

Pandemic at School: Students' Narratives during the COVID-19 Lockdown in Trieste

Pandemia a scuola: le narrazioni degli studenti durante il lockdown dovuto al COVID-19 a Trieste

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Abstract

Epidemic/pandemic narratives are social and cultural processes and therefore are instrumental in shaping and justifying pathways of responses at institutional level, and also in understanding people's responses and behaviours during disease outbreaks. However, attention is very rarely given to the narratives of young people who, during the COVID-19 pandemic have been implicated from the start. The paper examines the pandemic narratives of a group of students of a Vocational Training Centre in Trieste during the first lockdown (March-May 2020). The findings indicate how the students re-worked the official narratives, creating a multi-layered interpretation of the pandemic which made them reevaluate many things that were previously taken for granted. The research also highlights the need of a clearer and more coherent communication from the media and the government, to avoid dangerous behaviours that could invalidate the preventive measures taken to limit the spread of the virus.

Le narrazioni epidemiche/pandemiche sono processi sociali e culturali e come tali fondamentali nel creare e giustificare risposte a livello istituzionale, ma anche per capire le risposte e i comportamenti delle persone durante le epidemie. Tuttavia, molto raramente vengono considerate le narrative dei giovani i quali, durante la pandemia di COVID-19 sono stati coinvolti fin dall'inizio. Il testo esamina le narrazioni pandemiche di un gruppo di studenti di un Centro di Formazione Professionale a Trieste durante il primo lockdown (Marzo-Maggio 2020). I risultati dell'analisi indicano come gli studenti abbiano rielaborato le narrazioni ufficiali, creando un'interpretazione della pandemia stratificata, che ha contribuito a far rivalutare parecchie cose che prima venivano date per scontate. La ricerca evidenzia anche la necessità di una comunicazione più chiara e coerente sia da parte dei media che delle istituzioni, per evitare atteggiamenti pericolosi che potrebbero portare a comportamenti tali da invalidare le misure precauzionali prese per limitare la diffusione del virus.

Keywords

COVID-19, pandemic, narratives, young people, students, Trieste, Italy

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Introduction

The recurrent outbreaks of infectious diseases have prompted anthropologists to focus on their impact on society and public opinion (Sommerfeld 1994; Keck 2015; Kelly et al. 2019). Indeed, epidemics are not simply a biological or medical matter (Sommerfeld 1994). On the contrary, they involve people's perceptions, representations and behaviours, to the extent that these factors may spark a new outbreak or help contain the disease (*ibidem*). The "epidemic narratives" (Kelly et al. 2019) are created by a number of actors: governments, mass media, scientists and doctors, risk groups, victims; thus becoming a social and cultural process (Sommerfeld 1994; Joffe and Louis Lee 2004) revealing not only prejudices, political stances and social stratifications, but also fears and expectations about the future (Kelly et al. 2019). These narratives may be conflicting, thus creating confusion and misunderstandings in the public (Bomlitz and Brezis 2008; Arcangeli 2020). Moreover, as anthropological research has demonstrated (Lévy-Bruhl 1922 cit. in Kelly et al. 2019; Hobart 1993), the gap between scientific discourse and popular beliefs may hinder preventive measures if not taken into consideration. Therefore, it is apparent that understanding public perceptions and behaviours in a pandemic is one of the key factors for containing the spread of the disease (Sommerfeld 1994; Xu and Peng 2015). Interestingly, the voices of youngsters are very rarely, if ever, included in such research. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has involved youngsters from the very beginning. In some European countries including Italy, school closures from kindergarten through high school, vocational training centres, and universities have been one of the first measures undertaken to tackle the pandemic.

In the Italian region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia, in the North East of Italy at the border with Slovenia and Austria, there were no confirmed cases until the 29th February 2020. Yet schools of all levels were pre-emptively closed on the 24th February, during the annual Carnival celebrations and parades.¹ The following days, Carnival celebrations were forbidden and places of aggregation such as cinemas, dance clubs, coffee bars, restaurants and public entertainment places were also closed or operated with reduced hours. Finally, when the central government imposed a national quarantine, people were forbidden from leaving the house, except for necessity, work and health related reasons. These were exceptional measures, never before implemented in Italy. For example, during World War II educational institutions were closed only at intervals.

¹ In Italy, Carnival is an important celebration as it marks the beginning of Lent. Therefore, schools normally close from Shrove Thursday to Shrove Tuesday, the last day of Carnival. For this reason, the school closures took place during Carnival celebration, and were supposed to end at the beginning of March. Unfortunately, the spread of the virus in the region and the subsequent national quarantine, prolonged the school closures until June 2020, the end of the school year.

If one argues that these measures have impacted everyone's lives, then one can hypothesise that for young people the impact must have been even greater: it was the first time that this age group found themselves in an extreme situation that severely limited their movements. Like elsewhere, school closures prompted the introduction of alternative teaching methods, specifically the so called *didattica a distanza* (DAD) and *formazione a distanza*² (FAD) which are uncommon in Italy (European Commission 2018).³ Although remote learning methods have been instrumental to enable students to carry on with their studies, the implementation of such methods has not been without issues. (Parisi 2020; Commissione Scuola, Educazione e Formazione dell'ANPIA 2020).⁴

The pandemic outbreak has aroused a great interest among anthropologists and social scientists worldwide (Higgins, Martin and Vesperi 2020; Shokeid 2020). Anthropology websites, blogs and online publications have dealt with the topic from different angles (Guidoni and Ferrari 2020; Vereni 2020, Soto Bermant and Ssorin-Chaicov 2020; Dei 2020). However, no study on the subject has specifically explored the narratives of young people. My research therefore intends to give voice to the Italian youngsters by exploring how they lived through the quarantine, what their perceptions and understanding of the situation were, how they coped with the challenges posed by the circumstances, and what hopes and expectations they had for the future. I focused on a group of second- and third -year students from CIOFS FP FVG, a Vocational Training Centre located Trieste⁵ where I have been teaching for the last ten years. The students' voices were collected both informally, that is during the process of remote learning (FAD), and formally through short essays that they were asked to write. The findings are discussed in terms of compliance with the official "epidemic narratives". Similarities and differences between the official narratives and the students' narratives are subsequently highlighted and discussed.

² "Didattica a distanza (DAD)" and "Formazione a distanza (FAD)" can be translated in English as *remote learning*. DAD refers to remote learning for schools, whereas FAD refers to remote learning for Vocational Training Centres. Remote learning was the solution adopted by many educational institutions in Italy during the lockdown, to enable students to continue their education.

³ According to the DESI report, Italy scores very low compared to other European countries regarding connectivity, use of internet services, integration of digital technology etc.

⁴ The implementation of remote learning in Italy has been uneven, as the digital divide is wide across the country and broadband is not always available. Often remote learning has been left to the willingness of individual teachers and schools, thus creating disparities even within the same school. Furthermore, not all students had a computer available to follow online lessons. For example, many of the students who took part in the present study, utilized their mobile phones both to attend classes and to complete their homework.

⁵ Trieste is the regional capital of Friuli-Venezia Giulia.

The COVID-19 pandemic in Italy: an overview

The first cases of COVID-19 in Italy were detected at the end of January 2020, when two Chinese tourists visited Rome and were tested positive for the virus. A third case, one of the 56 Italians evacuated from Wuhan, China, was discovered on the 7th February, (Seckin 7 February 2020). Up until this point, the Italian government kept reassuring the country, stating that the situation was under control. Direct flights to and from China were suspended.⁶ Despite the government efforts, the disease spread further and, on the 22nd February, a dozen towns in the regions of Lombardy and Veneto went into lockdown (Bruno and Winfield 22 February 2020). Italian health authorities found that new clusters had no direct link to the Chinese outbreak (*ibidem*). Next came the unsettling news that the virus could be transmitted as a normal flu, and that people did not need to have been in contact with someone who had links to China to contract COVID-19. Consequently, the local authorities in Lombardy and Veneto closed schools, businesses, restaurants, events, and religious services. In Milan public offices were closed as well. In the provinces of Lodi (Lombardy) and of Padua (Veneto) some municipalities were declared “*zona rossa*” (red zone) and quarantined. Road blocks and check points were set up by the Police and Carabinieri⁷ to prevent people’s movements and the spread of the virus. Even train services bypassed these municipalities.⁸ People going out to do shopping or other errands were required to wear face masks. Despite the containment measures, the virus spread further and on the 8th March mandated quarantine measures covered much of Northern Italy.⁹ The following day, the 9th March, quarantine mandates were extended to the whole territory, thus making Italy the first European country to implement national a national lockdown as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. The drastic decision was taken in order to avoid the spread of the virus in the southern part of Italy, where the national health system is weaker and would not have been able to cope with such a high number of infected people as in the North of Italy. Indeed, at least during this first period, southern Italy suffered few casualties compared to the rest of the country. The quarantine ended on the 4th May, although travelling restrictions remained in place as well as limitations on

⁶ However, no checks were carried out on passengers making a stopover before reaching Italy.

⁷ Carabinieri are the Italian gendarmerie.

⁸ <https://www.lombardianotizie.online/coronavirus-treni/>. “Coronavirus, da sabato 22 febbraio i treni non fermano a Codogno, Maleo e Casalpusterlengo”. 21st February 2020, viewed on the 30th August 2020.

⁹ More specifically, the quarantine was imposed on the entire region of Lombardy, to fourteen provinces in the neighbouring regions of Piedmont, Veneto, Emilia Romagna and in the region of Marche. Roughly a quarter of the Italian population was affected.

gatherings and public events. In the following months though, restrictions were lifted and imposed again depending on the trends of the contagion.

COVID-19 at the border: how the virus reached the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region and remained there

At the end of February, as soon as the situation in the surrounding region of Veneto deteriorated, the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region declared a state of emergency.¹⁰ As a precautionary measure, in the days following the declaration schools of all levels closed, as well as libraries, cinemas, theatres and museums, despite the fact that no cases were yet detected in the region.¹¹ People were still free to move around, ski resorts remained open and discounts were offered to visitors. Only a few days later were public events, sporting and recreational activities finally suspended. This partial lockdown was scheduled to end on the 1st March. Nonetheless, on the 29th February,¹² the first COVID-19 case was detected: a man from Gorizia began to show symptoms and called the health authorities. Apparently, the man was infected in a hospital in Treviso, a town in the region of Veneto, where he went to visit a relative. The next day, other three people were found to be COVID-19 positive. Despite that, the regional government was ready to halt the state of emergency, and schools and other activities were to reopen. However, the increasing number of infected people put a stop to the reopening plan.¹³

When all of Italy went into lockdown, the region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia complied, with the rigorous rules and regulations imposed by the national government. Additionally, in a border-free Schengen zone, frontiers with the all adjacent countries were closed, ending the right to free movement to 400 million EU citizens, tourists, business people and foreign residents. Luckily, the case numbers and casualties never reached the likes of the neighbouring regions and most of the casualties were confined

¹⁰ The state of emergency was declared on the 22nd February 2020. <https://www.regione.fvg.it/rafvfg/comunicati/comunicato.act;jsessionid=651FF5DB0D355976EDF1360C12325896?dir=&nm=20200222172456008>, viewed on the 1st September.

¹¹ <https://www.regione.fvg.it/rafvfg/comunicati/comunicato.act;jsessionid=651FF5DB0D355976EDF1360C12325896?dir=&nm=20200223154010005>, viewed on the 1st September.

¹² https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/topnews/2020/02/29/coronavirus-primi-positivi-in-fvg_1ef2e39e-f63d-40b0-89c7-135742eac98a.html, viewed on the 30th August 2020.

¹³ <https://friuliseria.it/come-era-prevedibile-arrivato-il-coronavirus-anche-in-fvg-cinque-casi-di-positivita-al-tampone-ma-un-solo-ammalato/> Article published on *Friulseria*, on the 1st March 2020. Viewed on the 25th September 2020.

to nursing homes.¹⁴ Indeed, most of them were elderly people with pre-existing conditions. Most likely, the early regional government intervention of closures helped keep the numbers down. According to the Regional Health Minister, who published on the Regional website on the 5th May, COVID-19 confirmed cases were 669, with a death toll of 143 victims, at an average age of 87 years, all of whom suffered from multiple pathologies.¹⁵ During the months of September and October,¹⁶ as in the rest of the country, the virus was still circulating and positive cases were found daily. The local Health Authorities kept on reassuring citizens that a “second wave” was not going to happen.¹⁷ Nonetheless, restricting measures were still in place and some schools had already been quarantined. Cold weather was approaching, and it did not bode well.

The epidemic narratives in Italy

When the first two COVID-19 cases were discovered, the Italian government immediately declared the state of emergency (Ministero della Salute 2020) in conjunction with the World Health Organization’s declaration of a global health emergency. However, not until the 21th February, did the Italian media devote much attention to the virus (Giungato 2020). Yet with the epidemic spreading fast between February and March, the media’s focus was entirely on the virus, in a manner never seen before (*ibidem*). During the first weeks of quarantine, two main narratives appeared on the national level: the “narrative of fear” and the “narrative of hope”. The first narrative was developed by news broadcasts reporting round the clock on the spread of the virus, on numbers of infected, hospitalized, and deceased people. They also transmitted graphic images of military transport vehicles removing coffins out of the city, as there was no place to bury the deceased.¹⁸ The second narrative was synthesized in the unifying motto “*Andrà tutto bene*” (everything will be fine). Citizens hung banners and sheets from their balconies and windows magnifying the motto. Shopkeepers and businesses taped notes on their doors notifying of their closure with the addition of the same unifying motto: “*Spiacenti siamo chiusi, ma tutto andrà bene*” (apologies, we are closed

¹⁴ Residenze Sanitarie Assistenziali (RSA) in Italian.

¹⁵ <https://www.regione.fvg.it/rafvf/comunicati/comunicato.act?dir=/rafvf/cms/RAVFG/notizieda llaggiunta/&nm=20200505121438004#:-:text=Udine%2C%205%20mag%20%2D%20%22Tra,87%20 anni%20tutte%20con%20pluripatologie>, viewed on the 1st September.

¹⁶ The paper was completed in October 2020.

¹⁷ Unfortunately, the prediction will prove wrong.

¹⁸ This happened in Bergamo, a city in the region of Lombardy particularly affected by the pandemic.

but everything will be fine). All over Italy, quarantined citizens organized singing and musical performances from their balconies to send a message of optimism, love, and to keep neighbouring spirits high. At the same time, random citizens and artists posted videos on You Tube celebrating Italian resilience, replicating positive messages and messages of hope.¹⁹ This was perhaps the most original way to face the threat of the virus: certainly, it helped to find connection among people and it was celebrated by the media around the world.²⁰

As the weeks went by and the quarantine was extended, the “narrative of hope” faded away, and a third narrative emerged: the “narrative of denial”. This narrative was a composite, putting together “*The virus does not exist*”- denialists tout court, “*The virus is there but it is not so dangerous*” reductionists, “*They want to lock us in our houses to prepare the dictatorship*” conspiracy theorists and “*They invented the virus to poison us with the vaccine*” anti-vaxxers. Many voices contributed in fuelling this narrative: opposition politicians, even some scientists and doctors, who tended to present the virus as a sort of set up (Aglietti 2020) to better control people and restrict citizens’ freedom, in addition to making pharmaceutical companies richer and to reinforce government power. The “narrative of denial” was picked up and amplified by social media and social networks, thus entering into open competition with the “narrative of fear”.

Therefore, young people were bombarded by contrasting information while forced to stay home and face an entirely new reality. What did they make out of it? How did they react? What did they think? Did they create their own narrative? Or did they rely unquestionably on the “adult” narratives? These are the questions I try to answer in the present study.

Doing ethnography online: the context, the study group and the anthropologist

The Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET)²¹ offers vocational training courses aimed at young people who have completed lower secondary education,

¹⁹ Here are some examples of videos of hope: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjG-6ZDmiP4>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nh1bQNBEBZk>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbwm6W6SI3Q>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBF58wz8bBM>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8XCDISKwEI>. Some of these video were utilised to collect funds for the hospitals.

²⁰ Kearney, C. (2020). “Italians sing patriotic songs from their balconies during coronavirus lockdown.” The Guardian, 14th March 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/14/italians-sing-patriotic-songs-from-their-balconies-during-coronavirus-lockdown>. Viewed on the 5th September 2020. The following Youtube video is also revealing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBByYjjvNzs> (The Italians making music on balconies under coronavirus quarantine).

²¹ Istruzione e Formazione Professionale, in Italian.

ranging from 15 years of age and above. These are students who choose not to pursue a high school degree, and instead prefer a vocational qualification course. These courses offer a valuable opportunity to those youths who have dropped out of other schools, and also to immigrant children or children of immigrants, who need to enter the workforce without further delay.

The Vocational Training Centre CIOFS FP FVG (Centro Italiano Opere Femminili Salesiane²² Formazione Professionale Friuli-Venezia Giulia), where the study was conducted, is one of the numerous vocational training centres in the region. The CIOFS FP FVG is a Catholic but non-confessional educational institution based in Trieste.²³ What differentiates CIOFS from other Vocational Training Centres is its values and mission: the centre adopts a “student centred approach” whereby students’ interests and personality are deeply respected. Students are encouraged to “feel at home” and a cordial and friendly atmosphere is built between them and the staff. These attitudes allow the development of a rapport that is less formal compared to the classic relationship between teachers and students. For example, students are encouraged to be on a first-name basis with the educators. Students who attend CIOFS come from different socio-economic backgrounds, although many of them are from a lower or lower middle social class. Some of them do not hold Italian citizenship, either because they were born abroad, or because although born in Italy from foreign parents they cannot obtain Italian citizenship.²⁴ The CIOFS offers three main instructional blocks in the areas of sales, tourism and administration.²⁵ The students who took part in the research were my second- and third-year students belonging to each instructional block.

As mentioned before, the data had been collected both orally, during the online classes, and in writing, in the form of short essays.²⁶ Not surprisingly, the topic

²² Italian Women Salesian Centre.

²³ Despite being a Catholic organization, religion is not discriminatory. Indeed, pupils of different religious denominations are welcomed, without distinction. Religious education, about ten hours per school year, is based on the teaching of the different religious denominations.

²⁴ During the school year 2018/19, 37,61% of the students were not Italian citizens. About 50% were enrolled in the first year. In the following years, the number of non-Italian citizens decreased: 36,36% in the second year, 32,73% in the third year and 25,71% in the fourth year. Report sulla Dispersione Scolastica 2019. European Project FAMI IMPACT FVG.

²⁵ A standard course lasts three years and offers a professional qualification (3EQF). There is an optional fourth year that offers a professional diploma (4EQF).

²⁶ Doing ethnography in the context of remote learning poses a number of challenges, the first being the impossibility of observing directly the context and people’s behaviour. Hence, the choice of concentrating on the narration, both oral and written, of personal experiences and opinions. The narrations have been analyzed through an interpretative content analysis approach that allowed the identification of the themes that would constitute the various narratives (Tonkiss 2004). The research

“pandemic”, “COVID-19” or “coronavirus” was of high interest, and was discussed at length during the classes, often elicited by the students themselves, as a side topic. The online class discussions involved most of the students, who were eager to ask questions, express their feelings, opinions and voice their fears. Given the interest demonstrated in the topic, I proposed to the students to write short essays discussing their experience. The objective was two-fold. On one side, I was interested in discovering how the students were coping with the lockdown and documenting it, on the other side it was a way of supporting them during this difficult time.

The following was the outline they had to work on:

Cari ragazzi e ragazze,

vi chiedo per cortesia di provare a scrivere (in italiano o inglese, come preferite) come vivete voi la questione del coronavirus. Non siate parchi di parole! Potreste raccontarmi se inizialmente eravate contenti o meno perché chiudevano le scuole e come la vivete adesso, come passate le giornate... Cosa sapete del virus, come vi informate, cosa pensate di questa situazione... insomma, un po' tutto quello che vi viene in mente.²⁷

Most of them agreed, and a few essays were submitted. As the lockdown continued, and by April it was becoming clear that schools were not going to reopen, I prepared a number of webinars addressing the topic of pandemic outbreaks in the past, starting from the black plague to the Spanish Flu.²⁸ At the end of the webinars, the students were asked to produce a written output comparing the past pandemics to the present one and include their own understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on their lives. The task was set as following:

Prepara un elaborato di almeno una pagina dove illustri le differenze tra le pandemie del passato e la pandemia presente, le tue paure e aspettative per il futuro. Per esempio, puoi raccontare come pensi sarà la prossima estate, come vedi il prossimo anno scolastico, il lavoro ecc. Infine racconta le tue speranze (sempre in relazione alla pandemia di Covid-19).²⁹

began after the 10th March 2020, when at CIOFS remote learning was officially implemented. The data collection ended in May, even though some students handed in their essays in June.

²⁷ “Dear students, please write an essay (in Italian or English, as you wish) about your “coronavirus experience”. Do not be thrifty with words! You could tell me about your feelings when schools were first closed down, about your current feelings, what you miss the most, how you spend your days... what you know about the virus, where you get information from, what do you think of the situation... In short, whatever comes into your mind!”

²⁸ The webinars were part of an interdisciplinary project involving four subjects taught at the Vocational Training Centre: maths and biology, economics and history. The objective of the school project was to deepen students’ knowledge about the virus, its effects on society and to offer them an historical perspective on the wider topic of pandemics.

²⁹ “Prepare an essay of at least one page where you explain the differences between the past pande-

The data was collected between March and April, that is during the first two months of implementation of remote learning, and in May 2020, after the webinars, shortly before the lockdown was partially lifted. About ninety students were involved in the research, although their participation varied: not all took part in the online discussions and only a few sent back their essays. Not surprisingly, the students who participated the most during the online discussion were both those who normally intervened during classes, and those who felt particularly engaged by the topic discussed. Those who felt shy, particularly because they could not speak Italian fluently,³⁰ expressed their feelings during a one-to-one online interview. Gender differences were noted, especially with regard to the essays: first, female students responded to the task better than male students, both by handing in a higher number of essays and by offering more personal information. Indeed, many male students wrote just a few lines and their comments were very vague and did not show personal feelings much. In total, around 80 students participated actively in the discussions and about 60 essays were handed in.

There is one last consideration to make before illustrating the analysis of the narratives. Due to the lockdown, my interaction with the students was mediated by the computer screen. They rarely turned on the camera, despite being asked to do so. They claimed that using the camera would consume all internet data and they did not have enough. Consequently, most of the time, I could only hear their voices. Therefore, my ethnography missed the observational part, although ethnography brings a variety of techniques of enquiry (Walsh 2004). One may argue that students wanted to appear in a positive light and to impress me with their “good behaviour”, and therefore they wrote and said what they believed I wanted to hear. Of course, the fact that I am also their educator cannot be overlooked. However, this assumption can be offset if the rapport between the students and myself as their educator is taken into consideration. I have been their educator for two or three years, depending on when they enrolled at CIOFS, and I have got to know them well. Those who handed in essays containing more personal information and intimate reflections were those whom I have a better relationship with. Furthermore, the essays were compared to class discussion and no great differences emerged.

mics and the present one, where you write about your fears and expectations for the future. For example, you can tell what you think next summer will be like, how you see the next school year, work etc. Finally, tell about your hopes (always in relation to the covid-19 pandemic).”

³⁰ I am referring to those students recently arrived in Italy, who could not master the language fully.

Students and the virus: representations and behaviours

The analysis of the online discussions and of the essays shows that the majority of the respondents shared similar feelings and opinions about COVID-19 and the related situation. Their comments were mostly in agreement, although differences were noted when the various classes were compared. In general, before the lockdown nobody was really concerned: the majority of the students thought it was an annual flu or pneumonia, and that it would be over quickly. The school closures did not seem to bother them either. On the contrary, they thought it was entertaining, but the restrictions that followed made them mindful of the risks:

Fino a due settimane fa i bar erano aperti, i pomeriggi andavo sempre in città a bere un caffè con la mia migliore amica. Poi ho iniziato a frequentare solo i bar sotto casa. Ad oggi non è più possibile uscire, se non in caso di necessità come ad esempio andare in super mercato o acquisti farmaceutici.³¹ (M.S. Girl, essay, March).

Inizialmente io ero tranquilla, quando ancora non c'era il divieto di uscire dal comune e i bar erano ancora aperti, io andavo a lavorare e vedevo le persone intorno a me tutte impaurite. Dopo un po' infatti hanno chiuso quasi tutto quando i contagiati sono incominciati ad aumentare.³² (M.M., girl, essay, March).

The students were well aware of what to do in order to protect themselves and other people: wear a face mask, keep social distance, avoid shaking hands, kissing and hugging people. They did not like it, but they followed the rules, or so they claimed. The views about the origin of the virus differed, depending on which source of information the students used. During a discussion with a group of third year students, various theories emerged. These were all true to a certain extent. One female student stated that the virus was brought to Italy by two people, another student added that it came from China, another blamed tourists who arrived from all over the world. A female student stated that in Italy's case, the virus was brought by Italians themselves, after travelling abroad. Another student mentioned a German businessman who brought the virus to China, and from there it spread around the world. When asked about how the virus came into existence, a failed scientific experiment was mentioned:

³¹ "Until a couple of weeks ago, coffee shops were opened, I could go to downtown and have a coffee with my friend. Then I could only go to the cafés near my home. Now I cannot go out at all, only to buy food and medical items".

³² "At first I was ok, when there was no ban on leaving the municipality and the cafés were still open. I would go to work although I would see the people around me all scared. After a while they closed almost everything, when the number of infected people started increasing."

Scienziati che hanno fatto uno sbaglio con un esperimento, sono esperimenti militari sperimentati prima su animali... scienziati cinesi che hanno sbagliato... me l'ha detto mio zio... esperimenti militari, loro hanno sbagliato dei calcoli e hanno creato un virus.³⁵ (L.S., boy, discussion, April)

The main sources of information were the news (TV and newspapers),³⁴ the internet, (in particular the search engine Google), but also adults they trusted, such as parents, close relatives, or friends of the family. Often adults' figures appeared more reliable than other sources of information, and what they said carried more weight. However, the conflicting information often confused and worried the students: consequently, some decided to stop listening to the news, altogether, others claimed that they did not believe a single word they heard.

Non mi interessa... più ascolti le notizie più ti preoccupi.³⁵ (N.S. and M.DB., girls, discussion April).

Regarding the coronavirus news, I'm not interested in reading or hearing anything about it. I think it's a way to make you worry too much and some news are also fake.³⁶ (G.R., girl, essay, April).

Very few claimed to have searched information on the web, as they wanted to compare as much information as possible. If doubts emerged from the written essays, class discussions were the place where the students voiced their suspicion about the severity of the pandemic: one class in particular proved to be very sceptical, and claimed that the whole situation and the measures taken were exaggerated:

Mio zio che vive in Croazia mi ha raccontato che hanno detto che un signore era morto di coronavirus e invece era infarto.

È vero, anche a Trieste è successo!

Inventano tutto per farci stare a casa.

È una cosa nuova e non si sa cosa fare. Se non facessero paura, la gente farebbe quello che gli pare.³⁷ (A.V., N.S., S. D., M.DB, girls, discussion, April).

³⁵ "Scientists who made a mistake in an experiment, a military experiment. First they tried it on animals... Chinese scientists... my uncle told me that... they made a mistake and created the virus".

³⁴ They admitted that did not read the whole article, only the headlines.

³⁵ "I am not interested – the more information you get the more you worry".

³⁶ In English in the original text.

³⁷ "My uncle, who lives in Croatia, told us that a man was declared dead because of coronavirus, instead it was a hearth attack!" "True, it happened even in Triest!". "They make everything up to keep us indoors." "It's a new thing and nobody knows what to do. If they did not scare people, people would do what they wanted".

Mentono. Mentono sui numeri.³⁸ (S.D., boy, class discussion, Aprile).

Overall, the information that tried to minimise the seriousness of the situation was rejected by the majority of the study participants, as the “denialists” were viewed as dangerous and lacking respect for those who died because of COVID-19:

Penso che ci troviamo in una situazione molto seria.

Penso anche che non sia più una cosa su cui scherzare, nonostante abbia visto nei social molti discorsi seri sul Virus, ne ho visto anche molti altri su cui lo ridicolizzavano, e mi intristisce molto la cosa sapendo che ci sono ogni giorno persone che ci vengono a mancare a causa di questo.³⁹ (A.H., girl, essay, March)

Riguardo alle mie paure sono quelle che finita l'estate i numeri peggiorino al punto di superare quelli precedenti, aspettative da parte del popolo ne ho ben poche avendo già dimostrato fino a quali riescano a credersi più furbi delle restrizioni...⁴⁰ (J.P., boy, essay, May)

Io credo che il Covid-19 non si estinguerà presto, vedo molta gente irresponsabile che magari non crede al virus o che addirittura non gliene importa... continuano ad aprire bar, tra poco le discoteche.⁴¹ (K.T., girl, essay, May).

Subsequently, people who thought the virus was a hoax and those who broke, or wanted to break the rules, were viewed badly as they were seen as putting others at risk. For example, when the national and regional government began to relax restrictions during the so-called “Phase two”, many students expressed their fears:

... per me è troppo presto... certo che è calato il contagio e tutto quello che vuoi, ma se la gente continua ad uscire ci sarà sicuro qualcuno che tira giù la mascherina... il virus non aspetta...spero solo non peggiori di nuovo, se no dobbiamo stare ancora a casa...⁴² (G.L., boy, discussion, May).

³⁸ “They lie. They lie about the numbers”.

³⁹ “I think the situation is very serious. I also believe that joking about it is uncalled for. Despite having seen many serious talks about the virus on the social networks, I have seen also many that were making fun of it. That makes me very sad, knowing that every day people die because of the virus.”

⁴⁰ “My fear is that at the end of the summer the numbers [of infected people] would go up and exceed the previous ones, I do not expect anything from “the people”, having seeing how some think of themselves as smarter than the restrictions...”

⁴¹ “I don’t believe the Covid-19 will die out soon, I see many irresponsible people who perhaps do not believe in [the existence] of the virus or even do not care... they are opening cafés, and soon dance clubs as well”.

⁴² “To me it’s too early... of course, the number of infected people has gone down, but if people keep on going out and perhaps lower the face-mask... well, the virus is there... I hope it doesn’t happen or we have to stay home again”.

C.: Forse era meglio aspettare di riaprire. In Slovenia e Germania i casi sono aumentati dopo la riapertura, ho paura che a ottobre si chiuda di nuovo.

M.: Sì, dovrebbero aspettare.

C.: Mio papà dice che se i casi sono stabili o diminuiscono, va bene. Bisogna seguire le regole, altrimenti il contagio si diffonde di nuovo...⁴⁵ (C.G. and M.M., girls, discussion, May).

Of course, being housebound deeply affected everyone. Nonetheless, most of the participants accepted the mandated restrictions imposed without many complaints, although they found it challenging. They were bored and fed up with being unable to leave the house and meet friends, they felt isolated and lonely, but they believed it was necessary to stop or limit the spread of the virus.

The quarantine compelled some of them to find new ways of passing time, and they reinvented their routine finding new interests, taking up hobbies, and finding time to dedicate to activities left behind. These were strategies to fight boredom, but also depression.

Però ho scoperto altre cose che mi interessano. Gli anime, ad esempio [...]. Non avrei mai pensato che mi sarei potuta interessare agli anime, ma forse la noia ha fatto uscire anche questa parte di me.⁴⁴ (M.S., girl, essay, May).

Certe cose che avevo lasciato perdere per mancanza di tempo le ho riprese, tipo cucinare, leggere, cucire, tante cose che non avrei fatto altrimenti.⁴⁵ (A.H., girl, discussion, May).

Anyway, in these circumstances I picked up some activities I had left behind, such as painting and reading, which help me to stay calm and prevent me from going crazy even when I feel isolated and hopeless.⁴⁶ (C.Z., girl, essay, April)

The long-lasting quarantine also prompted considerations of various kinds. From thoughts about life and about the future, to reflections about things that were taken for granted prior the quarantine, like going out and meeting friends, relationships in general, freedom of movement, now were out of reach.

⁴⁵ C.: “Perhaps it would have been better to wait before opening [everything] again. In Slovenia and Germany the number of infected people has gone up again after they reopened it... I am afraid that by October everything will be closed again.” M.: “I agree, they should wait”. C.: “My dad says that if the number of infected people is stable or less, it’s fine. We must follow the rules, otherwise there will be another outbreak”.

⁴⁴ “However, I found other things that interested me. Anime, the Japanese cartoons, for example. I would have never thought that I could become interested in anime, perhaps boredom pulled it out of me.”

⁴⁵ “I took up again things that I had left behind because I did not have time, like cooking, reading, sewing, many things that I would have never done otherwise”.

⁴⁶ In English in the original text.

Durante questa infinita quarantena, ho incominciato a pensare. Pensare al futuro, come sarà [...].⁴⁷ (M.DB. Girl, essay, May).

La solitudine spesso fa bene, fa pensare e riflettere.⁴⁸ (L.F., girl, essay, May).

...questo [stare chiusi in casa]mi faceva star male, mi sembrava di essere in prigione... pensavo a tante cose mie personali... da quando abbiamo saputo quelle notizie [la pandemia e le sue vittime] ero molto triste. Mi sembrava come se la vita non avesse più senso a viverla così.⁴⁹ (F.J., girl, essay, May).

Prima davamo per scontate queste azioni quotidiane e non le apprezzavamo abbastanza [andare a scuola, incontrare gli amici, uscire a fare la spesa o andare a fare una semplice passeggiata], ma questa esperienza ci sta insegnando ad essere grati per ogni cosa che abbiamo e magari ci renderà anche meno superficiali.⁵⁰ (B.K., boy, essay, May)

Interestingly, although well aware of the danger, students claimed not to be particularly worried about themselves getting infected and ill. A recurrent consideration in the essays was rather a concern for those who could fall victims to the virus. The students revealed their worries for their relatives, mainly grandparents, as elderly people are more vulnerable to this virus. Young immigrants also worried for their family living in a different country, but also for people in general:

My only concern is my grandparents and older people.⁵¹ (G.L., boy, essay, March).

Io ho preso paura di coronavirus... ho sentito che è arrivata in Italia... tanta gente, morti... io non voglio morire né vedere altra gente morire...⁵² (A. U., boy, discussion, April).

...vivevo con i miei nonni... Ho vissuto tutto il periodo pensando di avere il virus e trasmetterlo ai miei nonni che quindi sarebbero morti.⁵³ (K.T., girl, essay, May).

⁴⁷ “During this everlasting quarantine I started thinking. I thought about the future, and how it will be...”.

⁴⁸ “Solitude frequently helps, it makes you think and ponder”.

⁴⁹ “... I was feeling ill, I felt like I was jailed... I thought about personal issues... since we started listening to the news I was so sad. I felt life made no sense living like this”.

⁵⁰ “Initially we took our daily life for granted and didn’t appreciate it enough, but this experience is teaching us to be grateful for every thing we have, and maybe it will make us less superficial about things”.

⁵¹ In English in the original text.

⁵² “I got scared of coronavirus... I heard it has arrived in Italy... a lot of people died... I don’t want to die and I don’t want to see others die”.

⁵³ “I lived with my grandparents... I spent the entire time thinking I had the virus and that I would infect my grandparents who would die from it.”

Concern for others also implicated the fate of those who had businesses, especially in the field of tourism: some of the students underlined the fact that COVID-19 had impacted mostly hotels, restaurants and cafés and that for many of these businesses opening again will be difficult. Others were concerned about safety at work in general, and wished that workers could go to work without fear of becoming infected. The call for collective responsibility was very common: the students were well aware of the fact that without commitment by all, the virus would spread again.

Interestingly, many students believed that scientific discoveries might solve the situation. This was apparent in those essays written after the webinars on the history of pandemics, but it was a topic that was mentioned also prior to the webinars. Most of the students stated that as diseases in the past were eradicated thanks to progresses of science and to vaccines, the same would happen now, given that medical science has advanced. Thus, vaccines were mentioned as the solution to the pandemic and the end to the restrictions and the participants said that they were confident that it will come soon.

...si dovranno portare le mascherine finché il vaccino contro il Covid-19 non verrà trovato.⁵⁴ (L.V., boy, essay, May).

Non apriranno i confini finché non scoprono il vaccino...⁵⁵ (A.V., girl, discussion, April).

Considerations about school attendance were also common: as previously mentioned, at the beginning everyone was happy that schools had been closed. However, soon the alternative i.e. remote learning did not meet great success. With the exception of one student, who stated that according to him remote learning was a new experience and he did not mind it, all those who mentioned it in their written essays and during discussions, were bored and dissatisfied by it.

I miss going to school and also do the classes there and not at home. I don't like doing video chats with the teachers because it isn't the same thing as doing a class in person.⁵⁶ G.R., girl, essay, April).

Non avrei detto, mi manca la scuola, vedere un volto familiare oltre alla mia famiglia.⁵⁷ (C.G., girl, discussion May).

⁵⁴ "...we will have to wear face masks until a vaccine against Covid-19 will be found".

⁵⁵ "They won't open the borders until a vaccine is found". The issue of the closed borders was mostly felt amongst immigrant students, who travel back to visit relatives over the summer.

⁵⁶ In English in the original text.

⁵⁷ "I wouldn't have thought so, but I miss school, seeing a friendly face other than my family".

However, it was not only remote learning that was an issue: the whole virtual reality was now viewed critically. Indeed, technology helped greatly during the lockdown, allowing friends to be in touch and that was a great relief, but many respondents claimed that they realised that “real life” was more fulfilling.

Quando eravamo chiusi parlavo con le mie amiche in chiamata a distanza si sentiva la mancanza perché non potevamo abbracciarci e divertirci. [...] Grazie alla quarantena mi sono resa conto ti quanto sia meglio la realtà di quella virtuale. Infatti come tutti sono stata davanti ad uno schermo facendo ogni mattina lezione.⁵⁸ (B.J., girl, essay, May)

Finally, their hopes and considerations. Of course, everyone was wishing for a happy ending: the virus would disappear somehow, thanks to the vaccine perhaps, and everything was going to be back to normal. Possibly the road “back to normal” was still a long path strewn with difficulties, but in the end, everything would be fine. However, some students voiced the hope that all this would not have been in vain, that everyone would become a better person, more concerned about others and more careful about the environment. According to them, the pandemic was a sort of turning point, something that should prompt a change for the better.

È un male che porta al bene, ne sono sicura; ovviamente non so come sarà il mondo lì fuori quando sarà tutto finito ma qualcosa è cambiato e cambierà ancora perché siamo cambiati anche noi. Sono cambiate le nostre abitudini, il nostro modo di pensare, di reagire davanti alle cose più difficili... Forse era questo che volevano? Sensibilizzarci? Farci capire di cosa siamo fatti, farci capire come ci trattiamo noi e come trattiamo la terra?!⁵⁹ (C.G., girl, essay, April).

È un bene per il mondo che è successa questa roba..., il cambiamento climatico... stiamo distruggendo il mondo. Molte industrie si sono fermate e l'inquinamento è diminuito. Mi dispiace per i poveri, ma non per i ricchi. Loro potrebbero fare qualcosa e non fanno nulla.⁶⁰ (P.N, boy, discussion, April).

⁵⁸ “When we were bound at home I used to talk to my friend through video calls, I missed them, I could not hug or kiss them. [...]Thanks to the quarantine, I realised that reality is much better than virtual reality. As everyone, I also had to sit in front of a screen and following the lessons”.

⁵⁹ “It’s an evil that will bring good, I am sure: of course, I have no idea how the world will be, when this will be over, but something has changed and it will change again, because we have changed. Our habits, our way of thinking, our way of reacting to difficult situations.... Is that what they wanted? To raise our awareness? Make us understand of what we are made of, how we treat ourselves and earth?”

⁶⁰ “It’s a good thing for the world that all this happened... climate change... we are destroying the world. Many factories stopped working and pollution has decreased. I am sorry for the poor people, but I am not sorry for the rich. They could do something [about climate change] and they do nothing.”

In questi giorni però ho avuto modo di fare una riflessione personale, non dico che questa quarantena sia positiva però essendo una situazione di emergenza le persone stanno riscoprendo dei valori che negli anni si sono persi.⁶¹ (M.S., girl, essay, March).

The same pandemic, different narratives

The comparison between the epidemic narratives that shaped the COVID-19 emergency in Italy, to those that emerged from the accounts of the students who took part in the research, highlights some differences. Clearly, the students' narratives stemmed from the "official" ones, but they presented their own personal re-elaboration. For example, the majority of the participants were well aware of the threat posed by COVID-19 and did not underplay it. Certainly, they were restless and bored, often intolerant to the restrictions. Some were sceptical, and thought that the situation was exaggerated, but the majority emphasised the importance of following the rules in order to stop the contagion. The start of *Fase 2* (Phase two), which marked the beginning of the gradual relaxation of the lockdown measures that were in force for a total of 55 days, was welcomed, but not without worries. During Phase two, people were free to go for a stroll, many returned to work, visited relatives, travelled between regions. Shops opened again. However, the comments suggested that the students were ready to bargain "freedom" with safety: they remarked that the risk of facing a new lockdown was great. Nonetheless, we cannot say that the participants followed the "narrative of fear" blindly. Indeed, their worries were somehow mitigated by the notion that if they would abide by the rules, they would be all right. Perhaps the rejection of the "narrative of fear" was the direct consequence of the lack of trust in the information media provided: too much, too confusing, too biased. Instead, the students created a personal narrative that can be called the "narrative of caution" and that can be summed up as: "*COVID-19 is there, people die because of it, we need to be careful*". Stemming from the above narrative, there was the "narrative of responsibility" that indicates the concern for other people, those who were deemed more vulnerable, and creates a space for the agency of the students. Many comments remarked the sadness students felt when they heard the news about casualties and watched the dramatic images broadcasted on the television. Certainly, military transport vehicles taking victims of COVID-19 to crematories, or the line of coffins waiting for burial in an empty town,⁶² left a long-

⁶¹ "These days I have got a chance to make a personal consideration, I am not saying that the quarantine is a good thing, but since it is an emergency situation, people are rediscovering values that went missing sometimes ago".

⁶² Bergamo, in Lombardy, one of the areas with the highest number of victims.

lasting impression. Thus, the “narrative of responsibility” prompted the students to act in the only way possible: that is, following the rules not only for their own benefit, but for the benefit of others as well.

The “narrative of denial” did not appear to take root: even though some students voiced their doubts about the real menace posed by COVID -19 and believed that the preventive measures were put in place mainly to scare people in order to keep them home, none of the participants denied the existence of the virus. What emerged instead, was a sense of powerlessness and resignation: there was nothing that could be done, decisions were taken somewhere else. Therefore, it did not matter if politicians exaggerated the risk, or if COVID-19 was an opportunity for someone to “make money”, as one of the students suggested. In any case, there was nothing that they could do about it. If adults tried to bend the rules by breaking the lockdown (a lot of people got fined because they were caught sunbathing or sitting on a park bench reading a newspaper), young people appeared to be more docile. In an article published on the *Sette* magazine in April, the psychotherapist Stefania Andreoli claimed that adolescents coped with the lockdown better than adults.⁶⁵ According to Andreoli, they adapted faster to the lockdown because of their acquaintance with the digital media, which facilitated both communication with friends and also enabled them to follow classes remotely. If this is certainly true, and mobile phones were instrumental in keeping in touch with the external world, the data suggests that the subdued attitude indicates a sort of detachment and impotence at the same time.

A similar attitude was found when looking at the “narrative of hope”: very few adopted the motto “everything will be fine”. They rather presented a “narrative of wishes”: “*We wish that things will get better and that we will go back to normal*” often combined with the statement that pandemic would “*make people better*”. The students believed that the extreme circumstances marked a turning point in the lives of many people and that the situation would prompt a positive change in attitudes and behaviours. One can argue that this belief stemmed from the “narrative of hope” and, of course, it was partly so. However, the comments indicate that it was more than that. Indeed, for many students the lockdown was a kind of epiphany that made them view their daily routine under a different light. Taking care of themselves by exercising, eating well and harmonising relationship with other was something that came up often in the comments. The lockdown made them re-evaluate their relationship with the whole family and understand how important family support is. Even school attendance was reassessed: the vast majority stated how much they missed classes

⁶⁵ “Adolescenti rinchiusi”, *Sette*, issued on the 10th April 2020. *Sette* is a weekly supplement of *Corriere della Sera*, one of the most popular newspapers in Italy.

and even educators. The discovery was surprising in the first place for the students themselves: they did not expect to long for school. Of course, school is above all a place where relationships and friendships are formed and this was the element students were missing the most, rather than the actual learning. Nonetheless, the finding is relevant as it reinforces the importance of the social and civic role of schools.

The long-lasting impact of these narratives remains to be seen. In other words, when the situation will go back to normal and COVID-19 will become a threat of the past, what will be left of these narratives? Indeed, at the time of writing, September and October 2020, Italy, like the rest of the world, is not completely out of the state of emergency. Although the virus seems to be less lethal, probably due to the fact that now doctors are more aware of its effects and know better how to deal with it, rather than the virus losing strength,⁶⁴ still numbers of infected people in Italy are going up (Ministero della Salute September 2020).⁶⁵ Schools have just reopened with very strict rules to avoid contagion – although some schools have already closed as people tested positive to COVID-19.⁶⁶ Students have gone back to school after about seven months of “freedom”, as some of them called the pause from in-person learning combined with summer holidays, and they have to comply with those rules. Most of them appear less prone to oblige, as there is an apparent discrepancy between the school rules and their life outside school. Indeed, at school they are asked to wear a face mask when not sitting at their desks, they need to keep social distance, cannot exchange school material and have to sanitise their chairs and desks before leaving. None of this is required in the outside world, where every Saturday night youngsters mingle together with no restrictions.⁶⁷ Thus, behaviours and possibly attitudes towards COVID -19 have definitely changed. It may well be that the narration would be different, had the research been carried out now.

⁶⁴ <https://www.healthline.com/health-news/is-the-new-coronavirus-getting-weaker-what-to-know>. Viewed on the 9th September 2020.

⁶⁵ <http://www.salute.gov.it/portale/nuovocoronavirus/dettaglioContenutiNuovoCoronavirus.jsp?are a=nuovoCoronavirus&id=5351&lingua=italiano&menu=vuoto>. Viewed 9 September 2020.

⁶⁶ *Il Piccolo*, 14th and 15th September 2020.

⁶⁷ Of course, restrictions exist: for example, after people got infected in clubs over the Summer, the government imposed to wear a face mask from 6pm to 6am in public spaces where there may be a risk of gathering. However, these rules are often ignored, both by people and by the police who should ensure their implementation.

Conclusions

Narratives are not created into a vacuum, but are deeply rooted in cultural assumptions and representations (Cobley 2001; Misturelli 2009). Equally, epidemics are not only a biological or medical phenomenon, but are also a social and cultural process (Sommerfeld 1994). It is the social representation that impacts the outcomes of the epidemic. Therefore, it becomes extremely important to uncover the narratives that each social group creates. The study has illustrated how a group of adolescents have reworked and partially transformed the official narratives. They followed the rules to prevent getting infected or infect others, but they have also expressed wariness about the information that was published and broadcasted by the different media. On the one end, the finding suggests that the “epidemic narrative” created by the different social actors worked well on the behaviours of the adolescents. On the other end it poses a major question: if the lockdown would not have been so strict, would the mere call to wear face masks, keep social distance and not go out unless needed, have been sufficient to convince people in general and young people in particular to comply? My answer is negative. Therefore, given the fact that epidemics are now and will be a recurrent event (Quammen 2013) and that the behaviour of people is one of the essential factors to contain it (Sommerfeld 1994; Xu and Peng 2015; Kelly et al. 2019), it is apparent that there is an urgent need to improve the communication model, which needs to be simpler and coherent as well as less sensationalist. This would be particularly important when the peak of the epidemic decreases and a false sense of safety may induce damaging behaviours.

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