

## **CORPO FISICO, CORPO VISSUTO ED EMPATIA DURANTE LA PANDEMIA. QUAL È IL PROBLEMA?**

### **PHYSICAL BODY, LIVED BODY & EMPATHY DURING CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC. WHAT'S THE MATTER?**

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#### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly had a devastating impact on a global scale. About two months after its onset, the contagion has turned into an unprecedented threat to the health of the world population, forcing all the countries of the world to face a very difficult period, almost comparable to a post-war condition. After just over a year, then, the educational drifts of the pandemic begin to be increasingly evident, which is certainly attributable to the restrictive measures that have been imposed on us, such as the limitation of personal freedom, the zeroing of sociality and, on the educational side, the consequent distance learning. Being distant does not only mean containing the contacts of the physical body, but also weakening the social dimension of learning that belongs to the lived body and which is well expressed through the practice of empathy. The aim of this contribution is to reflect on the relationship that is established among body-emotion-communication and the worrying drifts that the current conditions of physical confinement seem to exacerbate, in light of the fact that it would be almost impossible to intercept the emotional state of the other without the presence of the body that communicates sensations, emotions and moods. "Distant but close", this is the slogan that is still repeated to us every day. Difficult to practice "empathic closeness" in the absence of a body?

La pandemia da COVID-19 ha certamente avuto un impatto devastante su scala mondiale. A circa due mesi dal suo esordio il contagio si è trasformato in una minaccia senza precedenti per la salute della popolazione mondiale, costringendo tutti i paesi del mondo ad affrontare un periodo molto difficile, quasi paragonabile ad una condizione post-bellica. A distanza di poco più di un anno, poi, le derive educative della pandemia cominciano ad essere sempre più evidenti, il che è certamente riconducibile alle misure restrittive che ci sono state imposte, come la limitazione della libertà personale, l'azzeramento della socialità e, sul versante formativo, la conseguente didattica a distanza. Essere distanti non vuol dire solamente contenere i contatti del corpo fisico, ma anche indebolire quella dimensione sociale dell'apprendimento che appartiene al corpo vissuto e che ben si esprime attraverso la pratica dell'empatia. Lo scopo del presente contributo è di riflettere sulla relazione che si stabilisce tra corpo-emozione-comunicazione e delle derive piuttosto preoccupanti che le attuali condizioni di confinamento fisico sembrano esacerbare, alla luce del fatto che sarebbe quasi impossibile intercettare lo stato emotivo dell'altro senza la presenza del corpo che comunica sensazioni, emozioni e stati d'animo. "Distanti ma vicini", questo lo slogan che ancora ci viene quotidianamente riproposto. Difficile praticare una "vicinanza empatica" in assenza di corpo?

#### **Keywords**

Physical Body; Lived Body; Corporeality; Empathy; Pandemic

Corpo fisico; Corpo vissuto; Corporeità; Empatia; Pandemia

### **A brief introduction**

Over the past year, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on a global scale. In less than two months the contagion has turned into an unprecedented threat to the health of the world population, forcing all countries to face a particularly difficult period, almost comparable to a post-war condition (Singhal, 2020). The effects that the pandemic has had on humans are incalculable, not of second importance the psycho-educational ones (Torales et al., 2020), aspects on which it is necessary to reflect from a pedagogical and didactic perspective (Lewin, 2020) also according to a diachronic historical point of view (Shawn-Taylor, 2020).

The educational drifts of the pandemic are beginning to be increasingly serious and evident on children and adolescents. They have been particularly affected by the effects of the pandemic, particularly with the closure of schools. The learning loss – that is to say the lack of learning of cognitive relational, physical and motor skills – concretely risks having devastating effects, especially where families and the community have not been able to overcome the absence of school and taking charge of educational needs (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020).

The pandemic risks having serious negative effects on the educational development of the new generations, well beyond the period of confinement. Globally, it is estimated that in the next few years around 24 million school aged children will be forced to drop out of their studies, thus nullifying the progress achieved in the previous decades in the access to formal education and learning (United Nations, 2020). The increase in economic poverty can be matched by an equally substantial increase in educational one. This is the condition that deprives children and adolescents of the opportunities to learn and experiment, let skills, talents and aspirations flourish freely, educational poverty already widespread in our country, before the emergency. If we look at the recent EUROSTAT 2020 data on early school leaving, for example, the percentage of early school leavers in Italy has been around 14% for about 5 years (European Union, 2020).

After almost a year of limiting personal freedom, eliminating sociality and distance learning, the data are very clear. In 2020, the accesses to the emergency room of children and adolescents with problems related to serious psychopathological symptoms were 10% more than the previous year, and from September 2020 the number of care request for doctors and pediatricians dramatically increased (ISS Mental Health and COVID-19 Emergency Working Group, 2020). In fact, in the last year children and adolescents have been deprived of many aspects of their lives and one of the most dramatic effects – albeit still difficult to quantify in the short term – is precisely given by the serious impairment of interactions and social bonds, elements at the basis of educational processes. As is well known, in fact, human development is the result of the interactions among body, movement and environment (Damiani, Santaniello, Gomez-Paloma, 2015; Gallese, 2008; Rizzolatti, Sinigaglia, 2006), where at the core there is the subject and his own learning process (Dewey, 1933; Montessori, 1923).

### **1. Coronavirus Pandemic & Skin Hunger Phenomenon**

One of the particularly relevant educational aspects due to the pandemic is undoubtedly that of loneliness and its impact on psycho-physical well-being. Loneliness and social distancing have caused very significant effects in terms of anxiety and depression in adolescents and children (Nearchou et al, 2020). Strangely, the social distancing imposed by the parental authority generates less psychological distress compared to secondary isolation due to the voluntary removal of “peers”, linked, for example, to the fact that playmates or friends refuse the request to play in common. Somehow perceiving social distancing as a family rule can increase the sense of family cohesion, which is a positively contributing factor to mental health in adolescents (Ibid.).

The body and its actions thus play a fundamental role in the growth of children and adolescents and one of the lesser-known consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, but no less important, is the so-called phenomenon of the *skin hunger* (Balder, 2016), that is to say that “hunger for skin” typical of the human that is expressed in that ancestral need “to touch” and “to be touched” (Harlow, 1958). This is because the need for closeness, warmth, physical contact

is the need that the humans tend to satisfy from the very first hours of life. Body interaction, in fact, is a fundamental part of the development of the child because he learns with the support of a reference adult, to whom, among other things, he is emotionally linked. The studies on attachment by John Bowlby (1969) prove that this type of bodily relationship is the essential prerequisite for the social autonomy of the child and his ability to bear, in the course of life, the frustrations, successes and failures that inevitably create difficulties in the acquisition of new learnings (Cunti, Priore, 2020).

For subjects, body and tactile contact is an important part of living in the world. Simple actions such as shaking hands, kissing, hugging, holding hands or simply touching each other satisfy just that Bowlbian innate need for contact mentioned above. Kisses, hugs, caresses, handshakes: since the pandemic broke out, any gesture of affection is prohibited. We look at the other from a distance of at least one meter and we are forced to decipher his mood from the eyes, not being able to see even if he is smiling or if he is sulking, because he is covered by the mask. Yet, for the human being, physical contact is a primary need.

Human beings are intrinsically “social”, accustomed from birth to bodily contact (Bowlby, 1969), human contact which is made impossible if not prohibited by norms of social distancing. When a baby is born, it is customary to place it on the mother’s bare chest precisely to facilitate the first form of communication, not verbal, but very important for the tactile aspect. Touching, handling, caressing the newborn, promoting skin-to-skin contact, reassures the child and allows him to endure the first frustrations, as well as to fall asleep (Ibidem).

Body contact thus has a fundamental function in the educational processes and cognitive development of our species. According to Didier Anzieu (1974), in fact, the skin provides the psychic apparatus with the constitutive representations of the Ego and its main functions. The Skin-Ego is a representation that the child’s Ego uses during the early stages of development, to represent itself as the Ego that contains psychic contents, starting from one’s own experience of the surface of the body (Ibidem). This contribution highlighted a not negligible aspect. Skin contact is not only a phenomenon of gratification and pleasure, but it represents a form of pre-verbal communication constitutive of the subject’s structure. The role assumed by the body and movement is certainly not negligible even in subsequent developmental stages. Alain Berthoz (1998), in fact, has really deepened the relationship that is established between cognitive processes and the so-called “sense of movement”, a sort of sixth sense that is capable of sensing what is about to happen in the surrounding environment, which is linked to body structures and intersubjective dimensions.

## **2. Physical Body & Lived Body during Coronavirus Pandemic**

Body and movement, therefore, are closely interrelated, as well as intimately connected with the emotional-affective aspects that always characterize the learning process. Corporeality, therefore, indicates precisely this unifying dimension – having a body and being a body – sanctioning the indissoluble link among body-emotion-cognition.

Corporeality manifests the importance of an holistic approach to the existence of the individual. The body, thus, from *Körper* becomes *Leib*, a physical place where emotions lodge, a sign of one’s existence and individuality in the world, a means of self-knowledge and an instrument for the construction and consolidation of one’s identity (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Corporeality thus becomes the starting point of subjectivity, that is to say that every subject exists as a body, first of all, and it is only thanks to it that he is able to open himself to the other, to the world, to relationships. It is through the body that one’s existence is admitted, because one is recognized by the other as a material entity that is not only an anatomical structure, but the result of a very personal lived experience. This is equivalent to saying that one recognizes, one is recognized, and one recognizes the other as a lived and historicized body (Husserl, 1950; Merleau-Ponty, 1945).

At this point it is legitimate to ask for a question: what about our corporeality during coronavirus pandemic? The impression is that it is in decay because it is experiencing the most

excruciating of its conditions. Heartbreaking in the sense that it is divided, fragmented, torn to pieces. On the one hand, it seems that we are not dealing with anything else, them and us, the society out there and our most intimate experiences. On the other hand, it is forgotten, removed, opposed by everyone, including us. In between is our everyday life, where we strive to manage the situation, with results that are between the dramatic and the hilarious.

Each of us, then – even without realizing it – manage the two bodies mentioned above and which during the pandemic are again thrown into a contemporary dichotomy. Two different images of our physicality that the current emergency is separating more and more, with results that are anything but pleasant. On the first side we are referring precisely to the *Körper* conceived by medicine and science, that is to say as a set of organs and functions, a machine to be kept in motion at all costs, an object to be looked at with a clinical eye (Husserl, 1950; Merleau-Ponty, 1945).

The perspective is that of a carnal entity observed from the outside, without a soul and without affectivity. Currently it seems that nothing else is being dealt with. The numbers of contagions that have been bouncing against us for months do not account for anything but bodies like this, intubated. It is the absolute triumph of a quantity which, by exhibiting positive objectivity, aims to exclude and forget that subjective quality which, instead, belongs to the *Leib*. The latter is ours in all respects, no longer what the external gaze tends to objectify, but our own experience lived the body that founds and transforms the perceptive subjectivity of each of us, a dimension that lives above all in the affective relationship with his peers, between subjectivity and intersubjectivity (Gallese, 2013).

It is precisely this second body to be canceled in the current collective experience of the pandemic. *Leib*, today, more than life alludes to death, or at least to illness, to the fear of physical discomfort that could become lethal. The contact among bodies becomes the phantom of the contagion, and we find ourselves doubly alone, we and our body, me and the other bodies that, remaining at a safe distance, progressively migrate towards the medicalization of *Körper*. The other is no longer a living body that offers itself to me, or to which my body offers itself to experience the world together, but a potential enemy to be kept at bay, a silent, harmful otherness.

### **3. Intercorporeality & Coronavirus Pandemic: looking for Empathy?**

In light of the foregoing, the current situation requires further reflection. Is it really the physical dimension that constitutes the value of education and intersubjective communication?

No doubt, the interest in the body-communication-education relationship is not new, as it is clearly evidenced by the philosophical analysis of the essence of the act that underlies all the forms through which we enter into relationship with the other (Stein, 1917), one above all that of empathy. The empathy can be precisely described as a “meeting of bodies”, an experience that precisely takes shape through a bodily feeling that is realized in an exchange that arises from the feeling that the bodies resemble each other, from attributing to the other something that is one’s own. It is only starting from this experience that the individual is able to attribute sensations and emotions to the other, as he also experiences them (Boella, 2006). Therefore, it is possible to deduce that the intercorporeality is one of the main sources of knowledge of the other (Meyer, Streeck, Jordan, 2017). Furthermore, more recent research contributions have also highlighted that empathy is indeed linked to the ability of man to decipher body language but, more specifically, it is closely related to the interpretation of mimics and facial expressions (Ekman & Friesen, 1969). All this is due to the importance that the face assumes in the processes involved in the communication of emotions. In this sense, it represents the most expressive part of the human body, because it is precisely through its movements that the subjects are able to express the full range of human emotions.

From an educational perspective, it is interesting to focus attention on the communicative relationship that is established between empathy and the body. Rather than on the neurophysiological causes that generate empathy it is interesting to reflect on those of learning, therefore educational. Learning empathy is undoubtedly an important and generative component. The practice of empathy has to do with the human ability to “enter the skin” of another and “walk in it”. It is no coincidence that the Empathy Museum founded by Roman Krznaric in London is

accessed through the experience of wearing someone else's shoes, walking inside them. After all, the expression that (popularly but effectively) best explains "feeling the other" is "putting yourself in his shoes" (Boella, 2006).

In other words, it is important to emphasize that it would be impossible to intercept the emotional state of the other without the presence of the body that communicates sensations, emotions and moods. Reading the emotional state of others, however, does not mean establishing an authentic empathic relationship. For this reason, in order to pass from a mere reading of emotions to an authentic understanding, it is necessary to call into question a perspective capable of bringing out the leading role assumed by educational processes in the development of empathy. If, as the neurophysiological point of view suggests, the body would be the generating cause of the recognition of emotions, from an educational perspective, then we intend to deepen the role assumed by non-verbal language in the development of empathy.

Emotions are manifested through the body, postures are modeled, gestures are drawn, faces are marked. Empathy, body and communication therefore represent inseparable dimensions: it is not possible to emotionally tune in with the other without the presence of the body that communicates. Body, emotion and communication then become three fundamental parts of the educational process, when the development of an authentically empathic relationship is in the foreground. Basically, if empathy becomes the educational project to strive for, it follows that it is necessary to first develop in the subjects the ability to read the messages of body communication by interpreting their behaviors and inferring the emotions related to them.

We certainly cannot get out of the coronavirus pandemic alone, but we can only get out of it through a conscious practice of empathy, putting ourselves in the shoes of the most fragile: the elderly, the children, the sick. By assuming responsibility for the health of the other and therefore also of oneself. It is mutual care, which also involves personal sacrifices for the benefit of all. In addition to being able to save us from the coronavirus pandemic, empathy is also the main knowledge necessary to stay in the contemporary world: learning to put on the glasses of the other allows us to get out of self-centeredness and egotism, to look at things from others points of view, with other eyes. It is a necessary operation but also an indispensable knowledge for living in intercultural, therefore complex, contexts.

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