Emotions and Need for Trust in Times of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Carmelo Guarino, PhD
Azienda Ospedaliera
Ospedali Riuniti "Villa Sofia-Cervello", viale Strasburgo n. 233, 90146 – Palermo

Abstract

Aim. *Since the Novel Coronavirus made its appearance in 2019 in the Chinese city of Wuhan, in the province of Hubei, arousing alarm and concerns in health authorities and governments around the world, the changes that our lives have undergone have proved epochal. Within a few weeks, habits, quality and rhythms of our daily life have been deeply upset and destabilized. This research configures a cross-sectional study while, through a sociological approach, investigating precisely the relationships between emotions induced by the Covid-19 pandemic (such as fear, anger, sadness and joy) and dimension of people's expectations and motivations.*

Results. The results of the research, carried out with reference to the first Italian lockdown (march-june 2020), on a sample of 538 Italian citizens, reveal a certain pervasive sense of vulnerability within target population, whose health and life is put at risk, and therefore asks for reliable and efficient institutions they can trust.

Conclusions. Research shows that people, feeling fear and a sense of vulnerability in the face of emergencies and situations that pose a serious risk to health and life, ask to be able to trust reliable and efficient institutions, whose task is to ensure security and well-being, protection and support.

Keywords. Covid-19 – Emotions–Vulnerability – Trust

1. Introduction

The appearance in the Chinese city of Wuhan, in the province of Hubei, of an unknown respiratory disease at the end of 2019, prompted the World Health Organization to proclaim on 30 January 2020 the state of Public health emergency international concern (PHEIC) (World Health Organization, 2020). A new virus, belonging to the coronavirus family, named before 2019-nCoV and then Sars-Cov-2, has entered the world scene arousing alarm and concern in health authorities and governments around the world. In fact, the epidemiological picture that day after day has unfolded all its danger due to the relentless pace of progression of contagion and the risks to the health of people, still surrounded by an aura of unpredictability and unknowability, in the absence of a vaccine and specific therapeutic protocols, continues to worry the whole world.

Since then, the changes that our lives have experienced have been epochal. In just a few weeks, the Novel Coronavirus has disturbed the habits, qualities and rhythms of our daily life, destabilizing it deeply. Not only at institutional and governmental level for the different styles of political emergency management that have characterized the different countries, but also at individual level. An initial reaction of global silence was followed by an explosion of uncontrolled emotional states, almost hysterical, sometimes surrounded by mysticism, sometimes motivated by ascetic suggestions, with attributions of moral meanings, almost divinatory, to disease. Anyway, emotions such as fear, anger, joy and hope have alternated, combined, obsessively associated, in an uncontrollable swirl of individual and collective manifestations. Moreover, emotions, negative or positive, are central to social dynamics and are closely linked to the events and circumstances we live, both individually and collectively. In fact, revealing significant links with signs and symbols that convey meanings, they represent the basis of a shared heritage of ideas, values, rules, ways of acting, being, thinking (Collins, 1981; 2004, pp. 40-46; Stets, Turner, 2008, pp. 40-41; Knottnerus, 2010).

In Political Emotions, Martha Nussbaum writes that "All societies are full of emotions. Liberal democracies are no exception" (Nussbaum, 2013/2014, p. 1).Although the study of emotions represents a privileged field of research and analysis of disciplines such as economics, psychology or neuropsychiatry, even in the sociological field, emotions are central to both theoretical and empirical.

Emotions such as fear, anger, joy or sadness can be powerful factors for understanding and explaining social phenomena, from the more strictly micro plane of the relational dynamics that bind people up to the macro one of the processes of social and cultural change typical of the contemporaneity.

On the other hand, it is also true that social reality, with its dynamics of unpredictability and complexity, determines significant effects in the lives of people and entire communities, influencing their moods, emotions, feelings, perceptions of the world, ideas, motivations, expectations.

2. Thesurvey

The present survey, which configures a cross-sectional study, was carried out in August 2020 on a sample of 538 Italian citizens (260 men, 278 women) through web survey. the aim was to investigate, with reference to the first Italian total lockdown period (March-June 2020), the relationships between the emotions induced by the Covid-19 pandemic (such as fear, anger, sadness and joy) and the dimension of people's expectations and motivations.

2.1 Method

The survey tool is represented by a questionnaire structured in 53 items with multiple and closed response, and uses the Likert scale[1]. Access to the field of investigation and the administration of the questionnaire was achieved through the use of social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, as well as messaging systems such as Whatsapp and Messenger. The collected data, was therefore systematized, structured and encoded in a matrix by the Microsoft Excel program and finally analyzed.

2.2 Results

Analysis of the data shows that 62.6% of respondents were afraid to contract Sars-Cov-2, revealing an even more intense fear in 82.7% of cases for the risk of infection of their families. This reveals how significant is the dimension of family relationships in the context of emergencies such as those that affect health. Fears grow in the face of the risk of not knowing the truth and not being adequately protected. In fact, the fear of not knowing the truth unites 58.9% of cases. Instead, fears of not being adequately protected by the government and the institutions in charge, unites 50.7% of subjects.

More than half, 54.5% of respondents declared themselves angry with the Italian government for the contradiction and confusion of the information provided; instead, 70.4% declared themselves angry for delay with which the European Union moved to help Italy.85.5% of respondents are also angry about fake news, incomplete or conflicting news about the widespread disease. Instead, 81.2% of the people declared themselves angry at the politicians who speculated on the pandemic and its consequences, for reasons of pure electoral propaganda. Finally, 81.6% of respondents are angry for those who do not comply with prevention measures, from use of personal protection devices to social distancing.85.3% of respondents felt joy in seeing so much solidarity in people, while 73.1% of the respondents are united by the joy of rediscovering a community. Finally, 70% of respondents are comforted by the idea that the national and supranational institutions are working for the good of Italy and 68.8% of respondents are happy for the ability of the health system to react to pandemic. As well as, it is widely shared the emotion of joy for awareness that the world of medicine and governments are working together to develop therapies and vaccines (81.3%).

2.3 Discussion

From analysis of the emotions that have characterized the motivational and relational universe ofpeople during the phase of explosion of Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown, seems to emerge a question of significant sociological relevance represented by the theme of trust, not only amongst people but also between people and institutions.Infact, it is a subject of analysis that scholars such as Francis Fukuyama, Robert Putnam and James Coleman consider central to a strong and virtuous social capital, of which they emphasize the cooperative dimension and the respect of shared rules (Fukuyama, 1995/1996, p. 40; Putnam, 2000/2004, pp. 9-29; Coleman, 1990, pp. 175-185).The priority theoretical references in this case are represented by Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman, whose reflections are part of the broader field of analysis of contemporaneity and social change, on associated risks and relative threats, The effects of which are both disruptive to the lives of individuals and systems, both micro and macro-perspective.According to Ulrich Beck, technical-scientific and economic progress of the modern era, in addition to being a tool for the production of wealth, has also produced risks that from latent side effects have translated, according to unpredictable social and political dynamics, in irreversible, global threats. Examples are radioactivity and nuclear

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[1]The questionnaire is structured in two parts. The first part is articulated in a sequence of 13 items related to basic sociographic properties. The second part, instead, is articulated in a succession of 40 items that explore the dimensions related to opinions, attitudes and motivations of people; in particular, it is a series of statements distinct for the different emotions (fear, anger, sadness, joy)for each of which it has been asked to express its own degree of agreement, from much in agreement to much in disagreement (Corbetta, 1999, pp. 125-129, 185-186, 246-250; Bailey, 1978/2006, Vol. II, pp. 30-41).

disasters, environmental pollution and climate change, the indiscriminate and intensive exploitation of natural resources and soil, the creation of new social and international inequalities (boomerang effect), migration and economic exploitation of risks (big business).

All this helps to configure the risk itself in the form of a social condition whose side effects define its catastrophic potential, transforming the risk society into a "catastrophic society"(Beck, 1986/2006, pp. 18-27, 29-40). As a result, people's lives have become a universe of environments that welcomes the side effects to confront, whether local or global, individual or collective (Beck, 1997/2008, pp. 52-54).

This is what happened with Covid-19 pandemic, where a territorial threat, a local outbreak in Wuhan, China, in a few months, if not even in a few weeks, has taken on global epidemiological dimensions, forcing people to radically change their lives, public and private. According to Ulrich Beck, the only way to avoid being crushed by the threats and side effects of modernity is to rebuild a dimension of shared collective responsibility, restoring active trust in people and institutions (Beck, 1997, trad. it. 2008, pp. 55-56).

Even for Anthony Giddens trust is central to that process of "democratization of daily life" that refers to the substantial freedoms enjoyed by most people and that influence every single phase of their existence (Giddens, 1990/1994, pp. 39-43, 88-104). This principle is particularly true in emergency situations involving the well-being and safety of people who, precisely in these circumstances, seem to be claiming need for trust, protection and reliance on credible and authoritative institutions (Giddens, 2007/2007, pp. 133-134).

On the other hand, citizens need for trust finds an ethical correspondence in the same raison d'être ofinstitutions, of Welfare state. According to Zygmunt Bauman, people only ask to be able to trust of the public institutions to escape the overwhelming and distressing feeling of vulnerability and destabilizing disorientation that the processes of change and globalization have generated in such a pervasive way. That is why the institutions are asked to strengthen the Welfare state, generating new networks of trust and solidarity between citizens and institutions (Bauman, 1999/2004, pp. 137-142; Bauman, Mauro, 2015, pp. 41-65). In this sense, according to Bauman, the welfare state can become an extraordinary source of solidarity that protects against the fear of exclusion, marginalization, poverty. It placates anger and resentment by configuring itself as the institutional embodiment of the idea of community in its most modern form. The resulting social rights bear witness to the veracity and realism of mutual trust and trust in the institutions, endorsing and validating a dimension of collective solidarity (Bauman, 2011/2013, pp. 3-23).

3. Conclusion

As the research shows, people, feeling fear and vulnerability in the face of emergencies and situations that pose a serious risk to health and life, ask to be able to trust reliable and efficient institutions, whose task is to ensure security and well-being, protection and support. As Zygmunt Bauman says, we are all vulnerable and that is why we will always need others. Changing ways of being together, transforming the contents of social relations, changing conventions and culture assumes new configuration, but the more the institutions will be able to make themselves reliable, the more people will be able to trust each other (Bauman, 2007, pp. 61-79; Bauman, 2008, pp. 137-142).

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