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Families, Relational Scenarios and Emotions in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the impact that the COVID-19 emergency and the policies and decisions taken to deal with it (mostly lockdown and social distancing) have had on interpersonal relationships. In particular, it will explore the changes and relational scenarios which have emerged within the patterns of daily family life in the context of a temporary social deprivation caused by the pandemic. To explore this topic, the following contribution will draw on the most recent scientific literature on the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects moving within the theoretical framework of the sociology of emotions. The paper will also discuss how the exploration of emotional life, given its relational nature, can offer interesting sociological reflections on the consequences of COVID-19 on individuals' perceptions of others and, in doing so, can also suggest new research paths to follow.

Keywords: COVID-19; families; emotions.

1. Introduction

In late 2019, a terrible disease caused by the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, occurred in China and then quickly spread to the rest of the World assuming the characteristics of a pandemic¹. The COVID-19 pandemic, as it was later

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¹ On 11 March 2020, the director of the World Health Organization – Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus – released an official statement with the first data relating to infections and deaths and with the definition of the situation as 'pandemic': <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19--11-march-2020>.

named, has raised significant challenges for society as a whole and has reminded us that nobody in the world is immune from risk (Bauman, 1999). Isolation and social distancing have impacted interpersonal relationships and routine, placing men and women in an unnatural social condition, producing a source of psychological stress, and, sometimes, solitude. The social actor was forced to confine himself in his intimacy and in his family that reemerged as a 'cell of social life' (Corposanto, Fotino, 2020: 9), and the experience of living together constantly represents a litmus test of family life highlighting visible strengths and fragilities.

The analysis proposed in this paper will be developed within the theoretical framework of the sociology of emotions (Stets, Turner, 2006) and using a desk research methodology² (Stewart, Kamins, 1993; Largan, Morris, 2019) which consists of analyzing the most recent scientific literature on the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects, with a sociological focus, while also welcoming contributions from psychology, psychiatry and medicine. The *file rouge* will be the idea that there is a nexus of mutual conditioning between great economic, social, and institutional changes and emotional culture. The latter originates from the social context of symbolic elements, from common sense operating in specific historical situations (Elias, 1988; D'Andrea, 2005). The body, sensitivity, the perception of the external world, emotions and feelings are all conditioned by forms assumed from time to time by socio-cultural reality. As we will see, the pandemic and policies and decisions taken to manage it, have inevitably created extraordinary circumstances that have conditioned the emotional culture of society and how it has been received, resulting in a specific 'emotional climate' (de Rivera, 1992)³ within different family scenarios. Attention will be placed on the impact that lockdown policies and social distancing measures have had on interpersonal relationships and, in particular, it will explore the changes in relational scenarios which have emerged within everyday family life in the context of a temporary social deprivation. The situation arose following the outbreak of the pandemic, forcing families to face distress resulting from the loss of its reference network and numerous changes in the management of everyday life. Digital platforms and social networks have become almost the only possible space for relationships and sharing and, in doing so, interpersonal and social relationships have been temporarily

² Desk research or secondary research is a method that involves the use of already existing data. This methodology includes research material published in research reports and documents.

³ An emotional climate is a way that people of a society emotionally relate to the world and one another and depends on pervasive socio-political and socio-economic conditions.

transferred to a relational sphere deprived of a physical dimension. The access to sociality and education for the youngest has been completely delegated to the family. This has placed adults with the challenge of reconciling this new commitment to their work and has made their home environment and its management even more complex. In such an extraordinary situation, families have experienced different emotions and feelings that have influenced the interpretation of the global health emergency and its consequences have shaped relational patterns. Starting from these considerations, social relationships during the pandemic will be explored using emotions and feelings as privileged lenses to observe social dynamics and everyday life within the family system and their power to shape the interpretation and construction of the surrounding reality (Hochschild, 1979). Some fundamental concepts elaborated in the context of the Sociology of emotions (which will be briefly introduced in the next paragraph) will constitute the analytical coordinates of this contribution.

2. Theoretical background: the Sociology of emotions

Emotions and feelings for a long time have been the exclusive prerogative of the scientific fields of philosophy, psychology and anthropology; considered to be the sciences that are best able to investigate the irrational manifestations of life. By carefully analyzing classical sociologists, it is possible, however, to show how emotions do not represent a marginal topic. A first example is represented by the sociology of Max Weber who recognized the relevant role of certain emotions, such as anxiety and fear, in the formation of the 'spirit of capitalism' (Pulcini, 1997; Fornari, 2005). George Simmel, for his part, considered the ability of individuals to establish social relations at the center of social organization and investigated emotional reality and sexuality in modern societies (Fornari, 2005). It is also possible to refer to other authors as George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman within the American school or Norbert Elias in a European context, who, starting from the Simmelian sociological analysis, have deepened and expanded the debate on emotions and feelings (Fornari, 2005). These isolated voices, however, do not lead to disciplinary legitimacy and this happened as late as the 1970s when a series of requests and needs arose from society facing the 'challenge of complexity' and some works (e.g. that of Albert O. Hirschmann), called into question one of the foundations of sociology which is the idea of a rational social actor, guided by an instrumental logic concerning which emotions play a residual and socially irrelevant role (Pulcini, 1997). This awareness materialized in a real discipline, the Sociology of emotions, in the United States in the 1980s (Turnaturi, 1995): the discovery of the relevance of the emotional factor in social situations meant

a mutual integration between the rational paradigm and the emotional paradigm (Pulcini, 1997).

The American Sociology of emotions today counts several theories of emotions placed within the equally numerous sociological traditions: symbolic interactionism (Shott, 1979), structural perspectives (Kemper, 1990), Randall Collins' theory of rituals (Collins, 2004), to mention a few. Despite being very different sociological perspectives, they share the assumption of the sociological relevance of emotions, which condition interactions, culture and social structure but, at the same time, are conditioned by interactions, cultural and social structure (Iagulli, 2009).

Two scholars whose contributions inspired by a 'cultural' approach to emotions, which are still of fundamental importance today, are Steve Gordon and Arlie Russell Hochschild. Gordon emphasized the capacity of cultural forces to condition people's emotional reactions and to him we owe the cardinal concept of 'emotional culture' (Gordon, 1981) which manifests itself not only in language, but also in every other cultural element: from daily rituals to artistic expressions, from scientific publications to religious texts (Iagulli, 2014). In other words, an emotional culture comprises the cultural codes and symbolic inventory by which emotions are expressed and regulated. It is composed of emotional rules, emotional norms, and emotional narratives. Hochschild, instead, introduced concepts that are still of extraordinary relevance today and which have become part of the lexicon of the Sociology of emotions. In the specific context of the analysis proposed here, her well-known concept of 'emotion work' will be resumed; an expression that designates the control of emotions in private life.⁴

Starting from this briefly outlined conceptual framework, emotions and feelings will be the privileged lenses to observe social dynamics and daily life within the family system and their power to shape the interpretation and construction of the surrounding reality. The aim will be to offer an analytical perspective of a sociological nature, in the belief that the emotions which emerge within a state of uncertainty are socially constructed and that situations of uncertainty amplify the 'interdependence' (Lombardo, Mauceri, 2020) of individual emotions.

⁴ Hochschild distinguishes 'emotion work' from 'emotion labor', an expression that indicates the control of emotions for work reasons.

3. The effects of lockdown and social distancing measures: what we know about the emotions of social actors so far

Governments around the world are responding to the COVID-19 health emergency by imposing severe social distancing measures whose most evident effects are the radical upheaval of people's habits and lifestyles. Although states of uncertainty and different dispositions to temporality arouse individual mental states, there are some shared stress-inducing characteristics of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown which include loss of control, social isolation, and worries about one's own health and that of loved ones (Shanahan et al., 2020).

As mentioned previously, there is a nexus of reciprocal influence between great economic, social and institutional changes, the emotional culture of society, and emotional climate which is created within various social circles, including family. In other words, our socio-cultural reality conditions our perception of the external world, both emotions and feelings and it is, therefore, evident how an extreme situation such as the one we have experienced in recent months may have conditioned our way of relating to the surrounding world and to others. Emotional-affective life has a situational and relational nature, but it is also important to consider the cultural mediation of emotional experiences, spaces and narratives. The outbreak of COVID-19 can be classified as a typical crisis event, which is defined as an event that is specific and surprising, creating high levels of uncertainty and the perception of a threat (Liu, Liu 2020). The social disruption caused by the pandemic has generated a strong need for information and construction of meaning and the mass media, especially social media platforms, have been perceived by individuals as the best tools to satisfy this need. Social media have carried out a fundamental action of social glue, having been the almost exclusive channels with which to communicate with relatives, friends and colleagues. On the other hand, a surplus of information and the proliferation of fake news has been spread through these channels (Ruiu, 2020) which have fueled uncertainty, anguish and anger. These findings and considerations represent the common ground of research carried out between February and June 2020 with the aim of highlighting the emotional impact of the epidemic and also to understand the interaction between information and emotional wellbeing (Aslam et al., 2020)⁵. A considerable part

⁵ For the collection of the theoretical and empirical references object of the secondary research, was carried out a search on the 'Google scholar' engine and on 'Roma Tre Discovery', an academic platform that allows you to identify reports, articles and documents by drawing on the collections of digital libraries of 'Roma Tre' University.

of the data relating to the emotional dimension at the time of COVID-19 was obtained from the analysis of the contents published on social networks which proved to be one of the main sources of ‘emotional contagion’⁶. The monitoring of emotions of Italians carried out by Expert System through the semantic analysis of the texts published on social media⁷ is a perfect example of the research approach just described. It offered a broader vision of the emotional life during the period in which the prevention measures were most severe. From this daily monitoring carried out during the lockdown it emerged that, at the beginning of the spread of the virus, anxiety and then fear dominated, even if these emotions were offset by feelings of expectation and trust in the temporariness of the situation. From a comparison with Anglo-Saxon countries (Great Britain and the United States) a ‘common curve of social emotions’ was found as the succession of emotions was largely the same: for all at the beginning anxiety dominated, then fear followed and finally sadness⁸. Another set of research, instead, used the technique of the web survey; conducting online questionnaires, using applications and platforms realized for the specific purpose. One piece of research in particular was a web-survey realised by the MSA-COVID-19 (Osservatorio sui Mutamenti Sociali in Atto – COVID-19) in which section four of the questionnaire (called ‘Emotions and Resilience’) highlighted that during the period from March to April 2020, the basic emotions felt with higher intensity by interviewees were: sadness, fear, anxiety and anger, while happiness was the emotion with the lowest score (Cerbara et al., 2020: 7158). Similar results emerged from a survey carried out in the same period by BVA-Doxa regarding the main impacts on the Italian population caused by the recent spread of COVID-19. The research dedicated particular attention to the emotional state of Italians during the lockdown, stressing how, with the disruption of everyday life imposed by quarantine, a growing number of individuals experienced negative emotions. The results of this survey confirmed that prevailing emotions were worry and uncertainty, followed by stress, anxiety, fear, anger and sadness. Within this nucleus of negative emotions, boredom and fatigue were also identified.

The selection of the group of secondary sources was made using some specific keywords (e.g. COVID-19, pandemic, emotions, families, social relations).

⁶ In an article published in 1990 – *Stratification, Emotional Energy, and the Transient Emotions* – the essential core of Collins’ model of social rituals can be found. This model emphasises the so-called ‘emotional contagion’ that occurs between people who are co-present and focused on the same activity or object.

⁷ <https://www.sociometrica.it/>

<https://expertsystem.com/it/covid-19-insights-feelings/>

⁸ <https://expertsystem.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/20200519-COVID-19-19-Insights-Feelings.pdf>

Exploratory research (Buccolo et al., 2020) aimed at studying the perceptions and emotional experiences of Italians during the pandemic not only confirmed the findings of other studies (the prevalence of emotions such as anxiety, sadness and anger) but also highlighted how much the emotions felt in this particular period have contributed to the reconfiguration of people's lives within their own family context. According to this survey, moreover, the greatest fear felt during the most dramatic phase of the health emergency was that of not being able to hug loved ones again, followed by not being able to return to normal life, the fear of contagion and the fear of death.

A survey carried out in May 2020⁹, which focused on the work, emotions and wellbeing of women and men during the quarantine, proposed an analysis of the emotional life at the time of COVID-19 from an interesting gender perspective. The survey specifically revealed that women reported an increased level of fatigue and mental load, while men perceived less of a difference than before quarantine. Women, like men, spent their time mostly working but were involved much more than men in household management and the presence of their children increased the household burden managed by women as they devoted themselves more than men to their children's school activities. Especially among women, irritability, insomnia, lack of concentration and agitation had repercussions on the quality and lucidity of their work as well as on family relationships. Above all, gender differences were found in the type and recognition of emotions: alongside hope, women declared a greater range of negative emotions than men and with a greater intensity.

One last piece of research that deserves to be included in this brief review of the scientific literature on the 'emotional consequences' of the pandemic is a recently published web survey (Lombardo, Mauceri, 2020), centered on social relations during the COVID-19 emergency in Italy. The survey confirmed the imbalance towards negative moods identified in previous research: anxiety, sadness, boredom, anger and stress appeared as the main modes of emotional response to such an extraordinary situation. This core of emotions identified with a certain unanimity represents a sort of 'code' that characterized individuals' emotional life in the phase of a full health emergency and since emotions not only play a cognitive role but are also interactive and communicative, it seems clear that they have contributed to shaping family relationship patterns subjected to more or less profound transformations resulting from the need to adapt to changed historical and social conditions.

⁹ The reference is to the survey 'Donne e Uomini in quarantena. Lavoro, benessere ed emozioni' carried out by 'Fondazione Libellula': <https://www.fondazione.libellula.com/it/ebook.html>

4. The family as a privileged slice of daily life with which to reflect on the social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic

Otherness is a basic feature of an intimate family experience: usually, family keeps mutual exchanges with its sociocultural reference environment. Family relationships change together with the family's social relationships and the family is in daily contact with a broader network made up of many individuals. This social context acts as a protective buffer of family tensions as it allows household members to cope with interpersonal pressures through their social relationships. In other words, the network of friends and work colleagues 'can solve or reshape the troubles and the negative feelings that emerge in the family' (Gritti, 2020: 2). The explosion of the pandemic and the consequent measures taken to contain infection forced individuals to confine themselves to their private sphere that often coincides with their own family which affirms itself as a 'cell of social life' (Corposanto, Fotino, 2020: 9).

In emergency circumstances, such as those determined by COVID-19, the daily routine (ways of spending free time, eating habits, relational life and consumption styles) undergoes a sudden transformation, putting people who experience the consequences of these events into a condition of reorientation, at least temporarily, of their existential patterns. In the situation under examination, something has certainly changed in family relations as existential trajectories have been forcibly readjusted to a prolonged and forced co-existence. According to the findings of the recent aforementioned research (Lombardo, Mauceri, 2020), relationships have remained almost unchanged mainly in smaller households, while privacy has decreased and opportunities for interference and tensions have grown in larger ones, especially when forced to live in a house that is not adequate for prolonged co-existence.

The COVID-19 crisis has upset everyday routines and practices of sociality forcing families to face the distress resulting from the loss of its reference network and numerous changes in the management of everyday life. This has helped to outline new relational scenarios, that is, configurations of specific relational situations resulting from the adaptation of families to the measures taken to contain a global pandemic, but also the emotions and moods evoked by a situation characterized by communicative ambiguity concerning the narrative of the emergency and a pervasive sense of uncertainty about the evolution of the disease and the future.

4.1 Families in the time of a global pandemic: changes and challenges

In response to lockdown measures, families have reported the loss of community and freedom of movement, needed to reorganize family life,

including roles and routines and communication about practical and emotional challenges of living with the pandemic. They have also experienced, both collectively and within their own restricted social circle, a nucleus of emotions and feelings that have conditioned the interpretation of the global health emergency and its consequences which have shaped their relational patterns: widespread, indistinct and 'liquid fear' (Bauman 2006) of contagion and disease, the pain and mourning for the deaths caused by the pandemic, frustration derived from financial difficulties, internal tensions linked to the sharing of domestic spaces. The impossibility of continuing with one's daily routine, the interruption of certain activities, such as work or sports outside the home, the ban on going out except for reasons of necessity, the invitation to maintain physical distance, as well as the closure of all meeting and entertainment venues can be considered the main contextual factors affecting the increase of emotional state characterized by boredom, anxiety, and sadness, according to the research presented earlier. This set of factors has probably consolidated the use of online communication practices to maintain and preserve networks of family, friends, and professional relationships, but also to express and share emotional states. In this way, one of the main relational scenarios that emerged during the period of lockdown was outlined: the one in which interpersonal and social relationships have been temporarily transferred to a relational sphere deprived of a physical dimension. Social networks during quarantine contributed to the generation of forms of proximity unanchored from physical and local places where rituals of interaction used to allow people to keep in touch. The impossibility of leaving the house and attending the usual meeting places has led people to a reinvention of certain social occasions; simulating and reproducing the rituals of daily life in virtual contexts (Lombardo, Mauceri, 2020). Digital technologies have proved particularly helpful to the subrogation of affective interactions with family and friends and they have revealed particularly useful tools in cases of the 'geographical dispersion' (Rolland, 2020) of families, a situation in which members had to accept not seeing loved ones for an indeterminate period.

Particularly important changes were those related to the sphere of care in all its facets, also because these changes have forced family members to rewrite their priorities and manage roles that are sometimes in conflict with each other. A complex relational scenario is what has emerged in families where one or more members need special care due to problems related to their mental or physical health. In a condition, such as that which took shape in the period of the full COVID-19 crisis, much of the support given to families who provide long-term care for an ill parent was in fact lost. Families who care for a father, mother, or partner with serious illness had to manage without day-care assistance, and families with a child who requires specialized care had to cope

with a lack of outside guidance usually provided by a medical nursery or special educational services (Luttik et al., 2020).

For its social implications and effects, the relational dimension of families in which one or more members have assumed the role of 'smart worker' is a scenario that deserves particular attention. The COVID-19 outbreak and the resulting need for social distancing has led many organizations to impose remote working policies that require individuals to work at home rendering the lines between family and professional roles increasingly blurred. Simultaneously, the closure of childcare facilities and schools forced many working parents to suddenly take on full-time child-caring responsibilities and home-school instruction while also adjusting to their new work-from-home arrangements. The impact of these changes cannot be underestimated: maintaining family and work boundaries may become particularly challenging because individuals must undertake multiple role transitions. Enacting roles that compete for primacy, for example, having to choose whether to privilege one's role as an employee or as a parent, may lead to inter-role conflict, family-work interference, and emotional strain. The immediate effect of the forced and prolonged co-existence following the restrictions related to COVID-19 was, therefore, a shifting of roles and expectations of each family member, evolving into new family relational scenarios. While at school, the child's role was 'student', but once they are at home, most likely the role of a young or adolescent 'child' prevailed. For the parents, who suddenly have a child at home full time, their primary role as 'parent' has often also included the role of 'teacher'.

These new dynamics immersed in an emotional climate, as we have seen, with predominantly negative shades created tension consequent to the situation of role conflict in which individuals are placed into roles that they do not normally play.

Within the different relational scenarios so far briefly described, it is possible to identify a recurring element, which has found confirmation in the scientific and grey literature: the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has increased difficulties and the care burden of families and especially those of women (Power, 2020). The United Nations (2020) confirms that as institutional and community childcare has not been accessible for many families during lockdown, unpaid childcare provision has fallen more heavily on women, which has constrained their ability to work. It is possible to say that during the most critical phase of the pandemic and the related measures there was a temporary suspension of the so-called 'defamilization' process (Esping-Andersen, 1999) which consists of 'activating a network outside the family for the production of goods and services that are classed as reproductive labor (the sum total of domestic work and care work), which gives the woman more time for the market and creates jobs' (Di Nicola, 2015: 197). School closures and household

isolation moved the work of caring for children ‘from the paid economy – nurseries, schools, babysitters – to the unpaid one’ (Power, 2020: 68) increasing the tendency to entrust women with both the management and care of children and the response to the practical and emotional needs of all family members (Rolland, 2020). This means that women are often not only burdened by practical tasks but also mental tasks as they are required to perform, within their private life, an emotional job (Hochschild, 1979). Referring to this undervalued and unpaid work linked to the intimate and emotional sphere which is mainly carried out by women, some feminist scholars have recently drawn attention to the so-called ‘third shift’¹⁰, a term that describes the situation as ensuring the emotional wellbeing of not only children but also parents and other family members (Heejung Chung, 2020).

5. Concluding notes

This theoretical contribution focuses attention on the impact that the emergency and extraordinary situation created by COVID-19 has had on the social relationships and emotional universe of individuals who have experienced a sudden upheaval in their habits and existential paths. The family and its different relational scenarios have been considered a privileged fragment of daily life to reflect on some social consequences of COVID-19 and the focus on the role of emotions relating to all these transformations has suggested the possibility of following new and stimulating paths of research. Sociology, for its ability to grasp change, to intercept and make comprehensible the transformations of structural and cultural models, can offer a valuable contribution to the study of this unprecedented historical period. Among the research topics that can be explored are the study of the new forms that social relations can take, the structure of cultural systems and the change in expectations about the future that guides choices and behaviors. Furthermore, other issues that deserve to be examined more in depth are how the pandemic has changed and transformed work-family dynamics, verbal and non-verbal communication in the family context, professional careers and connected choices, gender differences and emotional reactions due to social distancing.

Given the currency and dynamic nature of the crisis, the consequences of the lockdown period and social distancing measures on people’s routines and social relationships has yet to be documented in detail. However, based on the studies and analysis proposed here, it is possible to draw some initial

¹⁰ There is also a ‘second shift’, a term coined and popularized by Arlie Hochschild (1989) which refers to the household and childcare duties that follow the day’s work for pay outside the home.

conclusions. A key observation to be made is that the COVID-19 emergency shines a spotlight on social, political, and economic issues that were already present before the outbreak, like health, income inequality and care burden. Moreover, it has shed new light on the analysis of everyday life as a terrain of socially relevant dynamics, especially under the pressure of this extraordinary situation. Reflections on the family and on the transformations of the dynamics and relational scenarios that have emerged following the pandemic proposed in the previous pages have tried to highlight the relational and societal value of emotional life in order to show the interactive and communicative role it plays. This role was explored above all through the concepts of emotional culture and emotional climate which made it possible to connect the link between emotions and the historical and social context, as well as their importance in the understanding of society and its collective values. Emotions, as we have seen, are a crucial link between the micro and macro levels of social reality (Iagulli, 2009). They have a social nature and are, therefore, inevitably conditioned by situations and strongly shaped by 'social forces' (Iagulli, 2019: 201) which come into play interactively during the emotional experience.

The emotional culture and process of socialization through which we learn have inevitably been marked by the pandemic and its consequences; not so much and not only on the material level, but also on the immaterial: the impact on social relations and the new way of conceiving them, the different ways of seeing and experiencing encounters with others, changes in attendance at the workplace, school and peer groups, as well as the different meanings we attribute to an everyday life that we perceive as profoundly changed. Physical distancing measures to contain the spread of the virus and the need to orient ourselves with respect to epidemiological risks are changing our social conduct which is also an 'embodied' conduct. If we maybe have left behind the phase of full lockdown, the same cannot be said of the extent of social distancing, which is now part of our life and which is inevitably transforming our way of relating to others and our emotional lexicon; our present way of expressing emotions which we do not convey through physical contact.

We are still going through a social and psychologically exhausting period and a lot of the things that people value are threatened (Steinert, 2020). The pervasive socio-political and socio-economic conditions created by the pandemic have fueled an emotional climate marked by uncertainty and fear of the unknown and this may contribute to a long-lasting change in how people perceive the world and interact with others.

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