



Covid-19 pandemic: Collective memory theory and the memory of older people

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ABSTRACT

In the last three years, humanity has experienced a state of pandemic. This global event was the result of the emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, responsible for the disease called COVID-19 (Coronavirus Infectious Disease-19), whose severity and potential for lethality was quickly recognized, especially for certain groups, such as the elderly population. In this context, social

isolation was considered as a preventive measure. Although distant, the pandemic was a phenomenon of planetary dimensions and, in this way, experienced in the core of society, translating, therefore, into collective memory. For Halbwachs (1990), collective memory is strongly anchored, finding strength and duration, in a set of men and women who are unique individuals, but operate as members of a group. In this sense, we understand that the group of elderly people who experienced, although distant, the consequences of the pandemic for their well-being and health, have their memories anchored in social milestones that they share as a group. The Theory of Collective Memory, therefore, becomes paramount as a theoretical resource to understand these impacts.

Keywords: COVID-19, Health of the Elderly, Collective Memory

1 INTRODUCTION

"[...] the same event can affect, at the same time, several distinct collective consciousnesses; From this we conclude that at that moment these consciousnesses approach and unite in a common representation." (HALBWACHS, 1990, p.115)

The global events experienced in the last two years resulted from an unexpected event that affected all of humanity. A virus – SARS-CoV-2 – that emerged in China has been responsible for several cases of severe acute respiratory syndrome caused by the *Coronavirus Infectious Disease-19*, whose severity and potential for lethality led the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a state of pandemic. The elderly were quickly recognized as the main population at risk for the evolution of the severe form of the disease. In Brazil, according to data from the Influenza Epidemiological Surveillance Information System (SIVEP-Gripe), about 71% of all deaths from COVID-19 were elderly people (PALMER *et al.*, 2020; OF LEO; TRABUCCHI, 2020; PETRETTO; ROBERTO, 2020; ROMERO *et al.*, 2021; VIEIRA, 2020).

In the context of this pandemic, social isolation was considered the main weapon to combat it. The feeling that "the universe has stopped" quickly settled between us. The impacts were prolonged and generated numerous repercussions, not only health, but social, economic, psychological and affective. Based on the theory of collective memory of Halbwachs (1990), the memories of experiences

lived in the past are added to data and references of the present and perceived as current, having implications for our future. In this sense, although the advent of a new virus with a peculiar propensity to infectivity and lethality is a current reference, our memory is able to correlate this information with memories of experiences and feelings previously experienced, which we assume has an impact on the way individuals experienced and interpreted the period of the pandemic.

Although distant, the COVID-19 pandemic was a phenomenon of planetary dimensions and, in this way, experienced in the core of society, translating, therefore, into collective memory. Our memories, even if they result from events or impressions that we experience in isolation, are reconstructed through the social frameworks in which our relationships are included (HALBWACHS, 2004). In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the lives of all, individually and collectively, also presenting a historical character. The memories raised from this period of our history will be composed of lived experiences of individuals in their groups plus information that will have been obtained by other means, especially the modern means of communication. Unlike other historical facts, which sometimes individuals do not actually experience them, but absorb reports and consequences of these, the pandemic and its consequences was and still are being experienced by all. And it is precisely in this lived history that our memories of this period are based. Those who have not experienced the period in question, will find in the future narratives and data in books, virtual encyclopedias, museums, monuments etc. whose information will not be complete, providing only a synthesis. In the lived past, however, memory finds support (HALBWACHS, 1990).

The different periods of history are, in fact, delimited and understood only after interest in the events of that time has subsided. Even if an event with great impacts happens and, from it, a new epoch is delimited, we in general are not able to perceive instantly (HALBWACHS, 1990). As human beings, living collectively, we are subject to the impacts of the various crises experienced by humanity, among them epidemics. Despite the numerous repercussions of these crises from the sanitary point of view, the great risk that affects us at this moment does not concern the virus itself, but the reactions resulting from the inner aspects of the human species, such as hatred, prejudice, discrimination, greed and ignorance. There are several possibilities of reaction to a crisis like the one we are experiencing with COVID-19, here we highlight segregation and cooperation as opposite poles that have been experienced in different measures around the globe. We cannot rule out the hypothesis of new future crises, which reinforces the importance of learning from the current one (HARARI, 2020).

As the pandemic has progressed and taken its course, it has become increasingly clear that information, overcoming isolation, combined with science and technology is being the biggest weapon in the fight against the coronavirus. Here we highlight the difficulties encountered by the elderly population in accessing reliable and intelligible information, especially the Brazilian elderly

population, mostly with low education and little access to technology. It is to be expected that, due to selective access to information combined with mobility restriction and social distancing, older people's memories of the pandemic period will be reconstructed using incomplete frameworks, which may not include aspects that we would consider to be common knowledge, including personal protection measures, income guarantee, access to health and immunization. We can think about the extent to which media and social networks have influenced the memories of older people regarding the period of the pandemic, and what their consequences have been for the physical and mental health of this population.

Halbwachs (1990) argues that memory capacity is closely related to belonging to groups, being:

"[...] that each individual memory is a point of view on the collective memory, that this point of view changes according to the place I occupy there, and that this very place changes according to the relations I maintain with other media. It is no wonder that, from the common instrument, not everyone takes advantage of it in the same way. However, when we try to explain this diversity, we always come back to a combination of influences that are all social in nature." (HALBWACHS, 1990, p.51)

In this sense, we can assume that the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic were apprehended by older people in different ways and conditioned by the approaches and withdrawals experienced before and during the pandemic. The elderly population is, by itself, extremely heterogeneous and, although it constitutes a group marked by the characteristics of age, it can belong to many other groups whose natures - social, ethnic, religious, etc. - are also varied. Memory processing is largely dependent on these conditions, as well as having time and space limits (HALBWACHS, 1990).

Considering the time aspect, we can reflect on the experience of older people living through the pandemic. Halbwachs (1990) argues that older people tend to an inner life whose pace is slower, especially compared to a child's feelings of duration. For the author, this difference could be justified by the progressive weakening of the affective faculties. However, if we think about how the elderly and children were affected, at least at the beginning of the pandemic, we can assume that the interest from the affective point of view of the events was greater for the elderly individuals, since the children are still immature to understand the risks and consequences of the disease. If this is true, the pandemic may have also had impacts on the duration, the experience of time, for elderly individuals who have remained away from their usual relationships, with daily activities altered and with space restrictions imposed by quarantine.

For Halbwachs (1990), the relationships we establish are important with regard to memory, since it produces changes in the representations we make of facts and objects, or as he puts it "*it is the action that exerts on me, from outside, another consciousness, which imposes on me a representation*

to which it is attached. He is a person who crosses my path, and forces me to notice his presence" (HALBWACHS, 1990, p.97). One of the illustrations brought by the author is the experience of physical pain, highlighting that the representation of the sensation of pain and the understanding by others of what it represents, help us to endure it. In this sense, individual durations receive, to a large extent, influence from other durations, which configures a kind of collective thought, where affective impressions are manifested through collective images and representations. Aging is marked by limitations imposed by the degeneration of the various systems and, in variable and conditional measures to the environment, can result in physical pain and psychological suffering. Although experienced in a unique way by each individual, aging is common to all and its representations can be shared by the group.

Next, we have the relationship between space and memory, a space that appears with important symbolic references and constitutes one of the social frameworks of memory. We can establish that there is a relationship of societies with the space they inhabit and the configuration of these spaces, of different dimensions (the house, the neighborhood, the community, the city, the village), as well as with the other places full of symbols (churches, health units, schools, hospitals). Halbwachs (1990) goes further and discusses the importance of the objects that fill these spaces, "being among us as a mute and *immobile* society" (p.132). Objects are even more important to older people, and it's not uncommon to hear the phrase "I like my stuff" when asked about changing homes or resistance to traveling. An environment that remains with the same configuration over time confers a sense of continuity and security, which can be relevant when we think of people who gradually lose postural stability and communicative ability (vision and hearing, for example).

The pandemic has imposed significant changes on all inhabited spaces. Both homes and common places have had to adapt to measures to prevent the transmission of the virus and there have been changes in public spaces – expansion of hospital areas and field hospitals, closure of temples, churches and schools. Such changes are reflected in the collective memory and behavior of the groups. Halbwachs (1990) also brings the reflection on the way in which the stability conferred by the social space - for example, the city that is always busy - gives families in situations of loss or catastrophes similar comfort of continuity, which results from the perception that we - that particular group - are only part of the multiplicity that makes up this society. In the period of the pandemic, however, the common spaces became empty and the hustle and bustle of the city ceased, what gave us the sense of stability became unstable and the feeling of insecurity a constant. For the elderly, the inhabited space has become smaller and, in several cases, there have been even more forceful changes.

We also highlight the category of the family as a social framework of memory. In its expanded concept, family is understood as a group of individuals who establish bonds with each other, forming

support networks that are influenced by biopsychosocial, historical, cultural and economic factors (FALCÃO, 2010). Halbwachs (2004) states that the framework of family memory appears on a background of general impersonal notions whose contributions of each component of that group is not easily delimited. He adds that as families develop and their memories are apprehended and retold among their members, the personal aspect becomes less and less evident and progressively the family begins to interpret in its own way the different aspects of society, having traditions and a unique logic that resembles that of society in general, however, it has its own nuances with a high potential for continuity. The protective measures undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic have had a restructuring impact on family coexistence and the structure of support networks, either by producing withdrawals or by generating a mandatory closeness, positive or negative, with regard to consanguinity and affective relationships.

According to the theory of the life cycle of the family, families in the mature phase experience their own challenges due to changes such as the marriage of children and, consequently, the inclusion of relatives by affinity and the third generation, as well as double care: elderly parents and children or young grandchildren (FALCÃO, 2010). Population aging and increased life expectancy have certainly intensified the challenges of this phase, and in the context of the pandemic, many seniors have had their routines greatly affected by the need to house or support very elderly parents and relatives and supervise children or grandchildren once schools were closed. How did these intergenerational relationships play out? Has it been positive, from the point of view of the very elderly, the repercussion of these changes and the relationships resulting from them? Halbwachs (1990) brings this intergenerational encounter as being, to a certain extent, a promoter of the perpetuation of traditions and customs that will be reflected in the future.

We still have families in their last phase of the life cycle: the couple in old age, who experiences peculiar situations - mourning, experience of finitude, loneliness, dependence, limitations (FALCÃO, 2010). The experiences of this phase are, in particular, conditioned by previous experiences and, we can say, especially marked by collective memory. This group of elderly people is recognized by Halbwachs (2004) as the one who finds the most favorable conditions to recall the events of the past and, to a certain extent, will expend a great energy in this activity of remembrance, producing a certain nostalgia for the past. In times of such intense changes, as experienced in the pandemic, this appreciation of the past tends to be accentuated, along with the feeling of anxiety for the return to the usual life, which we previously lived. Halbwachs (2004) reflects on the propensity of all individuals, more or less frequently, to nostalgia for the past. The interested memory of the past tends to select and give strength to that which produces happy feelings, doing the opposite with that which produces sadness. He states that *"the fact of lamenting the past rests, in effect, on an illusion, which is the work*

of memory or, more exactly, of the imagination" (HALBWACHS, 2004, p.132, our translation). It would be, in a way, a psychic strategy of survival, producing a kind of reverie. Here, society plays an important role in establishing the necessary connections, making cuts and touch-ups that bring the parts that matter from reality and, in fact, translating into memory (HALBWACHS, 2004).

For Halbwachs (1990), collective memory is strongly anchored, finding strength and duration, in a set of men and women who are unique individuals, but operate as members of a group. In this sense, we understand that the group of elderly people who experienced, although distant, the consequences of the pandemic for their well-being and health, have their memories anchored in social milestones that they share as a group. The Theory of Collective Memory, therefore, becomes paramount as a theoretical resource to understand these impacts. Memory is anchored in social landmarks and, in this sense, by analyzing the memories of the elderly regarding the pandemic period, we can recover all the social ties in which it would be inscribed.

Moreover, one of the main roles attributed to the elderly person is to be the collective memory of a social group. Remembrance is not a resumption of the past as it was lived, but an effort to reconstruct these experiences that are necessarily interpreted in the present, requiring reflection and effort of remembrance (HALBWACHS, 1990). Older people, through their narratives and positions in coping with the COVID-19 pandemic, occupy a privileged place, since they are not so busy with daily demands and with the return to a notion of normality.

2 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

[...] We must ask ourselves not only how to overcome the immediate threat, but also what kind of world we will inhabit once the storm passes. [...] humanity will survive, most of us will still be alive - but we will inhabit a different world (HARARI, 2020, p.15)

The advancement of science and public health policies implemented in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic have managed to curb the spread of the virus. Today, although vigilant, we can return to our usual activities, socialize socially and the expectation is that, little by little, the usual life will be restored. However, it is possible to perceive that the experience of the pandemic caused individual changes and in interpersonal relationships. Today's world is not the same as the one we left in the year 2019.

Among the social groups most affected by these changes are, without a doubt, children and the elderly. Understanding how these changes took place and what their consequences were for these groups will be of paramount importance. The relevance of social institutions in the functioning of societies became clear: schools, universities, health units, hospitals, nursing homes. Experts warn of the possibility of new future threats. What will we have learned from the COVID-19 experience? What

memories will we use to strengthen our institutions, to equip ourselves for the future, to protect the world we live in?

We consider it extremely important to recognize the memories of the elderly population about the period of the pandemic and its impacts on the quality of their life and health, since the group while recognizing its past and becoming aware of its identity through time, expands its importance for all society.

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