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Social and Individual Processes at the Time of the COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract

The author presents eight studies carried out during the global pandemic of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and focuses on different methodological issues to be addressed within the Digital Society and netnographic research. The studies are reported in a common context ranging from the individual experiences of researchers to the receipt of political propaganda in mass society through social media.

Keywords: Social research methods, Autoethnography, Netnography, Big data, New data, Infodemic, COVID-19.

Introduction

The special issue of *Cultura e Studi del Sociale* under discussion was conceived as a conceptual continuation of the special issue issued in June 2021, which was also dedicated to sociological studies on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like the previous one, this issue also maintains absolute scientific neutrality derived not only from the authors' commitment to study and work, but also from the fact that unlike summer 2020, this past summer was not accompanied by the same optimism as the previous one, despite the extensive vaccination campaign.

In a social situation where question marks are constant, for scholars and others as well, specific studies on aspects that have yet to be fully analyzed due to their precise link to life in the time of the pandemic represent a very useful contribution to the science of interpersonal relationships in these times of extreme crisis and beyond.

1. From auto-ethnography to political dynamics at the time of the pandemic

Speaking personally is always an act of courage, because authors not only lay themselves bare to the entire scientific community, but above all must observe themselves, a task that is not always easy. Apart from this, doing auto-ethnography at a time of extreme crisis, such as that of the COVID-19 pandemic, could lead a scholar to emphasize his or her own emotional expression, forgetting the relationship with traditional forms of social investigation. We therefore will take into consideration Martina Carleo's precise description in her work entitled *Being a subject expert during Covid-Era: an autoethnographic experience*, an analysis appropriate to the times and the situation.

The author tries to find the right balance between Leon Anderson's *Analytic Autoethnography* (2006) and Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis's *Evocative Autoethnography* (2016). We can find a description that we all would like to see as limited to the terrible years 2020-2021, and which could serve to understand the

limits and positive elements of the so-called *Didattica a distanza* (Remote Learning), i.e. the more or less successful attempts to make normal what unfortunately was not, but probably will be for several years.

Therefore, new possibilities of teacher-student interaction have opened that will be studied over the next few years not only in the sociological field, but also in the psychological, pedagogical, and IT fields. It is not necessary in sociology to be the first to address a new topic by applying methodologies used elsewhere. However, we believe that studying them can not only stimulate the cognitive potential of other subjects engaged in pedagogical and analytical activity, but can also contribute, over time, to a historical reconstruction of what happened in Italian universities during the pandemic of the years 2020-2021.

The analysis of individual attitudes at the time of the pandemic is also addressed in an essay by Marianna Coppola and Giuseppe Masullo, who deal with the very delicate issue of Italian hikikomori based on the finding that “Today COVID-19 is pivotal for rethinking oneself”. The Salerno authors tackle the issue of identity from the micro level of relationships between individuals and the “digital society” to using the now established methods of netnography to analyze a discussion group on Facebook of young hikikomori. Considering the close link between hikikomori and their families, since all their network activities are carried out in the space offered by the families themselves, we can also consider the essay a good practical example of netnography, as well as a further contribution to contemporary studies of Sociology of the Family focused on the perspective of subjects with a tendency toward self-isolation.¹

The question of how to carry out innovative research using so-called Big Data is discussed in our volume by Ciro Clemente De Falco and Emilia Romeo. The authors remind us that “it is important to point out that the data is not only 'big' but also 'new'” and that the distinction must always be made between digitized data that was originally collected in analog format and data arising directly “from user activity on the web” (“native digital data”). The analysis of this latter type of data in particular raises the question of what types of collection methodologies to use, given that not all traditional methodologies can be applied to “new data”. The emphasis of some authors, such as ours, on the difficulties faced by independent researchers in gaining access data produced by digital infrastructures will be particularly appreciated.²

On these premises, De Falco and Romeo examine the case study of Italy at the time of the first and second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, identifying the main topics studied in social science regarding the pandemic and analyzing the use of digital data and techniques for empirical research in social science. The authors note that Italian researchers have focused mainly on the use of online questionnaires or have used methodologies excluding the use of the web, which offers the possibility of tracking subjects' behavior. The authors rightly emphasize the limits of the use of questionnaires as a “non-intrusive” technique (see Clark & Purdon, 1995) and rightly point out that “big doesn't necessarily mean better”.

¹ In my recent essay (Maiello, 2021) I show how addiction to role-playing games also massively affects the generation preceding the one studied by our authors, i.e. that of their parents. The positive function of RPGs, in the context of inter-family relations, was identified by the Polish scholar Michał Mochocki (2021).

² The debate about the limits of big data particularly for scholars in the humanities and social sciences, presently much more focused on qualitative research, has centered in this field on so-called Digital Humanities. The discussion of the past and perspectives of this field of study was recently summarized in the volume edited by Lauren F. Klein and Matthew K. Gold (2019). On the same theme, with a more radical approach toward scientism, see James E. Dobson (2019).

A similar approach, this time focused not on the products of specialized researchers but on the “broadcasters of the 21st century”³, is offered by Miriam Di Lisio and Domenico Trezza in their study presented here under the title *The Fake News Pandemic*. The theme is obviously intriguing because we talk a lot about fake news yet at the same time there is considerable confusion about the definition of the term. Our authors, therefore, in addition to trying to carry out a specific study on the possible application of digital methods for the study of fake news, seek to impose order in the definitions of disinformation and misinformation with a mind to the ambiguity of the concept of fake news.⁴

The chances of success for an analysis of this type are obviously limited, “but needed”, as confirmed by the authors themselves, and therefore we consider their research an invitation to proceed with caution in the study of fake news in a period that is “highly infodemic”.⁵

An innovative content analysis is presented by Federica Palmieri, Jessica Parola, Marco Sallusto Palmiero, and Roberta Tofani, where the impact of the pandemic on individuals and on society is analyzed in particular on vulnerable social elements, such as the homeless, the Roma people, and women victims of violence. The authors remain strictly within the bounds of qualitative research by constructing their analytical categories inductively (see Glaser-Strauss 1967) and using CAQDAS Nvivo on data collected from Facebook or Instagram. In order not to confine their research only to individual cases, the authors compared the data collected by the aforementioned social media platforms with those of some Italian newspapers, thus managing to create a coherent research framework where the individual experiences are directly related to the collective experiences in the period of the first wave of pandemic. It should also be emphasized that the authors of the research, in addition to detecting clusters predictable in a period of pandemic, such as anxiety, sadness, nostalgia, resignation, and similar, notice another protagonist of the quarantine, which especially in Italy seems to represent a scarcely known phenomenon: silence.

We can therefore say that their choice to adhere to the principles of Grounded Theory will be useful to all who, basing themselves on the same principles, will look for data from below in the future, data that the study has made clearly available to the scientific community.

A less classic theme in social studies, that of Virtual Dark Tourism, which is already examined today at the level of scientific publications and even monographs (see McDaniel, 2018), is addressed by Gabriella Punziano and Giuseppe Michele Padricelli. The places they studied are those most affected by the first wave of COVID-19 cases in Italy, namely the towns of Codogno, Vo’ Euganeo, and 9 other municipalities near the Lodi district. The netnographic analysis was not easy for our authors as the majority of Facebook groups that dealt with the life and

³ It is an elegant albeit ironic style to define what Umberto Eco directly, perhaps somewhat brutally, called the “legions of imbeciles” (Eco, 2015), i.e. “less erudite” active users of Twitter (and social media in general).

⁴ We can only agree with the authors when they state that “if two people with different ideas and opinions were asked to define fake news, they would most likely give two completely different answers, based, in fact, on their beliefs”. (cfr. *infra*).

⁵ The word infodemic is a neologism created in 2003, in the middle of the 2002–2004 SARS outbreak, by the US journalist David J. Rothkopf. According to the original definition, infodemic means “few facts, mixed with fear, speculation, and rumor, amplified and relayed swiftly worldwide by modern information technologies, [which] have affected national and international economies, politics, and even security in ways that are utterly disproportionate with the root realities” (Rothkopf, 2003).

emotions of the inhabitants of these municipalities are open only to residents of these areas. The authors have bypassed the barrier of distrust, probably created by the massive presence of journalists in search of sensations, and have managed to enter a world of suffering and pain deriving from the pandemic disaster and aggravated by the fact that the spaces studied were in fact the first in Europe to experience lockdown and death, which was present almost everywhere. In this case as well the researchers' choice was defined as an unobtrusive approach where the scholar tries to show his presence as little as possible in order not to pollute the study or the spontaneity of the written and visual expressions of the social media users.

For the authors, it is also very important to understand a theoretical aspect already discussed in Tourism Studies, namely how a lurking tourism experience is a genuine tourism experience. The study of an extreme situation, such as that of the first red zone in Europe as a result of the pandemic, is able to provide further elements of understanding for the resolution of this question.

Social Media, however, does not consist solely of Facebook and Twitter. Among those platforms of medium size, with numbers of users on a global scale slightly higher than that of Twitter (STATISTA, July 2021), we find Reddit, which is used and described in detail by Ilir Rama. Reddit was born a little more than a year after Facebook and despite having sometimes been strongly criticized for hosting extremist groups in its rooms, defined as *subreddits*, it is considered a much more libertarian and substantially less hypocritical social media than Mark Zuckerberg's more famous one.⁶ Rama presents in a very sophisticated and open way, given his status as a "researcher embedded in the environment", his method of considering affordances within the context of digital platforms based on his netnographic research (defined as "ethnography in digital environments") on the subreddit named *r/coronavirus*, which in May 2020 already had 2 million users. Despite the use of computational data drawn from 2.8 million comments, the topics were set manually through human interpretation. Even in this case we are faced with an analysis conducted with rigor and scientific awareness, supported also by an innovative theoretical apparatus and very useful considerations in particular on the use of social media, and the influence of these not only on the subjects who use it, but in general on all of society. Rama in fact points out that Reddit essentially creates a self-censorship mechanism in users through the so-called *Karma system* which "directly promotes a community's culture by punishing socially deviant expressions and promoting comments conforming to situated social norms, building an intersubjective meaning." Everything is presented in a very open way and not managed by algorithms elaborated in a centralistic and non-transparent way as in the case of Facebook.

If sociology today, such as anthropology, is not afraid to consider even the researcher himself an object of study, or at least a participant observer, there are still fields in which the researcher remains distant and imperceptible. This is the case of political sociology, which now goes hand in hand with political marketing and media communication. And yet the researcher, unless she herself is part of a team of marketers or the restricted secretary of a political party, must rebuild from the outside, and only on the basis of the public demonstrations of the party itself

⁶ In the January issue of *The Journal of Politics*, after analyzing Facebook groups and their enormous capability to manipulate a specific audience, Jennifer Forestal recommends Reddit as a digital platform more conducive to democratic forms of discussion and collective organization (Forestal, 2021, p. 320).

and the likely strategies that the studied political party implements to obtain its results, whether positive or negative.

On this basis two young Neapolitan researchers, Agostino Stavolo and Assunta Luongo, focus in the section *Esperienze e confronti* (Experiences and Comparisons) on an Italian political party that appeared on the public scene of this country in September 2019, i.e. a few weeks before the outbreak of COVID-19: *Italia Viva*. Our authors try to identify the differences in communication through Instagram by this party during the period preceding and coinciding with the first wave of pandemic in Italy. Their experience is based on the one hand by suggestions offered by the “communication strategists” of the party studied, but also on the first studies that appeared in Italy on political communication at the time of the pandemic (see Boccia Artieri, 2020; Bordignon, Diamanti & Turato, 2020). In a simple but outstanding study, the young scholars remind us of the need for the researcher to be ready to accept empirical results that cannot be predicted a priori and that it is always possible to find traces of outdated and vulgar techniques of manipulation, as well as the reproduction of gender stereotypes, even in political parties enjoying respect in the liberal and partly libertarian global community.

Conclusions

If epidemiologists had to deal with the pandemic in the years 2020-2021, someone could accuse social studies scholars of dealing too much with infodemic. In its original meaning, however, this would sound more like exaggeration of data and information compared to a real biological danger, rather than an inflation of data, information, and – soon, we would add – studies. But research is never enough. And even if confined within the four walls that the pandemic has long forced us, we always consider research a “wonderful adventure” (cf. Engels, 1877), aimed at placing the pieces of tile and bricks on the edifice of scientific knowledge. One such brick is the special issue we present here.

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