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Everything is inside the home: the boundaries of home confinement during the Italian lockdown

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ABSTRACT
This article investigates the ways in which social distancing and home confinement restrictions have been experienced and perceived in the Italian socio-cultural context, in order to assess how they reshaped everyday life, and which are their social implications. Drawing on 60 in-depth semi-structured interviews, this article sheds light on the sense-making processes and the construction of inter-subjective meaning around home confinement and social distancing that emerged during the lockdown. Results support that during the national quarantine individuals had to reframe everyday practices, thereby redefining the boundaries of their experience. Indeed, individuals had to deal with a lack of personal spaces, a following stress overload and a collapse of the typical boundaries between the professional and private sphere, which required a complex management of everyday activities. Implications of these preliminary findings are discussed, as well as suggestions for future research.

Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis dramatically affected everyday life all over the world. On 9 March 2020, Italy was the first country in Europe in which it was imposed a national quarantine. More than 60 million people were put under lockdown and all working activities were shut down, except for essential service industries. Schools were closed and citizens were forbidden to leave their houses other than for proven and non-deferrable health or business reasons.

These home confinement measures lasted for two months, during which more than 8 million people were banned from going to their workplace, while 3 million had to continue working remotely (Barbieri *et al.*

2020). In the meantime, e-learning was adopted from primary schools to universities across the country. Throughout this period, most of the people were obliged to remain confined in their houses and to live isolated with their families or alone 24/7. Since then, social distancing restrictions have become a constant feature of everyday life.

The lockdown measures affected the realms of work, family, education and everyday life of millions of people, which were totally unprepared. Indeed, social distancing restrictions were a new phenomenon that had never been implemented on such a large scale. However, it is likely that these restrictions will remain in force until there is a vaccine. Moreover, social isolation ordinances may be implemented again if there is a resurgence in coronavirus cases. Given this scenario, how individuals perceive and deal with these measures, and the ways in which everyday life is reshaped following measures of home confinement, ought to be a major area of interest within the field of social sciences. Thus, to better understand this phenomenon, this paper investigates the impact of home confinement and social distancing on everyday life, in order to shed light on the social implications of these measures. To do so, this study focuses on individuals' lived experiences during the lockdown restrictions and attempts to grasp how a macro-level change affected micro-level experiences and interpretation frames. The main goal is to gain insight on the sense-making activities and the processes of construction of inter-subjective meaning around home confinement and social distancing that emerged during the lockdown.

Theoretical framework

The micro-level: re-framing everyday life

In Italy, citizens have been confined in their homes for two months, while businesses based on close proximity were closed and jobs left at stake. Within this scenario, lockdown measures had a disruptive effect on personal routines and possibilities. A large body of literature has focused on everyday life at the micro-level, thereby investigating the organisation of social interaction and microsociality (see Tavory 2018).

In *Frame Analysis* (1974), Goffman claims that individuals use frames to interpret social interaction. Frames are 'schemata of interpretation' (21) or, in other words, the categories through which we make sense of our experiences. Everyday interactions are constantly framed to understand what is going on, i.e. to make situations readable and meaningful

(Manning 1992). Indeed, individuals endow social order with reliability and predictability through frames, which are used to reduce the complexity and uncertainty of social life and to impose legibility on an environment marked by irregularities and unpredictability (Misztal 2001).

Lefebvre defines everyday life as 'a level of social practice within totality' (2002: 31), that show the ways in which individuals live. According to the author, everyday life is an 'intermediate and mediating level' (45), that allow researchers to gain insight on society as a whole. Following the Corona Crisis, social life was interrupted, fractured or changed, and routines and everyday practices were completely reorganised (Fuchs 2020). Indeed, the perception of space and time completely changed, and individuals were forced to re-frame their everyday experiences and to continuously re-organise their sense-making activities, through a process of *reframing*. However, little is known about this process and research regarding how everyday life was reframed during the lockdown is still lacking.

The macro-level: coming back to a world risk society

Since the beginning of the health and following economic crisis, several scholars (e.g. Giritli Nygren and Olofsson 2020; Ward 2020) supported that some aspects of the risk society thesis by Ulrich Beck (1992; 1999) could be helpful to analyse the impact of the pandemic.

According to Beck, today we live a world risk society (Beck 1999), marked by a growing incertitude and an uncontrolled diffusion of perils. If threats grow, institutions appear to be increasingly unprepared to manage the following crises – which are frequently strictly connected to their policies. Thus, governments are often obliged to rely on experts to deal with hazards, although there is also an increasing scepticism by lay people regarding the effectiveness and reliability of authorities (Lupton 2006).

Furthermore, rather than spreading locally, the diffusion of dangers occurs on a global level, favoured by the processes of industrialisation, urbanisation and globalisation (Beck 1992). From China, the COVID-19 spread all over Europe and then across the globe, while, for instance, in Italy, the first cases of COVID-19 were announced in Lombardy, i.e. the wealthiest, most productive, most populous region in the country. The region, that has extensive global trade connections, in fact, was the most hard-hit by the corona compared to all the other regions in Italy and also to most of the countries in Europe. In a world risk society, hence, perils become globalised mega-risks which easily spread following the interdependence and interconnectedness of the world economy.

Another element that need to be considered is the condition of individuals, which have to constantly cope by themselves with uncontrollable risks 'implied by the very business of living' (Giddens 1991: 41). In the last decades, indeed, a 'steady devolution of responsibility for risk from the State to citizens' is 'observable across multiple domains, ranging from national security (…) through to education, health, and welfare support' (Mythen 2018: 24). Within this process, individuals turn into risk managers of their own lives, and have to deal with an overwhelming burden of responsibilities (Beck 1992).

Methodology

The COVID-19 crisis is certainly a novel and unique research context. Given that the phenomenon is relatively new, there are no prior studies that scrutinise how social distancing and home confinement measures affect individuals and their ways to behave and frame social life. Thus, since this study was exploratory and interpretative in nature, a qualitative approach was employed in order to produce a valuable amount of very rich first-hand data and to facilitate theory generation.

60 semi-structured interviews were conducted via three online video conferencing platforms: Skype, Zoom and WhatsApp. The use of in-depth semi-structured interviews is a well-established approach to grasp the perspectives of the individuals, thereby capturing their thoughts, feelings, expectations and behaviours (Esterberg 2002).

Then, this study adopted a criterion sample (Creswell and Poth 2018). The selection of participants was based on their job, age and gender. First, there are three major categories of workers were identified during the lockdown (March–April 2020): essential workers, locked workers and remote-workers (Table 1).

Table 1. Categories of workers.

Category	Description	Examples
Essential workers	Individuals that had to leave their homes to go to their workplace	Doctors, nurses, grocery clerks, public transport workers, those in essential service industries in general.
Locked workers	Individuals that had a job before the lockdown but were obliged to stay at home, following sanitary restrictions, without the possibility to continue their professional activity	Bartenders, hairdressers, owners of little shops, clerks, etc.
Remote workers	Individuals that could continue working from home through digital technologies	Office workers, teachers, accountants, knowledge workers, etc.

The rationale in restricting the sample to these three categories has been the assumption that the duty to go to a workplace, the possibility to continue working from home, as well as the obligation to stop working, are key elements in evaluating how individuals perceive home confinement measures. Then, age was another criterion: two age subgroups were selected: 30 individuals aged 30–45, and 30 individuals aged 46–60. Finally, the sample is gender-balanced (30 males and 30 females).

Regarding the recruitment, several participants were identified via personal connections with the authors, then, the snowball method was applied further to recruit other informants matching the aforementioned sampling criteria. All the interviewees were residents around Lombardy and selected also based on their willingness to participate in the study, as it is commonly deemed suitable with exploratory and non-probabilistic research designs (Ritchie *et al.* 2013). All the interviews took place between April and May 2020, lasting about 45 minutes each, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim in Italian with informant's permission.

Interview data analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti software. Data were coded to identify themes related to the aims of the study, through open coding techniques, generally associated with a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Researchers ceaselessly checked, reviewed and discussed together the themes emerging from data throughout the process. This approach was deemed effective to explore novel phenomena within a continuous and iterative interaction between theory generation and empirical observation (Charmaz and Belgrave 2015).

Results

The word *boundary* refers to a demarcation line that defines the perimeter of a territory, but it is also a device through which individuals make sense of their everyday interactions. Results support that, during the lockdown, three dimensions of the boundary emerged (Table 2).

The boundary between external risks and internal solutions: individual reactions to systematic uncertainties

This paragraph shows how individuals experienced and dealt with the impact of a globalised mega-risk. Results support that, concerned by an

Table 2. Main themes emerged from the results.

Three dimensions of the boundary
The boundary between external risks and internal solutions: individual reactions to systematic uncertainties
The boundary between before and after Covid-19: scarce spaces and a difficult work-care reconciliation
The boundary between professional and private life: 'everything is inside the home'.

increasing incertitude and a lack of support by traditional institutions, individuals fell back on individual responsibility and started identifying their homes as the only possible secure shelter.

> In a moment you can lose everything, because it's not you that decide of your life and your company but it's something or someone that is external. *(P57, M, essential, 54 years old)*

COVID-19 is an *external* and *exogenous* risk that is experienced with real distress by informants, which have to cope with an uncontrollable hazard. Uncertainty emerges as a striking source of anxiety for participants, which finds difficult to elaborate potential solutions to their condition and often fall back on individual responsibility as a possible reaction.

> It depends a lot on us citizens, we must respect laws. *(P20, M, locked, 31 years old)*

These views surfaced several times and support a core feature of Beck's thesis (1992): while risk assumes increasingly importance in contemporary societies, so it does the assumption of responsibility by individuals. Lay people are obliged to be risk managers of their own lives, thereby seeking biographical solutions to systematic contradictions.

> Someone that is in need will soon rely on loan sharks, that are ready to support people that are alone facing a very difficult situation. (…) this thing should be controlled by the state, because otherwise all the burden is on people. *(P16, F, locked, 52 years old)*

However, the burden is on individuals also due to the perceived lack of support by traditional institutions. Lay people take on responsibility for the management of risks, in fact, as institutions do not offer solutions and possible future paths. Indeed, it also emerges, especially from the accounts of locked workers, a lack of trust in political institutions.

> [Politicians] don't know what to do, they don't have solutions (…) and they hope that this thing will sort out by itself. *(P21, M, locked, 37 years old)*

In an uncertain global scenario, in which institutions seemed not capable of proposing relief, individuals relied on their own sense of responsibility and developed an *internal* escape path. One of the outcomes of the lockdown restrictions was home *confinement*, which resulted in a sort of *atomisation* of social relations. Consequently, home became identified as the place in which relationships are safe, in sharp contrast with external relationships, perceived as dangerous and fearsome.

> In this moment I think that nobody feel safe in any place (…) only at home, I can say that I feel safe at home because … well, it's the four of us and I can say that I feel safe. *(P12, F, locked, 49 years old)*

> When you go out, you have the mask, but if you meet someone, you change sidewalk. *(P25, M, locked, 56 years old)*

> Thus, home is the place in which individuals feel secure. Despite the perception that restrictions are a limit to their freedom, informants frame the boundaries of the house as a sort of protection, i.e. a physical and symbolic threshold that separate safe contacts from hazards.

The boundary between before and after Covid-19: a novel scarcity of spaces

Following home confinement measures, everyday practices and social relations were abruptly overturned and the boundaries of experience were subjected to a striking shift. This paragraph focuses and highlights one of the most salient issues that surfaced from this change: the scarcity of spaces inside the house – the division of which had to be renegotiated by family members.

> Everyday life is completely changed, you look for mental ways out not to (…) overthink. *(P23, M, locked, 35 years old)*

> It turned our professional life upside down, totally. (…) it nullified it *(P9, M, locked, 49 years old)*

As previously mentioned, individuals suddenly had to interpret a completely new and uncertain scenario, that was a source of extreme distress. Indeed, each domain of social and personal experience had been 'turned upside down', as well as the frames usually applied to interpret everyday life. Categories commonly applied to make sense of professional and private life did no longer work, and a boundary between 'before and after coronavirus' clearly emerged (Reynolds 2020).

> Living together is hard for everyone, of course not having means of release …
> such as going to work or out for a walk (…). It's not easy at all to manage this
> new forced cohabitation. (P13, F, locked, 46 years old)

Home confinement imposed to individuals to be alone or with their cohabitants (family members, flatmates, and so forth) the whole day. This forced cohabitation often implied a complex management of spaces inside the house. Indeed, results show that, while one of the characteristics of a high-speed society (Rosa and Scheuerman 2009) is the scarcity of time, during the lockdown our societies experienced the *scarcity of space*. From the interviews, it emerges that it was difficult arranging and preparing suitable spaces for working tasks and personal activities, especially for individuals that were not prepared for working or spending time at home.

> The real issue is the space, because I don't have a room with an additional spot
> (…) so I have to work in the living room, with my stack of documents, it's a
> mess. (P5, F, remote, 52 years old)

While outside *social distancing* obligated people to completely reformulate social relations, spaces emerged also as a key element related to personal well-being during the quarantine.. Participants highlighted dramatic differences between who remained in scarce spaces and who was in wider houses.

> I have a dear friend that is alone and live in a 45 m² house without a balcony.
> He's alone, all day long, he doesn't go out and if he does it's just to buy grocery
> and then he comes back home. (P19, M, locked, 41 years old)

Furthermore, some interviews, which had to deal with a lack of space, highlighted the complexity of sharing spaces that were vital for daily activities. Individuals that did not have the possibility to elaborate new suitable frameworks for their occupations felt disconsolate and powerless.

> So, if I have to talk, and I always have to talk out loud (…) it's chaos, so my
> brother asked me to move somewhere else, but for me it's not easy to move!
> If I come up the signal is way worse. (P3, F, remote, 37 years old)

Given this novel and complex scenario, family members felt pressured and needed to renegotiate rules. New rituals and routines were elaborated to preserve personal and family's well-being, as well as order, but this implied a continuous effort and time-consuming negotiations.

The boundary between professional and private life: 'everything is inside the home'.

A recurrent theme in the interviews is that the necessity to manage different composite tasks contemporarily, and in the same place, often resulted in a stress overload. As it could be already noted from the previous paragraph, time and space are crosscutting dimension. Within a difficult management of scarce spaces, for remote workers home turned into the place in which several forms of work (e.g. wage-work, care work, educational work, etc.) had to be carried out at the same time (Fuchs 2020).

> He is in second grade and now does 3 online lessons, of two hours each, per week. He's a child, if you don't stay with him, he's not going to stay on the computer, or he gets easily distracted (…). And then there is homework (…) now it must be done every day. *(P1, F, remote, 46 years old)*

This complex organisation of time that is condensed in the same place has been a novel issue for many participants, especially for parents. Indeed, for several parents the lockdown resulted in some extra work related to household and childcare. Our results support that the burden of child-care or housework duties falls mainly on women, in accordance with several reports (e.g. Alon *et al.* 2020) that showed that the disease outbreak appears to increase gender inequalities. Indeed, women have to work and, at the same time, carry out time-consuming activities related to family life. As an interviewee put it:

> A woman has to do many things, like washing, cleaning, tidying up. *(P5, F, remote, 52 years old)*

Thus, women appear as systematically and disproportionally affected by the burden of extra work, with a distribution of the new child-care and housework activities that seem to be unbalanced within the couple.

This emergence of extra work concerning child-care and housework – the burden of which the burden of which fell disproportionately on women – implied a difficult work-care reconciliation and a complex management of different roles. Individuals play different roles in different social systems, depending on the person that is interacting with them, as well as on the time and the place. Goffman (1959) defines this mechanism 'audience segregation': individuals give specific performances to specific audiences and usually differentiate the various social groups with which they interact. This process aims to avoid

contradictory expectations that need to be fit and the following shift from an established role to another.

> It happened more than once to participate to meetings (…) in which there were kids running back and forth, screams that you could hear, people that had to finish the call because the dinner was ready … Things that are inconceivable in an ordinary professional context. (P32, F, remote, 43 years old)

Following home confinement restrictions, individuals had to live together with their families 24/7. Results show a collapse of the traditional boundaries between professional and private life. In Goffman's terms, the difference between front stage and backstage became blurred, thereby making more complex for individuals to organise social relations.

> Surely the issue is not to have a space that is our private space (…) now I'm at home and, whether I like it or not, kids are part of it, there is no more private space, the division between work and private life. (…) home was a sort of shelter (…) it was a space in which one used to say "I go home and I have a break", now this break doesn't exist anymore, because everything, private and professional life, is inside the home. (P9, F, remote, 36 years old)

Work and family stopped being distinct spheres with different roles to perform. All the activities concentrated 'in one universal, (…) unstructured space–time in one locale, the home' (Fuchs 2020: 379), in which all the social spaces and time periods converged.

> We all brought home our computer and through the remote working procedures we managed to continue all those necessary practices to work daily. (P6, F, remote, 39 years old)

This study focused on two categories of workers: remote and locked workers. Despite the same ban on going outside, the main difference between their conditions was the possibility (or impossibility) to work from home (using digital platforms). Indeed, remote workers re-constructed and re-organised their spaces for several activities, including wage-labour, care work, etc., thereby reframing the boundary between private and professional life, and experiencing the convergence of different time periods in the same physical space. Indeed, during the lockdown, the time boundaries between working and other activities became extremely blurred and the division between distinct spheres collapsed.

> The most difficult thing is absolutely (…) these slower rhythms … (P13, F, locked, 46 years old)

> Now I try to put effort into some works inside or outside the house, even improvising things that I've never done but that are useful to keep myself busy, so my day isn't meaningless. *(P22, M, locked, 45 years old)*

On the other hand, locked workers could not continue working, thus, during home confinements they experienced a different time perception: days appeared to slow down and individuals feel the need to fill in time, through new daily routines that could attenuate stress and anxiety linked to a highly uncertain professional and personal future.

Conclusions

Life and work dramatically changed during the COVID-19 crisis. Drawing on 60 qualitative interviews and a purposeful sample, this paper explored how social distancing and home confinement have affected everyday life in the Italian socio-cultural context. Findings highlight that the boundaries of social life were dramatically redefined, as everyday practices had to be reframed. A lack of personal spaces and the complex management of different social roles within the boundaries of the home resulted in a stress overload, also due to a collapse of the traditional boundaries between professional and private life. This process clearly surfaced in the interviews of remote workers. For them, 'everything is inside the home'. Thus, they had to continue working in their homes and to reconcile different forms of work in the same spatial and temporal environment. Within this scenario, women emerge as a disadvantaged category on which disproportionately falls the burden of housework and child-care activities. Indeed, women often had to manage and compartmentalise different types of work. Furthermore, this study highlighted that individuals seek biographical solutions as a response to systematic contradictions and uncertainties, following a lack of trust in political institutions.

Thus, this research extends our knowledge of the consequences of lockdown restrictions on everyday life, thereby making a meaningful contribution to the research regarding the social consequences of the COVID-19 crisis.

Finally, the limitations of this study must be acknowledged. In this research, only the experiences of a small number of individuals were investigated. Thus, the use of non-probabilistic sampling procedure did not allow to generalise the results to the whole population. The use of qualitative methods – highly valuable to explore individuals' experiences

and perspectives – has to be considered a starting point for further research. Indeed, more theoretical and empirical scholarship – based on quantitative methods – is needed to assess the attitudes and behaviours of individuals regarding social distancing measures across different places and countries. Better understanding of how these restrictions are experiences and perceived in different socio-cultural contexts will be the key for developing solid theoretical frameworks regarding the phenomenon.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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