

## **Social Representations of “Normality”:**

### **Everyday Life in Old and New Normalities with Covid-19**

FRANCESCA EMILIANI<sup>1</sup>, ALBERTA CONTARELLO<sup>2</sup>, SONIA BRONDI<sup>2</sup>, LAURA PALARETI<sup>1</sup>, STEFANO PASSINI<sup>1</sup> and DIEGO ROMAIOLI<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Education Studies ‘Giovanni Maria Bertin’, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

<sup>2</sup>Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education, and Applied Psychology, University of Padova, Padova, Italy

Several icons express the experiences of daily life at the time of Covid-19. Among them, "astronauts in their own home" recalls a twirl of bodies in a vacuum bubble. Aware of the structuring power of everyday life, we analysed how people were living the experience of lockdown at home and if and how a social representation of a new normality would emerge. We carried out two studies in the Italian context. In the first, 223 participants narrated their lived experience in the first phases of lockdown. By means of textual analysis (Reinert's method), the corpus returned four lexical worlds focusing on emotions produced by the suspension, need of a new awareness, effort to readjust to the situation, and the organizing power of routines. A thorough reading focused on women's narratives enhanced the structuring power of everyday life, both at a personal and at a societal level, including new collective rituals and appointments. The second study enrolled 214 participants and explored the advanced phase of the lockdown. Participants answered a free association task to the stimulus-word new

normality. The resulting corpus, analysed via correspondence analysis, gave rise to five dimensions pertaining various aspects such as constraints, opportunities, challenges, again both at an individual and at a societal level. In conclusion, underlining the reverberations on the psychosocial plane of the suspension of everyday life and their relation with emotional, cognitive, relational and societal assets, our contributions highlight the relationships between lived experience and social representations.

**Keywords:** lived experience; social representations; new normality; Covid-19; qualitative methods

*Questioning what normality is and how it defines itself in our times is to pose a huge and perhaps unanswered question. But the historical and current difficulty of arriving at a clear description of normality is also what constitutes its fascination and modernity (Colimberti, 2017, p. 1)*

In Italy, the lockdown came unexpectedly for many people and abruptly interrupted people's daily life and everyday routines. During February 2020, the news arrived fragmentedly. Nobody really believed in the transmission of the Chinese epidemic because "China is far away," but soon it turned into a reality. Within a few days, eleven municipalities were isolated as "red zones" and a sense of alarm and anxiety began to spread. Commuters were the first to notice that trains and buses were almost empty and that passengers were very careful and concerned about their proximity with other people. With the first cases in the northern Italian region of Lombardy, the perception of an unknown threat grew. "Stay at home" became a governmental

decree-law and Italians locked themselves into their homes both out of a sense of fear and responsibility<sup>1</sup>.

The focus of our reflection is on the experience of the interruption of individual and collective daily life and the loss of the so-called “normal” life. Since lockdown became mandatory by law, “returning to normality” has become everyone’s aspiration, the leitmotif of every government communication, and a message quickly picked up and echoed by commercial advertising. A common feeling seems to take for granted an awareness of a normality that is both shared and intimate at the same time, and is supposed to be pleasant. And this was despite the call of many people, especially virologists and economists, to reflect on “what kind of normality” we really should be looking for.

## **WHAT IS NORMALITY?**

The Nobel Prize-winning economist Yunus (2020) and the sociologist Lara (2020) have recently underlined the link between environmental disasters, intensive livestock farming and forms of epidemic. They have argued that epidemics are the product of the normality of the current development model and have supported the effort to actively seek a new normality. Old

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<sup>1</sup> Given the importance of the temporal and regulatory dimension underlying the present research, the main stages that have characterized the emergency management in Italy are summarized here. On March 11<sup>th</sup>, the so-called lockdown was established across the whole of Italy. Public events, non-essential commercial activities, work, leisure and sport activities were suspended and schools of all levels were closed. Citizens were forbidden to leave their homes except for reasons of absolute necessity, in any case keeping a distance of one meter from the others and wearing face masks. Phase 1 of the emergency thus began, aimed at containing the virus. At the press conference on April 1<sup>st</sup>, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte explained what the next phases would be: Phase 2, a period of co-existence with the virus in which progressively less strict measures would be adopted (Phase 2 began on May 18<sup>th</sup>); and Phase 3, which would indicate the exit from the emergency and the restoration of normality in both working and social life.

and new normalities gather around the aspiration for a reassuring and familiar dimension of life. However, we have wondered “what normality is,” given this is a word that poses many questions because of its multiform meaning, both in positive and negative terms. Our interest is not directed to the macro-social and economic level, but to the daily flow of each person’s life together with others. Specifically, we have tried to understand the link between everyday life and normality, aware that both concepts imply a normative dimension.

The relationship between norm and normality is intriguing and has been the subject of many disciplines. In particular, as Siniscalchi (2007) widely discussed it has been explored in their entire oeuvre by the eminent jurist Bobbio (1994), but also by the philosopher Foucault (1975), and by the sociologist Goffman (1961). Furthermore, classical theories of social psychology (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Sherif, 1936; Tajfel, 1970) have dealt with the construction of norms within social groups and their influence on individual and group behaviour. The theme was also developed in research on social influence and conformism (see Mugny, Quiamzade & Falomir-Pichastor, 2019). A particularly interesting contribution is that of Moscovici’s system-metasytem model (1961/1976) which brings into play the normative dimension of social contexts, which we will introduce later.

Normality is both a product and a premise of legal norms as it concerns what normally happens, what is statistically relevant, and at the same time expresses a judgment of conformity to a model of behaviour. Both concepts of normality and normativity are intertwined with the notion of everyday life, which is indeed both normal and normative. The study of everyday life has mainly been carried out by philosophical, sociological and forensic literature. For a more exhaustive discussion we suggest the works of Scheibe (2000), Highmore (2002), Emiliani (2008), and Zerubavel (2018). Two French authors are of particular interest with regard to the present topic: i.e., Le Blanc (2004) and Bégout (2005), who specifically analyse the notion of

normality in everyday life. Both these authors question the meaning of everyday life and normality and analyse the relationship of “everyday” with the norms that structure their experience and their ordinary existence. Why is everyday life considered the normal life?

The works of Le Blanc (2004) and Bégout (2005) focus on the processes that lead everyday life to be normal life, i.e. the processes of normalisation and familiarisation. The former author has discussed the dynamics between norms and freedom of the subject in everyday life, identifying the main conflict of everyday life precisely in the one between normativity and freedom. The latter author has analysed the process of normalization in terms of a process that guarantees the evident and almost natural character of what “goes without saying” to everyday life. This is what he defines “quotidianisation.” This is a process that stands on the boundary between what is familiar and what is extraneous. According to this author, the main conflict is indeed between familiarity and extraneousness, and an empty space unfolds between these two fields. This space is experienced as a kind of chaos in which everyone perceives a sense of loss. If people lose familiarity and the unknown remains unfamiliar, they find themselves in a sort of suspended space (Bégout, 2005).

From a genetic and phenomenological perspective, it is a question of understanding under what conditions a process of familiarisation and domestication of the unfamiliar is tacitly carried out. Normalization and familiarization are basic processes to build a familiar, coherent and stable world able to counteract anxiety in a continuous dialect between extraneousness and familiarity. These processes call into question the theory of social representations (SR), defined as forms of knowledge of common sense useful for the handling of everyday life and the events that characterize it (Emiliani, 2008). In his seminal work “*La psychanalyse, son image et son public,*” Moscovici (1961/76) provides us with a variety of definitions of the concept of SR aimed at deepening and illustrating different aspects of the theory. This is a theory of social

knowledge for everyday life, and the author considers familiarization and objectification the founding process of SR. One model specifically pertinent to our interest is “the system-metasytem model,” today less mentioned than others, in which the author makes explicit the impact of the daily context on the forms of thought and knowledge used in daily life. It refers to the idea that in everyday life there are two systems at work: “We have, in other words, ordinary operational relations on the one hand, and normative relations that check, test and direct them, on the other” (Moscovici, 1961/76, p. 254). As we discussed above, everyday life is a regulatory context, a metasytem that acts largely on the implicit and taken-for-granted knowledge which underline normal life. Reality is tacitly made ordinary and the metasytem of everyday life is mainly based on such tacit and taken-for-granted knowledge. SR theory has not specifically dealt with the taken-for-granted dimension of common knowledge. However, a point of interweaving between everyday life and SR is provided precisely by that component of shared knowledge which is taken for granted and which affects those forms of thought that are specific to SR. In his work, Moscovici illustrates these forms defining them “natural thought” arguing that they do not represent errors in respect to logical thinking, but are forms of thinking largely based on what is taken for granted in everyday life.

Furthermore, as Jodelet (2015) pointed out, Moscovici illustrated the relationship between regulatory metasytem and the process of selecting the elements of representation also according to the social position of the subjects in specific metasytems. In particular, Doise has corroborated the thesis that the elements valorised in the SR of the subjects are connected to their social insertion, as shown by numerous studies (Doise 2010; Emiliani & Molinari 1995; Mugny & Carugati, 1989). Jodelet (2006) has also examined the link between lived experience and SRs recognizing the polysemy of the notion of experience. Specifically, the author distinguished two dimensions: i.e., one of knowledge and one related to the psychological

implication of the subject. The notion of experience includes aspects of knowledge and emotional, linguistic and discursive dimensions whose understanding requires attention to practices and actions in life contexts, in our case the everyday context.

Following this line of thinking that considers the everyday as a metasystem that influences people's thoughts and emotions, what happens when a prolonged and imposed interruption of such a context occurs? By the same token, what happens to normality when everyday life is shut down? In the case of this article, we refer to the everyday context and its radical upheaval during the lockdown. In our opinion, the lockdown can be considered a sort of "quasi-natural" experiment that we analyse in order to understand the contours and the essentials of normal life and normality. To this purpose, we explored the experience of daily life before the lockdown, the experience lived during the interruption of private and collective everyday life, and the forms of the new normality after the lockdown, in the present and as an aspiration for the future. The general aim of the paper is to show the plot between everyday life and normality and how by analysing the everyday we got the SR of normality.

## **STUDY 1**

The specific aim of the first study was to deepen the experiences lived when there is a sudden and widespread disruption in the taken-for-granted dimension.

### **Methods**

#### *Participants*

The study involved 223 respondents (71.7% women and 28.3% men), who were grouped according to their age: 39.0% were young (< 35 years old), 39.5% adult (36-59 years old) and 21.5% older (> 60 years old). We adopted these age limits taking into account the one chosen

by the Italian National Institute of Statistics to define young people (<http://dati-giovani.istat.it/>), and recommendations by the Italian Ministry of Health widely resumed by the public debate in the national press that indicated over 60 as the population at risk with Covid19. They were both from regions heavily affected by the pandemic (i.e., Emilia Romagna, Veneto, Lombardy) and from Sicily and others, which were less involved. Their socio-economic and cultural position ranged, with a trend towards a medium-high status and a considerable presence of employee/teachers (28%), executive/manager/entrepreneurs (24%), students (24%), retired participants (11%), while a minor presence of unemployed/inactive (3%). Only a few (3%) exercised a profession in the health sector (doctors, nurses, social workers).

#### *Instrument and Procedure*

By e-mail and an online form, we asked participants to send a short text in order to shape a shared narrative of the lockdown experience. They also answered some questions on gender, age and gave some details regarding their living conditions. Overall, they were almost in a 'safe' condition, endorsing a medium-high level of wealth. A snowball technique was adopted, ensuring privacy protection. Answers were received from early March to mid-May 2020, i.e., throughout the lockdown period, from its beginning to the transition to Phase 2.

#### *Analysis*

The analysis was carried out with the help of IRaMuTeQ software. Specifically, the texts were submitted to descending hierarchical classification (DHC, Reinert, 1983). This method allows for the organisation of textual data into classes of meaning, named *lexical worlds*, and is recommended for the study of SRs (see Dany, 2016). For each class, through associative measures based on the chi-square test, the most representative words and the typical portions



of text within which these words are contained were identified. Similarly, the degree of association between classes and modalities of the variables were considered (Ratinaud & Marchand, 2012; cf. Sbalchiero, 2018), in our case gender and age group.

## Results

The corpus presents acceptable characteristics, resulting suitable for the analysis (Table 1).

The DHC allowed to classify 1,474 segments out of 1,787, corresponding to 82.48% of the corpus, and identified four different classes. Each class was interpreted reading its words, the narratives where they were mentioned together and the typical segments. The first split performed by the analysis grouped the classes into two sets (Figure 1). The first set mainly presents a theoretical analysis of the experienced situation, with its present and future possibilities, as well as of its social-economic-political sides (classes 2 and 4). The second set mainly refers to everyday life and lived experiences within it, for how they were shocked and transformed by the pandemic (classes 1 and 3).

Table 1.

*Lexical-metric basic measures of the analysed texts.*

N (Word-tokens)	63,355
V (Word-types)	5,137
V/N (Type/Token ratio)	0.8
(VI/V)*100 (Hapax percentage)	47.23

The first set is based on more than half of the whole corpus considered and splits into two classes: class 2 (35.9% of the units) and class 4 (15.9% of the units). Class 2 refers to emotions (*anxiety, fear, dismay/disbelief*), linked with the shock and consequent efforts to try to cope

with the *problem*, which led to suspend and question what a given-for-granted normality was, imposing social *distance* and *limiting freedom*.

I don't really know where to start. Saying how you feel in this period: I think it's tremendously difficult, it goes from feeling strong and positive to feeling sad and totally hopeless. At first, it was easier [woman, young, student, received April 11, 2020].

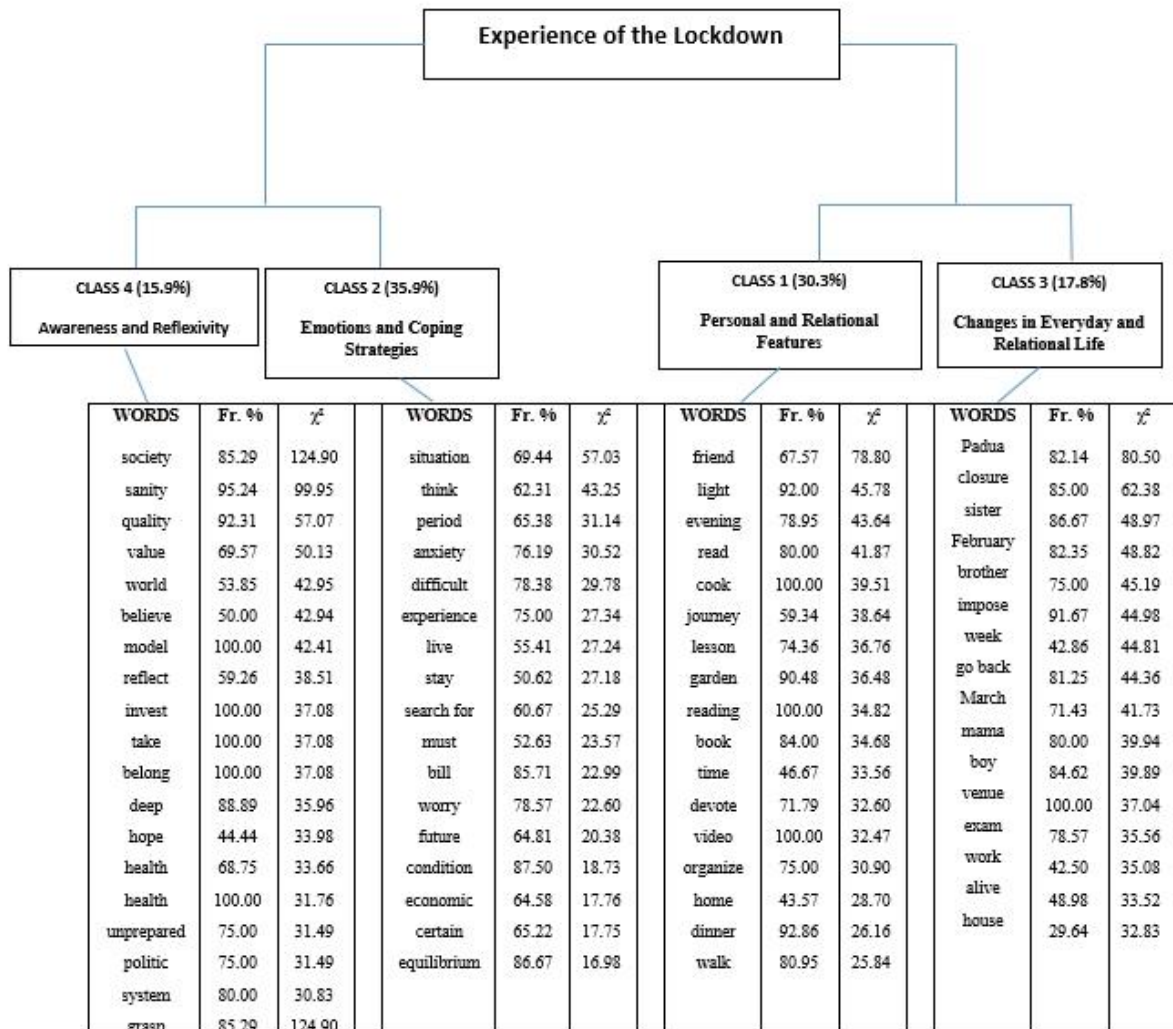


Figure 1. Dendrogram of topics produced with the Reinert method with the most characteristic words listed for each class.

Class 4 focuses on thinking about the seriousness of the situations and possible ways out. References to the need of greater *awareness* and renewed *reflexivity/reflections* go hand in hand with proposals for social policy changes aimed at dealing with the *economic issue* and reducing the risk of new pandemics. Great focus is given to the urgency of safeguarding *priority health* and education needs and, overall, increasing public *investment* in these sectors and in *welfare*, reversing the downward trend that has characterized the last decades. In this regard and from this perspective, the request is not so much to restore what was taken for granted previously, but to push towards visions of the world seen as admittedly utopian yet no less necessary and urgent:

The focus should be on priorities. We should reflect on certain values, focus more on others and less on ourselves, invest in young people, education, research. I do not believe that the sacrifices of these days will be in vain and we will use them to change in some way. [woman, adult, teacher, received April 18, 2020]

The second set depicts the organization of everyday life and splits in two classes. Class 1 focuses mainly on personal and relational features, enhancing the organizing power of routine and routinization. Chosen relationships and *friendship* are often named together with an *active* effort to *organise* and give shape to *daily life: reordering, cleaning* and – mostly - *cooking* as well as *physical activity, reading, meditating, watching movies* are merged together in original ways in order to *measure time* and *take care* of one's own *home* and *person*:

Arranging, reading, contacting via chat, phone, email, friends, neighbours and those far away. Babysitting my grandchildren on Skype, reading stories and making up riddles, and doing everything by dosing time with care. [woman, senior, retired, received April 2, 2020].

Class 3 encompasses words that refer to a sudden break between *before* and *after* the spread of the virus, the contagion and the following lockdown, with emphasis on the changes in everyday family and relational life as well as movements and shared decisions that these involved. Here the narrative focuses on a shocking demand to suspend a definitely *hectic* and demanding ('learning to run a household... to impose myself') but also vital and exciting way of life to go back to a past way of life at home. Answering family concerns ('they asked me to go back home') as well as regulatory requirements by law ('we have been asked to stay home'), the participants returned to daily lives to which they had to (re)adjust ('getting used to living with my parents again') and tried to do so by reorganizing times and ways of everyday life ('trying to fill the day by arranging furniture and shelves at home together with my mum'):

First of all, I had to get used to living with my parents again, like when I was in high school, and then I had to share my room again with my sister, who also happened to be at home with my parents when it the lockdown began [woman, young, student, received May 2, 2020].

## **Discussion**

At a first glance, this pattern returns the layout of questions that designed our survey. Observed fine-grained, however, it quite evidently depicts a shared narrative, widely spread in the collected answers, which can be summarised as follows. We were living a hectic, demanding and frenetic – albeit exciting - life, when the pandemic subverted it, suddenly suspending everything. At the beginning, there was dismay. That led us to reassess the given-for-granted

pattern(s) for a while. Then, slowly, through care of relationships and the reorganization of routines, a new provisional asset was devised. The shock and the imposed immobility (stay-at-home) raised chains of thinking and feeling (in particular worry and anxiety). At a broader social-economic-political level, vocal requests came to enhance care and attention for more adequate infrastructures in the health system and, more broadly, at the societal level.

Clearly, this core narrative takes on different nuances in different cases and our two design variables appear to play a major role. As regards gender, it is mainly women, who lend a voice to a thorough analysis of everyday life and its changes - and challenges - due to the suspension of the taken-for-granted (class 1). Again, it is mainly men, who inhabit the lexical world referring to a societal reading of the situation and related demands (class 4).

Transversal to all, however, a reflection remains on the change of priorities of fundamental values that this pandemic has elicited and brought to the surface. A widespread scale of values is questioned. Although regretting the freedom of movement and the vitality of previous times, various participants admit to having experienced unexpected elements of relief, for example, from a hectic daily life. These come together with feelings of sorrow and grief for the many victims of the virus and for their close ones. Often, in fact, the narrators mention experiencing a feeling of privilege with respect to much more serious and dramatic effects that the pandemic has had on other people's lives. It would be interesting to deepen the relationship of these feelings and expressions with the socio-economic or relational status of the respondents. Unfortunately, we have not systematically collected information on the family or work situation of the participants, such as the presence of children or grandchildren, nor on the possibility of job or position loss. Some clues appear in the narratives with these regards, but nor sufficient to indicate clear paths.

Overall, as expected, our invitation produced rich narratives at and across various levels of analysis: personal, relational, societal. Interestingly, nearly a half of the generated material pertains to everyday life and offers a clear illustration on how this works as a normative meta-system.

## **A CLOSER LOOK**

Giving more space to a qualitative interpretation, this section focuses on a specific aspect of the lockdown experience. That is, if, in the face of a sudden, threatening and unknown event like the Covid-19 emergency, the disruption of everyday life was accompanied, as Bégout (2005) argues, by the experience of living in an empty space. In other words, if the prolonged and forced suspension of the taken-for-granted dimension of daily existence in the face of the unknown has led to a loss of thoughts and affections structuring the sense of Self. And if this is connected to a sense of loss, emptiness and suspension. On this point, we proceeded with a careful reading of the texts. We selected only the women. As is well-known, at least with reference to Italian culture, they are considered the “masters and queens” of the house and of everyday life, and therefore the main protagonists in the above-mentioned process.

In all the narratives analysed, there was a reference to one’s previous life, to one’s previous normality. For those who work or study, this concerned the times, rhythms and routines related to work, travel, usual relationships, the needs of the home, family, shopping. For those who are retired, it referred primarily to looking after grandchildren, if any, to voluntary activities and participation in social and cultural events. The normality before the lockdown was for all participants characterized by restricted and fast times, with no time for themselves except to grab a coffee and the newspaper during the usual commute, to practice yoga in a hurry, a chat with colleagues, a bike ride, etc. Individual and even private paths that

join people together in a network of continuous shared meeting points. This is a shared network because everyone is able to understand what others do. That is, within this network of normal everyday life everyone knows and comprehends the lives of others and their “normal” behaviour, and only when shared rules get destabilized then confusion starts. If, in normal life, time is always tight, still, everything is arranged in familiar, usual times and places. In other words, it is a stable *scaffold* that allows and legitimizes transgression and deviance.

Although retired, I had a full life, I used to take care of grandchildren and children, I got tired, then I volunteered, friends, group walks, some trips... [woman, senior, retired, received March 16, 2020]

Before my life was frenetic, full of appointments, meetings, projects. [woman, adult, educator, received March 14, 2020]

The everyday has completely changed, the pace has changed. The bicycle, daily partner for transfers, has been left in the garage, all sports activities have become dangerous, the home-help interrupted, the theatre postponed, the pleasure of going to the movies replaced by television, concerts postponed, the physical encounter with friends reset to zero, as well as the chance to see the children. [woman, senior, university teacher, received May 5, 2020]

Everything that used to be normal, the hugs, the physical contact, is now like a threat. [woman, adult, retired, received April 16, 2020]

In the Phase 1 after having to stay indoors, we found two different ways of dealing with the situation. The first one focused on the collective dimension and civil responsibility. Restrictions are accepted as being part of a collective body, of a community that organizes itself to protect the weakest and most fragile members: the elderly, children, people with disabilities,

patients. The women who experienced the lockdown in this way felt committed, excited, involved. It was the time of the music on the balconies, the national anthem and “everything will be all right.” It’s the time of the many funny videos that were posted on the Internet with a lot of laughs, humour, and the feeling that everything will be fine in the end. For some, it’s the time of civil commitment. Rimé and Páez (2014) have pointed out the power of these shared manifestations in leading to the overcoming of the individual Self and in strengthening group membership: transcending the Self in order to privilege the dimension of “us.” At the same time, at a personal level, some of these women expressed relief for the time found for reading or other activities done more calmly. Relief for the interruption of hectic rhythms and stress.

Afterwards, all the participants underlined the time of loss, in particular the loss of people, friends, activities, the closest relationships, freedom: a time of uncertainty, a lost normality, a sense of emptiness. The loss of one’s everyday life means the suspension of what was taken for granted. This means having to consciously rethink everything, reorganize and control emotions, concerns, thoughts in the face of an unknown threat. In the breakdown of the taken for granted, one has to think about what to do and how to do it. It is the breakdown of the obvious that provokes, before of an unknown threat, a sense of being in a void, in a suspended bubble in which only anxiety finds space. “Astronauts in one’s own home” is a beautiful image uttered by a young woman who well expresses the idea of floating suspended in a void. That is, “stay at home” becomes “we are not at home in our everyday common-sense knowledge.”

In the first days of isolation I felt lost, I had an almost obsessive need to do things, fill up the time, but I did it in an anxious, disorganized and confused way. I had to overcome the emergency and the abyssal unknown to turn it into a known and domesticated unknown, calm the anxiety and proceed at a steady pace. [woman, senior, retired, received March 16, 2020]



I live in a digital bubble that keeps real life away. Everything is suspended, all activities, suspended getting sick, getting hurt, etc., suspended deadlines, fines. Reality is suspended. [woman, senior, retired, received April 2, 2020]

No routine in those first ten days, then the perception that I was going to the massacre: then rules, routines, little rituals. [woman, adult, teacher, received April 9, 2020]

The need for a daily routine taken for granted is clear. Indeed, many women express the need to invent a new everyday life with new patterns, routines and meanings: a new normality. The breaking of what is taken for granted involves the implementation of anchoring processes, in the sense of the SR theory, with the aim of making the unfamiliar familiar. That is, making sense of what is disturbing. The threat must be familiarized, for example, with humorous jokes and comforting video such as those that have invaded mobile phones.

Soon came the awareness that life had to be organized to resist starvation, laziness, idleness. To find a rhythm and meaning to the days. [woman, senior, retired, received March 14, 2020]

Progressively, while continuing to feel caged, with claustrophobic peaks, I began to put order in the void. As if I was gradually finding a way to organize myself mentally, structuring my days according to routines that gradually consolidate. This is the fundamental change. To scan myself daily, I would say hourly, for the things I do. [woman, senior, retired, received March 16, 2020]

I chatted for hours on the phone and strengthened relationships with people I felt less before, spent more time on relationships, made friends with neighbours. [woman, senior, retired, received March 14, 2020]

This way of living the situation made urgent communication with others. Through communication with others, meanings are redefined, the causes of the epidemic are discussed, and the situation is reconstructed through the shared search for information. People mutually wonder, debate and think about how to proceed together even if physically separated. The unfamiliar becomes familiar through conscious thought, dialogue, debate and communication. All of them increase their relationships with others, and chat long time about the situation, compare points of view, and keep themselves up to date. As Jodelet (2015) has pointed out, when a new and unknown phenomenon confront us, we must also understand the important role that conscious deliberations play in form of communication and discussion in making sense of such novelty. Conscious representations emerge from a breakdown of the taken-for-granted background of intelligibility (Daanen, 2009).

What we have verified in this study is that the sudden disruption of everyday life as a familiar and obvious dimension of individual and collective existence has led to the experience of a void. That is, the perception of being suspended between what was taken for granted and the threat of the unknown that still has to be familiarized through shared conversations. In this void, feelings are negatively marked and the need to reconstruct an everyday life that is partly defined as new is pressing. What do people refer to when they talk about a new everyday life? This was the object of the second study.

## **STUDY 2**

The specific aim of the second study is to investigate the SR of the *new normality*, a concept that was introduced by scientists and politicians to indicate the need to reduce quarantine restrictions by finding the right way to cohabit with the virus. The idea of a *new normality*, highly echoed by media, entered the private and public debate of the Phase 1 (see note 1) leading people to ask themselves not only “when will it end?” but above all “how will we continue?”

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

The survey involved a non-probability sample of 214 participants (76.3% women, 23.7% men) aged between 17 and 81 years old ( $M = 32.80$ ,  $SD = 14.70$ ). They were divided into three age groups: 71.9% under 35; 21.4% aged between 36 and 59; 6.7% over 60. They mainly were from regions heavily affected by the pandemic (i.e., Emilia Romagna, Veneto, Lombardy: 56%), but also from Tuscany, Apulia, and others less involved (44%). Job-wise, 58.6% stated they were university students, 27% salaried employee, 6.6% self-employed, 4.6% unemployed, and 3.3% retired.

### *Instrument and Procedure*

An online questionnaire created *ad hoc* for the study consisted of a free association task. Participants responded to the word stimulus *new normality* by answering a question in the form of “what comes to your mind when you hear the word...” and then reporting the first (up to 5) words (or short sentences) that spontaneously sprang to mind.

The study was carried out in the week from May 18 to 24 2020, the week that represents the real beginning of Phase 2 with the reopening of the first activities. Participants were recruited by e-mail among those who, at the beginning of April, had completed a questionnaire

on the first impact of the emergency and agreed to be contacted. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were guaranteed privacy protection according to the ethical standards currently in force in Italy with regard to social and psychological research.

### *Analysis*

Responses to the free association task were submitted to lexical-metric analyses with the support of Spad software.

First, the vocabulary was created and diversity and rarity indexes (Flament & Rouquette, 2003) were calculated. Then, the vocabulary was processed to reduce data dispersion: a preliminary equivalence treatment of the data aimed at merging synonyms was carrying out and a minimum threshold of frequency was imposed ( $F \geq 2$ ). Lastly, lexical correspondence analysis (Lebart, Salem & Berry, 1998) was run. This is a multivariate technique that allows for a synthesis of the data on the factorial space. The axes can be interpreted as semantic dimensions through which to read the corpus, illustrating proximity among words on the factorial space and variations in positioning by variables (gender and age group, in this case).

### **Results**

Information about the original and resulting vocabularies (after preliminary equivalence treatment of the data) on the *new normality* is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2.

#### *Corpus information*

	Original vocabulary	Resulting vocabulary
Number of participants	214	214
Number of total words (Tokens, N)	1,058	1,058
Number of distinct words (Types, T)	773	231

Number of single-occurrence words (Hapaxes, H)	686	64
Diversity index (T/N)	0.73	-
Rarity index (H/T)	0.89	-

Concerning both diversity and rarity indexes, values close to 1 indicate the absence of a well-organized SR. Their very high values thus may be interpreted as a preliminary indicator of an idea of “new normality” which is not yet shared, stable or consensual.

The content of the SR of “new normality”, given by the most frequent words, was articulated around some main thematic nuclei. The two most evoked terms were by far *social distancing* ( $F = 53$ ) and *mask* (49). Together with *gloves* (9), *sanitation* (6), *no gathering* (5) and *no physical contact* (5), they outline - by keywords - the rules of behaviour defined by the institutions and insistently echoed by the media that citizens are required to follow. Words that highlight a change in different aspects of daily life, such as *change* (22), *change of normality* (13), *change in habits* (9), *change in sociality* (9), *change of school* (8), *change of priority* (8), *smart working* (7), *change in everyday life* (6), *change in lifestyle* (5), and *difference* (5) followed. These terms describe the “new normality” as a change connoted in a neutral way, in which the focus on adaptation is central (*adaptation*, 13; *get used to*, 12; *coexistence with virus*, 11), although there were many associations that indicate which aspects will undergo changes (*attention*, 21; *rules*, 7; *caution*, 6; *precautions*, 5).

Nevertheless, there were words that outline the “new normality” as a worsening of the previous situation or, less frequently, an improvement. Specifically, those who fear a change in a negative direction express concern mainly about the economic and social situation (*social emergency*, 10; *irresponsible people*, 9; *economic crisis*, 7) and the limitations to individual freedom (*no freedom*, 10; *limitation*, 7; *stay indoors*, 5; *control*, 5). Interestingly, the reference to the so-called “hut syndrome” (*home as a safe nest*, 5) also emerged. Overall, this vision

implies a sort of rejection of the new situation (*no normality*, 27) or the label that has been attributed to it (*wrong rhetoric*, 12). On the contrary, those who refer to a positive change mentioned the increased attention towards themselves (*human sized life*, 6) and the environment (*respect for the environment*, 9).

These different visions of change are linked, on the one hand, to affective dimensions with predominantly negative connotations (*uncertainty*, 25; *fear*, 20; *anxiety*, 11; *concern*, 6; *anger*, 5; *stress*, 5) and terms that reflect these emotional states (*difficulty*, 8; *effort*, 7; *chaos*, 6). On the other hand, generally positive emotional dimensions (*hope*, 18) and related terms (*commitment*, 8), *responsibility*, 8) emerged. To close this thematic nucleus on change, there were some words related to the temporal dimension (*long phase*, 8; *dilated time*, 7; *how long will it last*, 5), which highlight further uncertainty.

In contrast to this thematic nucleus, some participants mention a return to normality, interpreting the “new normality” in relation to the lockdown period. Terms in this direction are *meet friends* (20), *return to normal* (18), *freedom* (18), *meet loved ones* (17), *work* (12), *open air* (10), *meeting* (7), *everyday life* (7), *holiday* (7), *bar/restaurant* (6), *sociality* (6), *go out* (6), *restart* (6), *end virus* (5), *personal care activities* (5).

The field of the SR of “new normality” is defined by some main semantic dimensions, which can be theoretically interpreted as the organizing principles of the SR itself (Table 3).

Table 3

*Semantic dimensions*

1. Constraints vs. Opportunities (1.91% of explained total inertia)	
face mask (1.3); social distancing (1.2); no freedom (0.8); concern (0.6)	human-sized life (13.4); dilated time (13.1); change in routine (12.2); re-appropriation of time (10.7); change of awareness (6.9); reinventing oneself (4.4); self-management (4.3); willpower (2.7); resilience (2.4); smart working (1.8);

	serenity (1.8); challenge (1.5); family (1.4); everyday (1.1); isolation (1.1)
2. Regulated behaviours vs. Questioned changes (1.85%)	
<i>Men; Under 35</i>	<i>Women; Over 60</i>
face mask (5.0); social distancing (3.4); meet friends (2.4); no physical contact (1.7); work (1.7); gloves (1.6); bar/restaurant (1.5); open air (1.4); meet loved ones (1.4); go out (1.0); change of normality (0.9); sociality (0.8); queue in shops (0.7); precautions (0.7); attention (0.7)	no everyday life (6.6); change (6.0); no democracy (5.0); what is normality (2.9); psychological problems (2.3); uncertainty (2.2); difference (2.2); restart (2.1); change of everyday life (2.1); conscience (2.1); social emergency (1.8); recovery (1.7); no spontaneity (1.7); superficiality (1.6); breakage (1.5)
3. Lost everyday life to reinvent vs. New challenge to face (1.81%)	
	<i>Men</i>
no everyday life (7.6); change of everyday life (4.5); change of routine (2.2); change of awareness (1.9); smart working (1.6); dilated time (1.6); restart (1.2); social distancing (1.2); what is normality (1.1); no habits (0.9); reinvent yourself (0.9); mask (0.9); change of priorities (0.8); no physical contact (0.7); fear of others (0.6)	re-appropriation of time (5.9); willpower (5.8); resilience (5.6); nostalgia (4.2); concern (3.7); courage (3.7); incompetence (3.3); challenge (2.5); resistance (2.4); superficiality (2.2); anguish (1.6); readjustment (1.5); hope (1.3); serenity (1.2); fear (1.0)
4. Individual resources vs. Collective resources (1.76%)	
<i>Women; Under 35</i>	<i>Men</i>
no everyday life (14.2); change of everyday life (7.1); willpower (4.1); re-appropriation of time (3.3); courage (2.7); restart (2.5); resilience (2.2); what is normality (1.6); challenge (1.5); resistance (1.5); isolation (1.5); suspicion (1.1); hope (1.0); social distancing (0.9); responsibility (0.8)	smart working (5.1); concern (4.1); change of routine (3.6); incompetence (3.2); respect for the environment (2.8); change of awareness (2.4); change of school (2.3); sense of civic duty (2.0); superficiality (1.9); anguish (1.8); dilated time (1.6); economic crisis (1.2); reinvent yourself (1.1); no freedom (0.9); too much hurried (0.7)
5. Sociality and commitment vs. Isolation and discomfort (1.75%)	
<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
no everyday life (11.9); change of everyday life (5.3); restart (1.7); open air (1.7); meet loved ones (1.7); what is normality (1.6); meet friends (1.5); personal care activities (1.4); end of the virus (1.4); work (1.2); bar/restaurant (1.1); sustainable mobility (1.0); incompetence (0.9); concern (0.9); smart working (0.9)	no democracy (6.9); social distancing (3.6); mask (2.9); no sociality (2.8); gloves (2.4); change (2.2); conscience (2.2); queue in shops (2.0); no spontaneity (1.9); no physical contact (1.6); recovery (1.6); sanitizing (1.6); psychological problems (1.2); difference (1.1); utopia (1.0)

*Note.* For each (negative and positive) pole of the semantic dimensions: statistically significant positionings of the participants' sub-groups are indicated in italics; and the most relevant words (up to 15) in terms of absolute contribution (in brackets) are listed in descending order.

The first dimension defines how the “new normality” as a whole is understood. It opposes what we have called *constraints* on one pole to *opportunities* on the other. In particular, the *constraints* pole is characterized by a few words that outline prescriptive aspects, i.e. the most salient norms that limit freedom (*mask, social distancing, no freedom*), as well as the resulting anxiety (*concern*). On the other hand, the emerging *opportunities* pole is explained by words

that indicate the ability to effectively face the challenges of the new situation (*willpower*, *resilience*, but also *reinventing oneself*, *self-management* and *serenity*), to be able to grasp the potential it can offer, especially with respect to time management (*human-sized life*, *dilated time*, *re-appropriation of time*, but also *change of awareness* and *family*), and to positively reorganize the different areas of one's daily life in the face of change, from habits to work, to relationships (*routine change*, *smart-working*, *changed sociality*). It is worth noting that participants do not place themselves on either pole with respect to their gender and age group.

The following semantic dimensions, briefly commented below, allow to better clarify this first organizing principle, offering a more complex and multifaceted vision of the SR under investigation.

The second dimension illustrates whether and how the "new normality" is accepted. The *regulated behaviours* pole, where men and young participants are positioned, is contrasted with the *questioned changes* pole, where women and older participants are positioned. Specifically, the former pole describes in a rather neutral way those behaviours that - unlike the lockdown - are allowed in the current Phase 2, together with the rules that remain in place. These words suggest a certain degree of acceptance of the new situation, perhaps optimistically perceived as only transitory. At the opposite side, the *questioned changes* pole shows a much more critical and pessimistic view, difficult to accept and almost incredulous. This perspective is defined by words that denote negative affections towards a situation felt as a net break with the previous one, arousing anxiety about the future at different degrees on the social level. There are, however, words with positive connotations as well.

The third dimension describes how to approach the "new normality." It opposes the *lost everyday life to reinvent* pole, where participants do not position themselves with respect to gender and age, to the *new challenge to face* pole, attributable to men participants. In particular,



the former pole is made up of words that suggest an awareness of the change that primarily affects everyday life, in its individual and collective dimension. On the contrary, the latter pole proposes a more individual-centred look and identifies the wide range of affections put into play to face the challenge that such situation has imposed.

The fourth dimension outlines the resources deployed to cope with the "new normality." The *individual resources* pole, where women and young participants are positioned, is contrasted with the *collective resources* pole, where men are positioned. Specifically, the former pole is characterized by words that indicate the ability to effectively face the challenges of the new situation, albeit with some anxiety, as well as the individual responsibilities related to them. At the opposite side, the pole is explained by words that open to more political and public considerations, such as the environment, broadening the focus to a more societal level of reflection and collective responsibility. The reference to words that evoke concern is also present.

Finally, the fifth dimension defines some additional aspects related to the "new normality", such as the relational scope and the agency. It opposes the *sociality and commitment* pole, attributable to men, to the *isolation and discomfort* pole, which is applicable to women. In particular, the former pole is made up of words that refer to the sphere of interpersonal relations and a return to daily activities that took place before the pandemic. The change of life is certainly detected, but addressed with determination and confidence of possible improvements in different areas, both personal and social/environmental. On the other hand, the *isolation and discomfort* pole is articulated around words that suggest a much less optimistic vision of the new situation, with numerous references to distance between individuals, which becomes not only physical but also emotional.

## **Discussion**

In order to explore the SR of the new normality, the study has investigated the contents and the main semantic dimensions that define its field. It is worth noting that the first dimension proposes the same dichotomy underlying the word “crisis.” This is indeed interpreted in common use as a worsening of a situation, but its etymology also refers to a moment of reflection, choice and possibility of change. The subsequent dimensions appear mostly as further specifications of the first, but there is an interesting pattern in them. *Mask* and *social distancing*, central elements of the norms applied in phase 2, are always mentioned within one of the poles, and sometimes they integrate (factors 3 and 4), others contrast (factors 2 and 5) with explicit references to everyday life. This seems to indicate the sign of a representation that, in the emerging phase, still struggles to conceive such a normative life.

In projecting themselves into the future, the respondents are only cautiously able to have a look beyond the present, remaining mostly anchored on a “normality” configured in terms of restrictions and obligations and to an everyday life to be regained. The new normalities are outlined through opposition and negative rhetorical formulation. Participants express themselves in terms of what they *don't* want to regain, anchoring their point of view to the previous normality, albeit criticized for one reason or another. Indeed, the alternative normalities that could open up have not yet been experienced. Therefore, they can only be represented on a hypothetical basis, filled with feelings of uncertainty and concern.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

During the lockdown period, a photo on the Web showed graffiti daubed on a wall stating: "We won't return to normality because normality was the problem". The phrase opens up ideological and political reflections and alternative worldviews. This topic was actually raised by the

participants in the present research, with regard to respect for the environment, social commitment, lack of freedom and rights. In both studies, however, the normality we are talking about is rooted primarily in the times, pace, activities, routines, rites and rituals of daily, personal and collective life. Normality is inscribed in everyday life and these two dimensions appear as sides of the same coin.

In previous individual existences, everyone may have gone through times of exit and suspension of daily life, like during a journey or an illness. The lockdown, however, was a collective experience before an unknown and menacing event. From the collected stories, what appears is a choral SR of daily tasks in which people occupy their place, like in a large canvas by Flemish painters. People implicitly know, taking it for granted, what they are doing and why. Normality is intrinsic to those behaviours, to that shared painting.

The two studies have implied the temporal dimension. The former focuses on the past and the present; the latter, that we would have expected to be projected into the future, actually remains anchored to the present and its "new" restrictive normativity. However, the combination of the two allows us to grasp, at the beginning, the dynamics of the process of normalization of a reality unconceivable for all until a few months before. From both studies, the past normality emerges with a mixture of regret and perplexity linked to the recognition of negative aspects that induce reflection in terms of human size life and shifts in priority. *Awareness* and *renewed reflexivity* are words that are constantly found throughout the research. The aspiration to normality experienced up until that moment is coloured, especially for some participants, by a small yet important awareness, from which emerge judgments aimed at emphasizing at times the excessively frenetic previous life, at others the lack of attention afforded to social relationships or personal needs. At the same time, these terms also refer to

the cognitive effort needed to grow familiar with new ways of performing even the most mundane everyday gestures, such as entering a bar or meeting a friend.

When the sudden and radical disruption of that daily life lived as normal occurs and *staying at home* becomes a collective experience, a sense of emptiness, suspension, and loss becomes manifest. There begins an interruption of the ordinary and the “taken for granted,” which inevitably has repercussions on an emotional level. Sensations thus emerge that range from anguish to dismay, to other emotions such as boredom and apathy that, though less markedly, reveal the loss of an order of thoughts regulating the relationship with reality (Emiliani & Passini, 2017). For this reason, the reaction of many participants, after initial dismay, was to re-establish a daily routine, organized on small rules and new domestic habits. The need to recompose one’s own normality thus arises as a strategy for coping with collective anxieties, even before existential and personal issues. This reveals the structuring power of the everyday order on the Self. This collective dimension emerges clearly in the second study, which mentions it in contrast to a polarity more markedly expressed in an individual key.

Loss and emptiness on a personal level were replaced in the first period of the rigid lockdown by a manifestation of the collective Self, an Us that is expressed in songs performed on balconies and that would indicate a change in SRs (Rimé and Páez, 2014). This specific function played in the initial phase of such collective rites is confirmed by the fact that there is no reference to them in Study 2. In the new normality, there no longer seems to be any need for them, replaced by the return to the rituals and traditions of one’s own small social group (e.g., holidays, meetings with relatives and friends), in the hope that the emotion and strength of identity evoked by them at the time (e.g., national pride) can be transformed into a more widespread and everyday sense of civic duty.

Reading the results of the two studies in detail, it is possible to make some more observations about the resources that the respondents seem to have available to face the post-emergency situation, beyond the personal ones and the already mentioned processes of reconstruction of a shared everyday life. Among these, politics does not appear to be a particularly concrete and represented element within one's own living space. Indeed, during the lockdown phase there was a massive and daily presence in the homes of Italians of political institutions (e.g., the daily press conferences at 6.00 p.m., the heated debate between the State and the Regions, the theme of European policies and funding) and it actually constituted, together with the contribution of experts such as doctors and virologists, the main source of updated information on the Covid-19 situation. Nevertheless, among the key words of the two studies, the political topic, albeit emerging clearly, remains only sketchy and little embodied in the narratives. It seems that the political facets hardly structure themselves in that form of shared and situated thought that defines SR, remaining at a circumstantial level. However, such facets are no less important at the sociopsychological level, precisely as clues of a need for a change (cf. Contarello, Romaioli, Nencini & Brondi, 2013).

The topic of the recognized interdependence between oneself and others instead emerges as more fervent, vital and complete. This is expressed in the commitment to voluntary work, in the centrality of relationships of friendship, in the reference to the dimension of care – of oneself and those we are concerned about – and in key words such as *commitment*, *conscience*, *responsibility*, *irresponsible people*, and *sense of civic duty*. It is the perception of a more evident interdependence between personal and collective rights and duties that appears as something on which to build the near future.

A final comment should be reserved to the role played by the demographics considered in the research. The age differences do not appear consistently relevant in the two surveys. In

general, both studies suggest that there is a greater focus on individual resources by young people, and on societal dynamics by the others (adults in study 1, over 60 in study 2). More stable in the two surveys is the difference between men and women, where the latter show a more questioning and concerned view of the future. It should be kept in mind, however, that the two samples are not equally distributed on the two variables and are not homogeneous, in the sense of having a preponderance of over 60 in the first study and of young people in the second. Both studies are also based on a majority of women with a medium-high socio-economic level, and these variables may have influenced the type of results that have emerged.

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FRANCESCA EMILIANI is a full Professor of Social Psychology, has as main research interests the topic concerning common sense knowledge, Social Representation Theory, and the structuring power of everyday life. E-mail: francesca.emiliani@unibo.it

ALBERTA CONTARELLO is full Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Padua, Italy. Currently her research interests regard: change and continuity in social knowledge, including social representations of ageing; social psychology and qualitative research; social psychology and literary texts. E-mail: [alberta.contarello@unipd.it](mailto:alberta.contarello@unipd.it)

SONIA BRONDI is a researcher in Social Psychology at the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, University of Padua, Italy. Her research interests include social representations, change and stability, environmental issues with a focus on collective memory and identity processes, and public participation. E-mail: [sonia.brondi@unipd.it](mailto:sonia.brondi@unipd.it)

LAURA PALARETI is an associate professor in Social Psychology at the Department of Education Studies “G.M. Bertin”, University of Bologna, Italy. Her research interests are related to the role of everyday life in typical and atypical populations (chronic illness, therapeutic residential care for children) and to the evaluation of programmes for children and youths. E-mail: [laura.palareti2@unibo.it](mailto:laura.palareti2@unibo.it)

STEFANO PASSINI is an associate professor in Social Psychology at the Department of Education Studies “G.M. Bertin”, University of Bologna, Italy. His studies are mainly focused on authoritarian attitudes, obedience and disobedience to authority and crimes of obedience, intergroup indifference, moral inclusion/exclusion processes, and human rights. E-mail: [s.passini@unibo.it](mailto:s.passini@unibo.it)

DIEGO ROMAIOLI is a researcher at the Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, University of Padua, Italy. His main research interests are in social psychology, focusing on change, motivated irrationalities, ageism, qualitative and generative methods, multiplicity and relational processes in the construction of the self.  
E-mail: [diego.romaioli@unipd.it](mailto:diego.romaioli@unipd.it)