field. A permanent point of tension lies between the apparent ease of data collection and the difficulty of gaining access and participating in the field" (Dominguez et al., 2007, p.1). Although written 14 years ago, these challenges of doing research online, in virtual or cyberspace continue to raise the same issues today, and they are even more important now, when social interactions and physical mobility are limited to an extent that has never been done before in human history.

Thus, there are at least several qualitative methods a researcher can choose from when conducting online research. The most important aspect in choosing the appropriate method for the topic/subject being researched is that each population, community, group, and individual has its own ways of defining, understanding and engaging in an online interaction, and the researcher needs to identify the different online contexts, and ways in which to gain the trust of informants (Miller, 2020). Anthropologist Daniel Miller (2020), via a YouTube webinar, suggested a greater focus on online participant observation - surveying the online and digital needs of the people you want to connect with and volunteering to help you meet, befriend informants, gain their trust and, consequently, the chance to be invited to online gatherings where there is the opportunity to meet new future informants and that of further participant observation.

Given the methodological 'shift' signalled above from observation - based on the diary - to interpreting the empirical material as a set of autoethnographies, the participants' personal and self-contradictory voices were analysed. This was made possible through the use of multivocality (Mizzi, 2010).

Conclusions

The present descriptive analysis indicates that the quarantine period at the onset of the COVID 19 pandemic was experienced by the majority of subjects as a period dominated by fear, fear at a personal and collective level. The same dataset indicated that there was a quarantine cycle at the subjective level: if at the beginning, during the first two weeks of quarantine, subjects were focused on the strict recording of events outside themselves, later on a narrative focused on the very personal experiences, on the negative changes induced by the situation prevailed. What also attracted attention was the subjects' ability to generate new forms of narrative, using multimodal media, by juxtaposing written text with images obtained from online communication, which led to the emergence and development of "politics of emotions" that were highly personal and punctual. It is true that there was a limitation of the sample (16 diaries collected in the case of the research project) but, it could be speculated that no regularities and "patterns" of expression of emotions were identified in the diaries analysed.

As a conclusion, the subjects included in the sample presented some extremely personal narratives of the quarantine of 2020. Using media modality they managed to convey, with the help of images and texts, both feelings of fear and dread as well as elements of rupture, discontinuity produced by the quarantine in their daily existence. The research thus raises a number of issues from a methodological perspective related to the limitation of research with human subjects during quarantine. It is clear that the social sciences will need to use more innovative research methods and find new ways of reaching potential participants - especially those with limited access to the internet. The data also show the existence of a variety of personal understandings and representations of a new social context.

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