

**Discussion – Key Debates, Viewpoints & Interviews**

Covid politics – We Have to do Something About It! Agency and Pandemic
Mikolaj Pawlak

Covid politics – The Unexpected Victory of the Nation State
Agnieszka Bielewska

Covid politics – Pandemic, War Metaphors, and the Process of Civilisation
Daniel Arenas

Covid politics – Crisis in the Time of Disaster (Coronavirus)
Dr Veselin Mitrović

Covid politics – Morality and Solidarities in a State of Exception
Teppo Eskelinen

Covid politics – Your Own Personal State of Emergency
José Duarte Ribeiro

Covid politics – Beware of the Ministry of Purity
Javier García-Martínez

Covid politics – Reflections on the COVID-19 Rupture: Towards Transformation
Angela Martínez Dy

Covid politics – Calling Leaders' Bluff: The Covid-19 Outbreak and Power Relations in European Societies
Matteo Antonini

Covid politics – The Pandemic in Europe's Community of Destiny
Stefania Adriana Bevilacqua

Covid politics – Being Tough (Enough?) – Navigating the Limits of Democratic Power in the Coronavirus Crisis
Isabel Kusche

Covid Inequalities – Scenarios of Return (im)Mobility and Pandemic
Izabela Grabowska

Covid Inequalities – The Butterfly and the Cocoon: The Chinese Community of Prato (Italy) during COVID-19
Laura Leonardi

Beliefs and knowledges – Between a Purifying and Polluting Spoon
Milica Resanović

Beliefs and knowledges – The Sound of Silence: The Aestheticization of the Coronavirus in Service of the Production of Knowledge
Dr Shiry Bar-Lev

Beliefs and knowledges – Coronavirus, Theodicy and Capitalism
Bartholomew A. Konechni

Beliefs and knowledges – Toilet paper and pangolins: Magical thinking during the Covid-19 pandemics
David Redmalm

Beliefs and knowledges – Socio-Ecological Mentalities and the Trilemmas of Covid and Climate
Dennis Eversberg

Beliefs and knowledges – The Largest Possible Experiment: The Corona Pandemic as Nonknowledge Transfer
Matthias Gross

Covid life-courses – Reflecting on Meta-Temporalities in the Study of Youth Futures Within the Covid 19 Pandemic
Giuliana Mandich

Covid life-courses – Parents' Home Office Challenges During the Corona Pandemic
Lena Hipp

Covid life-courses – Robots Versus Human Care Workers in Elderly Care: Un-/empathic and Un-/infected
Marcus Persson

Covid life-courses – "My Life in Times of Coronaviruses": Changes in the Everyday Life of Children of Madrid
Lourdes Gaitán

Covid life-courses – Alone Together: Biographical Crises in Times of Pandemic
Ana Caetano

Life, health, death – Living in a Lockdown: An Opportunity to Enhance Physical Activities?
Dr Mihaly Szerovay

Life, health, death – The "Bare Death": Biopolitics and Religiopolitics of Jewish Covid-19 Victims
Noa Vana

Life, health, death – Pandemics, Social Sciences and Inequality of Time
Cláudio Pinheiro

Life, health, death – The Display of Displaced Care: Funerals in Corona Times
Erika Anne Hayfield

Reflections – (Inter)acting in a Different Timeframe
Aurianne Stroude

Reflections – Relational Corona
Dr. Markus Lange

Reflections – Everything has Changed and Nothing has Changed
Hannah Bradby

Reflections – Pandemic Possibilities in Sweden – From a Room with a View
Gabriella Wulff

Mediating Covid – Following the #. Itallians and 'Biographical Continuity Under Covid-19
Veronica Moretti

Mediating Covid – The Evolution of Fake News in the Context of Coronavirus: First Explorative Insights into the Emergence and Spread of Fake News in Austria
Daniela Wetzelhütter

Mediating Covid – Epidemic, Pandemic, Infodemic: A Project in Three Acts
Marc Hannappel

Covid Working – Becoming Irrelevant for the System: A Discussion of Terms
Elke Hemminger

Covid Working – The Corona Crisis and the Systemic Relevance of Jobs in Germany: Towards a New Appreciation and Solidarity?
Paul-Fiete Kramer

Covid Arts – Arts in Finland
Sari Karttunen

Covid Arts – The Impact of the Pandemic on Artists: Case Study in Malta
Dr Valerie Visanich

Covid Arts – Resisting Pandemics: Balconies, Musicians and Contemporary Lockdowns in Contemporary Spain
Kerman Calvo

Covid Arts – The Show Must Go On(line) - Music in Quarantine
Alenka Barber-Kersovan

Covid Arts – The State and the Arts in Sweden During the Initial Phase of the Covid-19 Crisis – Less Visible Losses in the Shadow of Lost Lives and Livelihoods
Christopher Mathieu

Covid Arts – The Arts in the Time of Pandemic
Dr. Olga Kolokytha

Covid life-courses – Alone Together: Biographical Crises in Times of Pandemic

ISSUE 46: PANDEMIC (IM)POSSIBILITIES VOL. 2 SUN 2 MAY 2021

FACEBOOK TWITTER EMAIL

Ana Caetano, Assistant Professor, Department of Social Research Methods, School of Sociology and Social Policy, Iscte-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, CIES-Iscte, Lisboa, Portugal

I have been studying biographical crises for some years now. My interest is in understanding how people cope with very personal difficult moments experienced over the course of their lives. I am examining critical events and periods connected, for example, to the death of someone close, a disease, accidents, severe economic difficulties, among other traumatic occurrences [1]. One of the main features of this type of micro analysis is that it examines extremely private dimensions of a person's life, and deals with the exceptionality and sometimes even unpredictability of these events in that person's biography. It is true that many of these crises illustrate the individual dimension of larger societal trends. An accident, a death, or a disease can be understood at the individual level as the result of chance, but if we look at the global picture, these are events that are quite common in people's biographies. They are individually unexpected but collectively probable. And while they tend to have disruptive effects, there are institutional responses to such circumstances [2]. Societies are prepared, through their institutions, to deal with these negative moments, precisely because they are integral parts of social life.

Nonetheless, these critical events are lived as something private, singular, and unique. They are often experienced in isolation, in the sense that the people around cannot truly understand what these individuals are going through, unless they had experienced something similar. Much of the suffering comes from this sense of solitude, of being the only one dealing with such problems. It is hard to deal with the differences with other people, whose lives go on while theirs are somehow suspended. That is why it is so important to many individuals to turn to self-help groups, where they find people who went through similar situations. The issue of identification with others and the ability to be understood play a key role in the way people cope with critical biographical events and redefine their identities in the process [3].

In the case of the current pandemic, this area of studies is, perhaps more than ever, being challenged to reflect and contribute to understanding individual experiences. People are also experiencing biographical crises, but these crises are of a different kind:

1) The first difference relates to the pandemic's collective nature. The crisis is global and shared. It is not singular, unique, and private because everyone is experiencing it, even if they are not infected with the virus. Life has changed abruptly for large numbers of people around the globe. Individuals may be dealing with their own issues, such as health problems, financial difficulties, unemployment, layoffs, distance from family members, confinement in the domestic space, or difficulties in work-family balance, and they have unequal life contexts and starting points, but these issues are being experienced by entire populations. The crisis is not something specific to a single biography, or to a constellation of separate lives, but is instead transversal. The collective features of this crisis have implications for the way it is lived. We have all seen different social actors, from governments, health organisations, and the media, to friends, family, and neighbours call out expressions such as 'we will beat the virus', 'getting through this together', 'we will survive', or 'stronger together'. The emphasis is on the words 'we' and 'together'. This is indeed a collective struggle, which is behind the widespread idea that we are all in the same boat, since the virus does not choose by class, gender or ethnicity. We know that this is not true, because even if anyone can be infected, there are different levels of vulnerability related to people's socio-economic backgrounds, health situations, or country of residence, among many other factors. Even so, this collective narrative seems to play an important role in the process of making sense of what is happening and in helping people get by, while building a sense of community. We can compare and relate to other people's experiences, states of mind, practices, and vice-versa, they can relate to ours. This is an important coping mechanism that is most of the time lacking in the ways individuals cope with singular biographical crises.

2) The second difference relates to the fact that the pandemic assumes the features of what we can call a 'total event', to borrow Mauss's [4] concept of 'total social fact', and Goffman's [5] notion of 'total institution'. It is a total crisis, in the sense that it affects, in a *direct, immediate, and simultaneous* way, all (or almost all) dimensions of people's lives, such as family, work, health, finances and leisure. A large number of individuals were removed from their habitual daily lives for an uncertain period of time, in social isolation, facing powerful obstacles in accessing services and others outside their homes. And all of this occurs within socially regulated parameters, which encompass issues related both to more general matters, like work, education, communication and social relationships, and also to micro-level aspects of our lives, such as food, hygiene or taking walks. A biographical crisis at the individual level can, of course, also have a transversal impact in someone's life, but obviously not at this scale and with this degree of simultaneity and immediacy. Besides the abruptness of the critical event on a person's biography, usually changes tend to be more gradual, prolonged in time, and context dependent.

3) There are institutional responses for most biographical crises. But in the current pandemic situation, the pre-existing responses were clearly insufficient in the face of such rapidity and unpredictability. Basic societal institutions, like hospitals for example, did not have immediate responses to deal with the abruptness of the crisis. This means that the institutional framing of the pandemic is being built *in loco*, according to the specific dynamics of evolution of the disease, based also on the previous experience of other countries, and making use of the available resources. That is why not all governments have implemented the same measures and the timings have varied. Both biographical crises and collective crises like the current pandemic are institutionally framed, and the support provided in this regard is key in helping people cope with the situation. However, while in the former this framing consists in a set of standardised procedures, even if adaptable to individual circumstances, that have been established for a substantial number of years, possibly even decades, in the latter this framing is being created in the urgency of the moment.

4) And finally, the fourth difference regards time. When a person goes through a difficult moment in life – for example, the death of a family member – there is no specific time-frame defining how long this individual will experience bereavement. But there are, in fact, socially expected durations [6]. Despite the suffering and other potential problems arising from that specific situation, it is expected that that person resumes her life, by going back to work or to school, fulfilling family obligations, and maintaining social relationships. One of the most distressing things about the current collective crisis is the uncertainty regarding time. We do not know for how long our habitual lives will be suspended, for how long will the social distancing measures last, and for how many months will the virus be active. And none of this depends on us as single individuals. That is why most governments have been managing the crisis pointing to short time markers, presenting sequential close horizons in the implementation of measures, and reviewing them in a phased manner, while building institutional responses. This is also a way of easing the distress of having life on hold. Temporal pointers are crucial for the way we live our lives and plan our futures. They act as existential points of reference, in this case to foresee life without the pandemic.

Despite these differences, biographical crises and collective crises have in common the experience of feelings of suffering, anxiety or fear, and they produce real changes in people's perceptions and practices. But while in the former individuals tend to feel alone in the world, in the face of a 'total crisis' people feel alone together, within a collective institutionally regulated environment being produced on the spot and dealing with temporal uncertainty. It will take time to unfold this comparison and to understand how people have coped. And sociologists, as social actors also experiencing these circumstances, will need time to manage their own crises as individuals to be able to understand how the life of others has changed.

References

- [1] Caetano, Ana (2018), "O léxico das crises biográficas [The lexicon of biographical crises], *Análise Social*, 226(LIII): 88-111.
- [2] Grossetti, Michel (2004), *Sociologie de l'imprévisible*, Paris: PUF.
- [3] Becker, Gay (1997), *Disrupted lives*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- [4] Mauss, Marcel (1954), *The gift*, London: Cohen & West.
- [5] Goffman, Erving (1961), *Asylums*, New York: Anchor Books.
- [6] Merton, Robert K. (1996), *On social structure and science*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Comment on this article – log in with your ESA username and password: a comment field will appear.

Authors

Ana Caetano