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Living – Six Researchers in Search of A Meaning In Lockdown: A Collective Essay (RN03)

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TEXT=LIVING%20%E2%80%93%20SIX%20RESEARCHERS%20IN%20SEARCH%20OF%20A%20MEANING%20IN%20LOCKDOWN%20A%20COLLECTIVE%20ESSAY%20RN03%20PANDEMIC-IMPOSSIBILITIES

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RN03 Biographical Perspectives on European Societies Coordinators and Board Members 2019-2021

‘Stay at home!’. Biographical researchers are accustomed to, and they are well equipped (methodologically) to reflect on, changing life trajectories in unprecedented circumstances. This collective essay maps our individual experiences of a lockdown (see the list of contributors at the bottom).

Using the methodological approach of Walking Interpretative Biographical Method (WIBM) [1], we developed methodological guidelines on a walking and imagining exercise. Six authors followed the guidelines and recorded their experiences in the form of auto/biography [2]. These reflections took place in March and April 2020 in Austria, Czech Republic, England, Germany, Ireland and Poland.

Analysis of the short essays produced four main themes.



(https://www.europeansociologist.org/sites/default/files/public/Nurse_O_Neill_Essay-The_Study_by_Maggie_O'Neill.jpg)

Fig. 2 . The Study. (Image by Maggie O'Neill)

'Slow walk(s) to meltdown room by room' [Jane]

'Next up the stairs, hands feeling the comfort of the white bannisters and into my re-organised study'
[Maggie]

'My study became the place for work, walk and reflections. I first reorganised the room: went through sorting my papers, draft articles, reports, notes, travel documents, moved them across the room and moved one bookcase from one wall to another' [Lyudmila]

'When I work, I usually listen to music, as I do today. With music I connect joy of life, energy and creativity.' [André]

The newly organised or modified workplaces are now full of 'un-office' – like images and sounds:

'Isolated with my husband and two teenage children, surrounded by pictures of our ancestors we were constantly kindly asked and harshly ordered to reorganise our everyday routines, to transform our place into lecture room, into classroom and engineering office' [Katarzyna]

Old style landline telephone is back in use, along with Skype, Zoom. We teach, direct from our homes, and our children are taking lessons from home as well:

'Two weeks later our child is having another routine school day afternoon guitar session with grandpa on Skype. Then we shut the e-devices off and gather for family supper reflecting on our day, as we always do. Family is more than one household, but not for the time being' [Kateřina]

'The whole house changed shape and some familiar and accessible areas became "offices": on-line, virtual meeting places; on-line teaching music zones; violin practice rooms. All members of my family continued to work, to walk, to practice musical instrument and to exercise, but at their own paces' [Lyudmila]

For Katarzyna's family, the caring work of Health Visitors provides comfort at a distance:

'Waving them from the window to avoid contact we were talking by the phone at the same time. Their questions: if we feel good, if we need anything like food, hygienic stuff or medicine, if we need some sort of psychological support calmed me down. These little tiny banal things made me think positively. At least for a while... ' [Katarzyna]

Walking through our memories (Erlebnis and Erfahrung)

This new situation of having been cut off from the familiar worlds brings memories of not so distant, but feels like a very distant, past:

'After our family lockdown in January due to our child's dramatic health condition, I finally travelled to my hometown in Czechia. Regular travels were interrupted, and I only felt the crisis is over when I laid down in my bed in small bachelor apartment I now use as atelier' [Kateřina]

Treasured memories of the past also emerge:

'My vinyl records not only remind me of beautiful moments, like discovering new places, but also of intimate and hurtful things, like the death of a very good friend. Despite this painful loss, he lives on in the stories that the vinyl records remind me of him' [André]

There is a strange 'taste' of the silence, of new 'free' time, and sense of distances and space:

‘Everything now looked almost surreal and distant, like boarding passes, concerts tickets and programmes. I looked at those trying to recollect in my memory happy occasions. Then journals. Sociology journals were piling around for a while, as I tried to find a spare minute to read them. Now is the time. There is a certain pleasure of reading article after article and to enjoy reading and thinking...’ [Lyudmila]

Auto-biographical meaning of Covid-19

It is far too early to analyse the biographical ruptures and meanings of Covid-19 and its real impact on the way we think about and live our lives. Our generation has not experienced such situations first-hand. What might we learn biographically from such experiences?

Music has a strong emotional power to remind us and to link us with the past:

‘The music I am listening to right now will probably remind me not only of the writing process, but also of the COVID-19 lockdown (e.g. the physical distancing from friends). However, to what extent vinyl records – or in general personal objects – can be regarded as a biographical impulse that lifts life stories out of the shadows is a task that biographical research should address in the future.’

[André]



(https://www.europeansociologist.org/sites/default/files/public/Nurse_O_Neill_Essay_Vinyl_by_Andre_Epp.jpg)

Fig. 3. Vinyl. (Image by André Epp)

Sounds and sensory memory:

'What are the sounds of isolation? The first thing which might immediately come to mind is silence. Silence could be imagined as a natural faculty of isolation. And its synonyms include separation, segregation and yes, very familiar to us quarantine. However the experience of recent self-isolation with an entire family brings to life different shades of sounds of self-isolation and memories'
[Lyudmila]

'Moving into the bathroom I touch the 1960's rose leather nursing chair inherited from my Grandparents. I sit, sinking into the thick, sticky, silence of isolation in Newcastle upon Tyne. A city holding its breath over days, suspended, released today, an exhalation of fear. Remembering my fear of 1975, when at nine after devouring biblical stories of The Ten Plagues, I became terrified of losing my family. Now at almost fifty-four on Good Friday, I hope it is a Good Friday. I move to the stairs. One black and white photograph taken in 1969 of a family seated around a dinner table, food consumed, and drinks in raised hands. Everyone is seated except me, at three I am standing on my Grandpa's knee holding up a pulled cracker in the present I can taste the Christmas pudding.' [Jane]



(https://www.europeansociologist.org/sites/default/files/public/Nurse_O_Neill_Essay_The_childrens_bible_by_Jar
 Fig. 4. *The Children's Bible* (Image by Jane Arnfield)

'Tracing a previous walk I walk through the garden past pots of herbs and plants, through the back door, into a small hall and stop at a painting of my home town, the steel works in the snow, an elemental expression of that time and the feeling of life there for me as a child and young person.'

Next to it is a painting one of my sons did in kindergarten, a beautiful veil painting of rainbow colours, my heart always lifts when I see this evoking memories of such happy times of physical and emotional connection and the awe, wonder and playfulness of childhood.’ [Maggie]



(https://www.europeansociologist.org/sites/default/files/public/Nurse_O_Neill_Essay_Back_garden_by_Maggie_O)
Fig. 5. Back garden. (Image by Maggie O'Neill)

The new meaning of the ordinary things:

'Moving into the bedroom, more photographs, our wedding, son's graduation, both sons together on Inch Beach, and a photo of mum and dad smiling together, hands raised in thanks for gifts received at a Christmas we had apart. Absence and presence, things that are gone but stay with us, time for family, and Nature as healing' [Maggie]

Fear of the unknown keeps us worrying to the point that we are getting more stabilised.

'Walking back to the kitchen plagued by wondering if at nine the fear of contagion could now be realised? Or, having experienced and imagined such fear, I am somewhat stabilised?' [Jane]

There is a new sense of time and mobility:

'Two weeks later the lockdown of Czechia...., we should make some strategic decisions as family. We are ready to move to Czechia to look after our parents, we even consider to bring them in Austria, we need to decide now. After years of „would you like to come“, all of a sudden it is „either move in, or stay where you are“. Grandparents want everyone to stay landed, training of 40 years of political lockdown made them resilient for crisis' [Kateřina]

For some of us, the pain of separation and the comfort of being together:

'I took the ferry home (as planned) for my Mum's 90th birthday, we had a virtual 90th in the end on face time, I felt so sad for her, we made the best of it' [Maggie]

Experiencing deserted places and spaces:

'The village sounded and looked deserted, only birds and bumblebees go their own unrestricted way. Almost no cars. My cat has been going out for walks unrestricted, until we heard on the radio today that cats have to be kept indoors....' [Lyudmila]





(https://www.europeansociologist.org/sites/default/files/public/Nurse_O_Neill_Essay_Unrestricted_walk_by_Lyudmila_Nurse)

Fig .6. *Unrestricted walk* (Image by Lyudmila Nurse)

At the time this essay was written, we were still in the lockdown. This (auto) biographical work shares some of our experiences of isolation, and it is a first step to a longer durée biographical project.

References

- [1] O'Neill, M. and Roberts, B. (2019) *Walking Methods: Research on the Move*. London: Routledge.
- [2] Instructions to the researchers were to write about either a) your memories of walking and imagining in one of the rooms of your house/apartment/while exercising during the last two-three weeks; or, b) undertake a slow walk in your apartment, flat / house moving from room to room. Stop at a place, a photograph or an object that calls you to pay attention. Why does this have resonance for you? What does it evoke and invoke biographically?

Contributors

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