COMMUNICATION, INTERPERSONAL AND INTERCOMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

This article aims at identifying and analysing the causes and factors which influenced and continue to influence communication as well as interpersonal and intercommunity relationships during this period dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, based on the conclusions resulted from the analysis of the causes and effects generated by the COVID-19 pandemic on humanity, I offer some proposals for the normalization and improvement of communication and of interpersonal and intercommunity relationships.

Keywords: *faulty communication, effective communication, interhuman communication, intercommunity communication, COVID-19, interpersonal relationships, intercommunity relationships .*

1.INTRODUCTION

According to the well-known authors and researchers Frederick Kempe and Peter Richardson, the COVID-19 pandemic has produced dramatic changes in every social life sphere of all the world's states (KEMPE, 2020; RICHARDSON, 2020). On the other hand, Andrew Norton, the Manager of the International Institute for Environment and Development, considers that the SARS-COV-2 virus "has changed our ways of working and being, perhaps irreversibly" (NORTON, 2020).

On an individual level it seems that the pandemic has amplified some of the more problems of many people. Being under the constant bombardment of negative news about the side effects of the COVID 19 pandemic many of our peers have become more fearful, more suspicious (TAUNTON, 2020: "One impact is that, the less contact we have with other people, the more we become suspicious of other people. This can make others more defensive and lead to a vicious spiral where isolation leads to suspicion,

which begets defensiveness, which reinforces the suspicion and leads to further isolation as a self-fulfilling prophesy"), more selfish and more close-mouthed up to the refection of communication and relationship (GENTILI & CRISTEA, 2020), especially with the unknown and with those of other races, ethnicity, religion or political convictions.

On the other hand, states try to reduce the negative effects of the health crisis generated by the SARS-COV-2 virus manly through administrative measures (GENTILI & CRISTEA, 2020), stimulating corruption and the resurgence of extremism, racism and xenophobia (CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY, 2020). There is proof that the administrative measures taken by various governments led to economic recession, unemployment and poverty (LAKNER et al., 2020; WORLD BANK, 2020), the dissatisfaction of a major part of the population amplifying the inequalities and social exclusion (NORTON, 2020).

Although most of the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals are well-known, there are no studies that would argue the real magnitude of these effects globally. This situation correlated with the reticence of some states to cooperate with the other and with the World Health Organization (WHO) makes it difficult to coordinate the efforts of the international community to eradicate the SARS-COV-2 virus.

On a social level, the states are divided. It can be said that the faults of division are those which separate the rich and the poor (Martinez-Fernandez: "In the past three decades, most of the world has experienced an obscene increase in wealth and income inequality. According to 2015 U.N. statistics, 62 of the world's wealthiest

individuals had as much wealth as 50 percent of the global population, which is 3.7 billion people."), respectively the majority population from the minority one.

The international relations are dominated by dissensions in the politico-diplomatic, economic-financial and military plan (DAVIES, 2020). The great powers fight for the world hegemony (SAUCO, 2020: "the fight for world hegemony shape the international framework of the present pandemic" (SAUCO & NUNEZ, 2020); CHILDS, 2020: "In this fluid atmosphere, some recent activity looks like deliberate 'muscle flexing' as the major powers may be seeking to establish new levels between themselves of what might be called 'pandemic deterrence'"; BARRY, 2020: "The United States remains a global power with global responsibilities, and nowhere are such responsibilities more serious than in U.S. military efforts to sustain deterrence against revisionist powers such as China and Russia. While the recent U.S. force surge to the western Pacific should help stabilize that region, the chances of conflict in the coronavirus era are higher than before the pandemic"). Some states try to take advantage of the situation and to gain advantages in their relations with their neighbours and to settle decades-old disputes over disputed territories (CHILDS, 2020: "The latest flare-up of tensions between China and India across their disputed frontier could present another test of the current state of great-power relationships") or to impose their political and economic domination on the weaker states.

2. THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON COMMUNICATION AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

The fear induced by the forecasts of various virologists, epidemiologists and of the doctors working in emergency medicine who estimated an increasing number of decays and death, associated with the impact of the abundance of preponderantly negative news in the media regarding the effects of the pandemic and the restrictive measures imposed by the authorities created a favourable climate for the appearance of some changes in peoples' behaviours. Isolation, quarantine, restricting and sometimes even forbidding movement, associated with the loss of jobs led to anxiety, stress, lack of trust in the others as well as in the authorities and created some favourable conditions for the manifestation of conspiracy theories (CHOPRA, 2020; WILKINS, 2020). On the other hand, wearing the mask, the protection equipment, the communication which mainly took place via phone, email, social networks etc. and the physical distancing changed the way people and communities relate (NOBILO, 2020).

It is said that the peoples' true character is shown in special situations. This truth proves its validity now as we find ourselves in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic and the moral faults, either unknown or ignored, of some people appeared in the communication process and in the relationships with their families and with other members of the communities they live in.

2.1. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communication and family relationships

The self-imposed isolation or the one decided by the authorities, the online teaching and the work from home forced family members to cohabit more than usual, in a small space, a situation perceived by some as "house arrest" (WERTHEIM, 2020: „An entire generation of students sit in a kind of virtual detention").

Besides the frustration generated by (self) isolation the members of many families noticed that the latent existing tensions among them prior to the pandemic amplified and led to heated verbal disputes and even manifestations of physical violence (FAIOLA & HERRERO, 2020: "In China's Hubei province, domestic violence reports to police more than tripled during the lockdown there in February. Then-French Interior Minister Christophe Castaner said reports of domestic violence jumped by more than 30 percent within the first two weeks of the country's lockdown. The Catalan regional government in Spain reported a 20 percent increase in calls to its helpline in the first few days of its confinement order, according to UNICEF"). The misunderstandings between husbands were also stimulated by the dissatisfactions of the children who could not accustom themselves to the lifestyle and this amplified the stress of the parents beyond the limit of endurance.

Restricting the activities of many economic agents and the option of working from home was appreciated for its reduction of the negative effects on the economy, but this solution added extra pressure the relationships between family members. The one who works from home needs time and space exclusively for that particular activity, time and space taken from the ones intended for communication and relationship with other family members. Therefore, the already existing stress caused by the (self)isolation and by all kinds of restrictions increases and it negatively reflects itself on communication and respective family relationships.

The lack of involvement on behalf of some husbands when it comes to household chores and the children's education process led to more fights and domestic violence which sometimes unfortunately resulted in divorces, injuries or even death for some of those aggressed (ZHANG, 2020; BETTINGER-LOPEZ & BRO, 2020).

2.2. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communication and interpersonal relationships in society

Constantly bombarded with negative news, either true, invented or exaggerated, manipulated and disinformed (BELIN & DE MAIO, 2020: „Disinformation flourished over scientific uncertainty regarding the virus and its treatments"), many of our fellows became more cautions and even distrustful in the good intentions of other from the community they live in.

Neighbours, acquaintances, friends or even relatives avoid meeting face to face because of the fear of not getting infected with the SARS-COV-2 virus. This fear of contamination is sometimes absurd as many people avoid going to the doctor or to the hospital not to be declared positive and hospitalized, a situation they believe could become fatal.

Wearing masks both in closed spaces – at work, in shops, at schools – as well as in open ones and physical distancing should become a habit for each of us but many members of the communities in which we live refuse to respect these measures. They are influenced by the opinions which deny the existence of the virus, broadcasted both by the media and by social networks (MARPLES, 2020:

"With so much information available about the severity of the coronavirus and the need to follow guidelines, some people still refuse to accept reality") and they accuse the authorities of trying to violate human rights and that they intend to impose authoritarian regimes.

Restricting the movement of people both inside and outside the states, associated with the ban of hotels, restaurants and sports arenas, reduced the recreation possibilities of a large part of the world's population. These measures, together with the loss of jobs and a decrease in the standard of living led to dissatisfaction and protests on behalf of an important part of adult population (POWELL, 2020: "Public health experts decried the anti-lockdown protests as dangerous gatherings in a pandemic"), which began peacefully but ended up mostly in violent clashes with the police and the destruction of various statues (YOUNG, 2020; BBC NEWS, 2020; LOS ANGELES TIMES, 2020: "States and municipalities across the nation are removing Confederate statues and those of other historical figures such as Christopher Columbus amid protests over systemic racism, police violence and the killing of George Floyd").

Working from home, online education, the movement restrictions for people, goods and values, the compulsory and the self-imposed quarantine represent the most important factors which changed people's behaviour during the pandemic. These factors and the fear of contamination with the new virus diminished people's preference for face to face communication and a shift in the gravity centre of communication and interpersonal relationship towards communication via the mobile phone, internet or social networks. This complex of factors seems to have stimulated people's tendency towards individualism, selfishness, greed and a lack of empathy towards the others, which at times turned into hatred manifested under the form of xenophobia and discrimination under all its forms (Mansouri FEHTI, 2020: COVID 19 highlighted "several core areas of impact which threaten intercultural understanding during the pandemic – from the rise of xenophobia and ethnocultural racism to increases in gender-based violence").

The moral problems of many people, kept under control by laws, social norms of social coexistence and education erupted, taking advantage of the

fertile ground created by this pandemic. The statistics from many states reflect an alarming increase in the cases of alcoholism, drug use, domestic violence and antisocial acts (INTERPOL, 2020: "Cybercriminals are developing and boosting their attacks at an alarming pace, exploiting the fear and uncertainty caused by the unstable social and economic situation created by COVID-19."). At the same time, extremist political and religious organisations, but also those of organised crime took on new members. These are individuals who did not manage to adapt to the norms of social coexistence as well as people rejected by the communities in which they live. These people, driven by hatred and revenge, consider themselves wrongfully marginalized by their communities so they either form new extremist groups (Antifa, Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter etc.) or they join the already existing ones (White Supremacists, Klu-Klux-Klan, ISIS etc.). Domestic and social violence recorded some alarming increase during this pandemic period (WARRICK, 2020: "Across the globe, violence has emerged as a major and persistent side effect of the pandemic....In Europe and North America, law enforcement officials and security experts say the pandemic is energizing far-right groups, including some that are openly advocating anti-government and anti-immigrant violence").

Well-known behavioural specialists and experts, as well as psychologists from a number of universities developed a study in which they analysed the behaviour of citizens from 31 states in relationship to their fellow citizens and to foreigners, as well as the way in which they reacted to the restrictive measures taken by the state leaders in order to stop the COVID-19 pandemic. The conclusion of the authors highlighted the refusal of an important part of the country's citizens, as well as the availability of some other populations to comply with the decisions taken by the health and administrative authorities of their states. In the end of the study, the authors consider that the measures taken by states in order to reduce or eliminate the effects of the pandemic have to take into account the psychological particularities of the population and that the study has to continue as there are many uncertainties regarding the long-term effects of the pandemic and of the measures taken to eradicate it (CHAN et al., 2020).

3. THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON COMMUNICATION AND INTERCOMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

The authors of a study conducted by YouGov in America, between September 3 and 4, 2020, concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic "has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, upended the economy, and has forever changed how we work, communicate and socialize" (GRAEME, 2020). Assessing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, Luis Martinez-Fernandez considers that it represents "an unprecedented global catastrophe" (MARTINEZ-FERNANDEZ, 2020).

The numerous effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and their large scale determined various officials of international organisations and many state leaders to appeal to solidarity and cooperation between the world's communities and states (Davies, 2020; Richardson, 2020) both for the transfer of knowledge regarding the SARS-COV-2 virus, as well as for the facilitation of the supply of medicine and health materials necessary for the treatment of patients infected with this virus. The solidarity and collaboration that the World Health Organisation speaks of, as well as the political leaders from many countries and the well-known epidemiologists and virologists mostly remained at the stage of generous intentions (SAUCO, 2020: "However the opposite has been the norm: more tensions between superpowers....refusal and reticence to the urgent request for help within the same political union…"). Many states started a fierce competition for the development of a anti-COVID-19 vaccine (STANWAY & KIM, 2020), at the same time discrediting the other competitors (CALLAWAY, 2020: „Without a completed phase III trial, Zavidova also worries that it will not be clear whether the vaccine prevents COVID-19 or not — and it will be difficult to tell whether it causes any harmful side effects, because of gaps in how Russia tracks the effects of medicines… Our system for safety monitoring, I think, is not the best").

Together with these actions, culprits are being sought for the outbreak of the pandemic and its mismanagement, both at the international level and at the level of the states (SILVER et al., 2020).

The national and international media space is oversaturated with conspiracy theories and fake news, meant to manipulate the international community and to hide the lack of competence and professionalism as well as the corruption and greed of some governors, businessmen, banks and medicine producers. Many journalists from the written, audio-visual or online press highlighted the sensational instead of an objective presentation of reality (CHOPRA, 2020: "Legacy media, such as print and television, have long been the object of criticism for prioritizing profits and sensationalism at the cost of serious reporting. Social media platforms have received significant attention in the last few years given their role in spreading fake news and their weaponization in undermining elections and democratic processes across the world").

Most state leaders decided to reduce or to eliminate the effects of the pandemic mostly with the help of some administrative measures, which partially proved inefficient from a sanitary point of view because they negatively influenced the people's immune systems as they were forced into quarantine and self-isolation. At the same time, restricting the movement of people, goods and values negatively influenced the global economy (WTO, 2020; CHAKRABORTY & MAITY, 2020), amplifying the unemployment rate and impoverishing a significant part of the world's population (RICHARDSON, 2020; WORLD BANK, 2020). Even though we have enough information regarding the complex negative effects of the pandemic, Eric Levitz believes that "the precise consequences of this catastrophe — for the global economy, geopolitics, climate change, and our own little lives — remain opaque" (LEVITZ, 2020).

4. PROPOSALS FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF COMMUNICATION AND INTERPERSONAL AND INTERCOMMUNITY COMMUNICATION

As this pandemic is global, the solutions should also be global, but they also have to take into account the aspects specific to the states and to the communities within those states. In order to fulfil this goal, the health recommendations and the social coexistence norms must be developed by an international and interdisciplinary group of doctors specializing in immunology, virology, epidemiology, biochemistry, with a recognized reputation, who must be accompanied by experts in emergency medicine, crisis management, economics, finance, communication and public relations.

The media has to be part of the solutions and not of the problems and it must respect its role of objective and impartial actor, refusing to take part in the actions of manipulation and misinformation initiated by various interest groups and by not broadcasting sensational and fake news. Emphasis has to be placed on education and efficient communication starting from the individual level and up to the state level and that of the groups of states.

Keeping contact with friends and acquaintances via phone, email, social networks or face to face in very important and it allows us to overcome the present situation to create a sense of normality (TAUNTON, 2020). Basically, by communicating with others we will no longer feel lonely, even if we are in quarantine or in (self)isolation (WEN, 2020).

The pandemic should not be politicized, especially since parliamentary, local or presidential elections are taking place in some states during this period.

The solidarity and collaboration which some international officials or national leaders speak about has to become effective, in the sense that it reflects the coordination of the states' efforts in order to stop the pandemic and to set aside all disputes, regardless of their nature, between the states and the evil interests of some medicine, vaccine or heath material producers.

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a disaster but this event should also be perceived as an opportunity to accomplish the transition towards new production and consumption methods, a goal that can only be met through "deliberate planning and carefully designed strategic communication in the public sphere" (BODENHEIMER & LEIDENBERGER, 2020).

5.CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic offered some favourable conditions for the antisocial

behaviours of many individuals, both in the family and in the society, as well as the manifestations of the existing latent moral problems in many of our fellow citizens.

With the stated goal of protecting their citizens, the leaders of many states tried to stop the evolution of the health crisis triggered by the SARS-COV-2 virus, through mainly administrative measures, generating new internal and international tensions and complaints or amplifying the ones which already existed before the pandemic.

The competition for the production of an anti-COVID-19 vaccine, as well as the one for the global hegemony, hinders the achievement of solidarity and international cooperation for the eradication of this pandemic which affects most of the world's population.

Some experts say that there is little chance of eradicating the pandemic soon (GENTILI & CRISTEA, 2020). Others, based on the conclusions drawn from the analysis of other pandemics which have affected the world, believe that the SARS-COV-2 virus will never be eliminated (VARLIK, 2020: "Yet experts tell us that even with a successful vaccine and effective treatment, COVID-19 may never go away."). Therefore, measures have to be respected by the population of all the world's states so that the possibility of getting reinfected with the SARS-COV-2 does not reappear.

It is possible that this pandemic will change the course of history (NORTON, 2020; University of Chicago, 2020) as it happened with some other similar events, although it is too early to speak about the future of post-COVID 19 (CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY, 2020), as there are many unknown aspects, as well as many uncertainties regarding treatment and the production of an anti-COVID 19 vaccine (NORTON, 2020: "The scope and scale of the pandemic and its impacts and implications for the future are not yet clear. We do not know when it will end, or how the world will transition to a new state").

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