



1/2023

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## RE-CREATING NORMALITY DURING PANDEMIC. A VISUAL ESSAY ON THE ADAPTATION TO THE PERIOD OF ISOLATION IN ROMANIA

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**Abstract:** *DURING THE CRISIS CAUSED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, PEOPLE FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD HAVE STRUGGLED TO ADAPT, TO RE-CREATE NORMALCY IN ISOLATION, AND EVEN TO SURVIVE. CHANGES IN PUBLIC SPACES HAVE BEEN ILLUSTRATED IN VARIOUS VISUAL ESSAYS. WE HAVE BUILT A VISUAL ESSAY THAT HIGHLIGHTS THE ADAPTIVE CHANGES OCCURRED IN THE PRIVATE ENVIRONMENT AND THE WAYS IN WHICH THE PARTICIPANTS IN OUR RESEARCH TRIED TO CREATE A NEW NORMALCY DURING THE STATE OF EMERGENCY IN ROMANIA. WE COLLECTED DATA IN THE FORM OF VISUAL DIARIES THAT MATERIALIZED IN AN ARCHIVE OF 380 PHOTOGRAPHS, ILLUSTRATIVE FOR THE ISOLATION DURING THE PANDEMIC. WE HAVE SELECTED 10 PHOTOS THAT TELL, IN THE FORM OF A VISUAL ESSAY, THE STORY OF ADAPTING AND RE-CREATING A NORMALCY IN THE PRIVATE ENVIRONMENT, AT A TIME WHEN SOCIAL LIFE HAS BECOME DANGEROUS AND PEOPLE HAVE SPENT MOST OF THEIR TIME AT HOME.*

**Keywords:** PANDEMIC, ISOLATION, VISUAL DIARY, PHOTOVOICE.

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Daily life has routines and habits that create security in a constantly changing world. Many of our behaviours are repetitive and form patterns by which we define a certain normality. Famous



sociologists of the last century, such as George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blummer and Harold Garfinkel, have shown that social order is built on the meanings given by people to things and events, within the social interactions that take place in everyday life. Ever since childhood, we all need certain routines that give us stability, and as adults we integrate many habits into lifestyles. Social institutions in all cultures are expressions of the need for stability, routine and social security.

When our lives are disrupted by major changes or crises, we make significant efforts to adapt and create a new normalcy. This happens both in our daily lives and in the great social structures: in communities and organizations, in economic markets and within the systems of political power.

Mankind has recently experienced such a totally upsetting crisis, which has required huge efforts to adapt and even survive: the crisis caused by the Sars-Cov-2 virus, universally known as the Covid-19 Pandemic. Social life in all states of the world has been threatened, rethought and rebuilt to reduce the risk of disease and mortality: emergencies have been imposed; freedom of movement has been drastically reduced; educational, cultural, religious or entertainment institutions have closed; and work and learning have moved to the online environment, which has meant a real digital revolution.

Several visual essays published in prestigious journals illustrated the changes in public life during the pandemic: usually crowded public spaces have become empty, wild animals have exceeded the limits of their natural habitats and stepped on the streets, in cities, people have been seen rather through windows, isolated in their homes and new signs or objects have begun to be defining for the development of daily life: masks, arrows to indicate the direction of travel, visors, screens. (Pope, 2020). People have adopted new behaviours to adapt to the rules imposed by the authorities, such as hygiene measures or teleworking, and the volunteer actions have been illustrative for the manifestation of social solidarity all over the world (DGC, 2020). The search for normalcy was excellently illustrated in a visual essay published by The New York Times (Kask, 2020), where we see how the usual activities of daily life are carried out bearing the signs of the pandemic: masks, distancing measures and increased hygiene. Medical staff as a key human resource and hospitals that have been transformed to better respond to extremely difficult pressures and health conditions have been a significant material in visual essays published in 2020 (Sonnevend, 2020; Sutton, 2020).

We wondered what people actually did in their daily lives to adapt to the isolation imposed by the pandemic and to create a certain normalcy in a major crisis situation. To answer the question, we set out to collect visual diaries that illustrate the activities considered significant in the process of adapting to the new reality. Rieger (2011) argues that photographs as sociological evidence can be used successfully for "documenting social change" (p. 132). Based on this idea, we collected data on the social change imposed by the pandemic in the form of photographic diaries, asking research participants to periodically send us representative photos of what it means for them to be isolated, how their lives have changed and how they live the period of isolation. We also requested that the photos be accompanied by a short text or explanatory comment (see photovoice). We collected data from 30 participants, men and women aged between 19 and 71, who reside in Brașov county, Romania, both in urban and in rural areas. The archive we set up contains 380 photos that we received via e-mail or WhatsApp, between March and June 2020. It was the time interval corresponding to the state of emergency decreed in Romania at the beginning of the pandemic. This was the period with the most drastic restrictions, when the mobility of citizens was severely restricted, when all institutions considered non-essential were closed and when most work and education activities took place in the online environment.

Once established the archive of photos, we conducted a thematic coding thereof (Braun & Clark, 2012). According to the major themes that appeared in the photos, we made a visual essay describing the lives of our participants in 10 photos. The essay illustrates activities that are seemingly trivial, common, but that have been invested with meaning by the participants in our research. These

images have special meanings precisely because they illustrate the attempts to establish a state of normalcy in the course of life at home. The photos tell the story of adapting and re-creating a normalcy in the private environment, at a time when social life becomes dangerous, when any exit from the house could be associated with the risk of illness or even death.

The photovoice technique is very suitable for exploratory studies or for those that highlight less heard voices at the social level, such as the case of marginalized or excluded groups. We dare say, in the context of the isolation imposed by the pandemic, beyond the speeches of the authorities or journalists, the voices of ordinary citizens may be relevant to understanding how individual or family adaptation strategies were constructed during a deep crisis.

Purcell (2007) shows that techniques such as photo-elicitation, photo-novella and photovoice, used in “critical photographic practice” are very useful for the “development of individuals and communities” (p.114). Photovoice is a participatory research technique (Mitchell, De Lange & Moletsane, 2017) and a way to raise awareness among decision-makers or the general public about the illustrated problem (Scârneci-Domnișoru, 2016).

From a sociological point of view, one of the fundamental propositions of symbolic interactionism is that we humans define ourselves as a species through the use of symbols. The photographs presented by us in this essay can be considered symbols of the process of adaptation and change of social life in a difficult context, they highlight actions, efforts or creativity in the process of re-constructing a normality in daily life deeply affected by the crisis.

In our new normalcy...

We spend more time cooking. If before the pandemic we used to go out to eat in the city, now we started to prepare our favourite dishes at home. We have more time to indulge in home-cooked food and drink, we are willing to try new recipes and we even learn to cook now.



Fig. 1 *Homemade pizza cooked with love for our dear ones* (MV, woman, 47 years old, 25<sup>th</sup> day of isolation).



Fig. 2 *After years, I started doing milkshakes again.*

*Until now, I only ordered them if I went out on the terrace with my friends. Now I find out that I can do milkshakes myself, on my teenage child's recommendation. We discover new talents and forget about isolation! (CC, woman, 46 years, 19<sup>th</sup> day of isolation).*

We spend more time working at home or in the garden, we take care of all kinds of household chores. We clean items and places that were not previously a priority, we tidy up the busiest closets for which we have not had patience so far, we finish household chores that have been on waiting lists for a long time. We do this because we want to, because we have more time now or because we have to, because we can no longer turn to those who helped us before.



Fig. 3 *I'm trying new things (DD, man, 44 years old, 24<sup>th</sup> day of isolation).*

Working from home is not much like working from the office. It seemed more difficult at first, but then I discovered the wonderful benefits. Some of us no longer want to work from anywhere else than home.



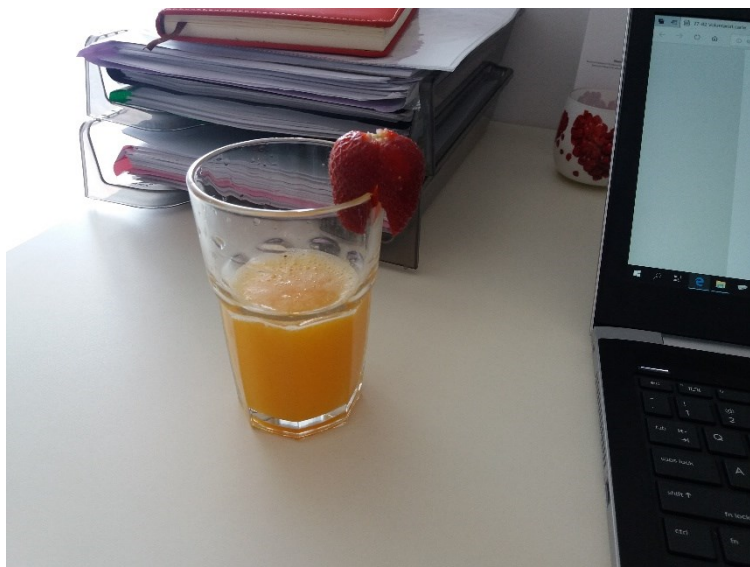


Fig. 4 *Working from home also has its charm, especially when your loved ones pamper you with love and fresh juices! (CC, woman, 46 years old, 63<sup>rd</sup> day of isolation).*

We also moved relationships, friendships, meetings, to the online environment. This is how we “visit” our relatives, this is how we “go out” with colleagues and this is how we “take business lunches”.

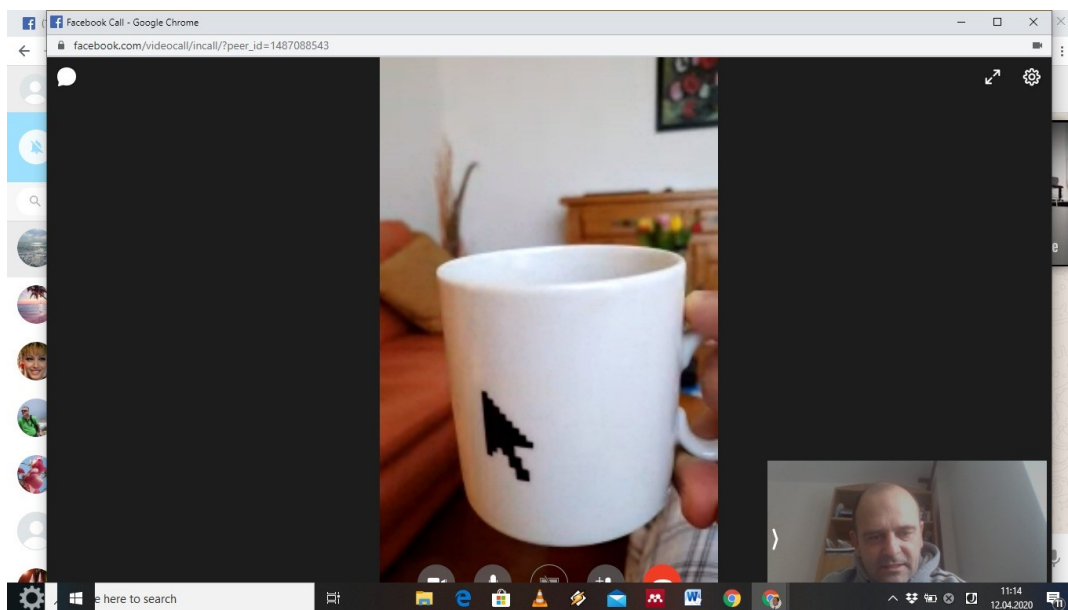


Fig. 5 *I keep my Saturday habits. I just changed the place from Council Square (city centre) to online (FN, man, 50 years old, 30<sup>th</sup> day of isolation).*

We have more time to enjoy our pets, and they enjoy our presence, too.



Fig. 6 *My loving cat sees my face more often and gives me free massages* (MG, woman, 44 years old, 4<sup>th</sup> day of isolation).

We have more time for hobbies, for reading, for creative preoccupations – forgotten and found.



Fig. 7 *Time for my Soul* (AA, woman, 32 years old, 43<sup>rd</sup> day of isolation).

We do more family activities – we play with our children, we tinker together, renovate and even complete some larger construction projects, for which we did not find time before, for which we did not have the patience and strength before.



Fig. 8 *We take the place of grandparents, kindergarten and play partners (FSD, woman, 43 years old, 18<sup>th</sup> day of isolation).*



Fig. 9 *We deal in a complete team with the realization of some bricolage projects, postponed for lack of time (MG, woman, 44 years old, 4<sup>th</sup> day of isolation).*





Fig. 10 *We are finally building...* (MP, man, 42 years old, 60<sup>th</sup> day of isolation)

If at first the new normalcy seemed scary, inconceivable, now it seems we would keep some of it.





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