Reconnecting in a Post-pandemic World

Elena Baskina

Masha Tiunova

Elena Baskina
Reconnect movement, Re-authoring Teaching
Moscow, Russia

baskina.elena@gmail.com

Masha Tiunova,
Reconnect Movement, Re-authoring Teaching
Moscow, Russia

tiunova@me.com

Human connections have been challenged in many ways already prior to the pandemic. New forms of relationships emerged, making people face more options. Those options often, as Peggy Orenstein put it provoked us into "a constant state of negotiation, trying to live out more modern ideas yet unwilling or unable to let go of the old ones." New technologies providing joyful and novel ways of connection, have been also bringing painful forms of disconnection. Work environments have been often equating our identities to work objectives and goals - which we were then applying to ourselves, our partners and our relationships.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only made this harder, as humans attempt to connect from larger distances, behind masks, and amidst high pressure and stress. More and more conflicting expectations of what should be done started bringing new, painful frontiers of loneliness.

As a result, people have more things to figure out and reflect upon. There are even more discourses that affect them. A whole new language emerged out of the pandemic.

We are taking a look at some of the practices that emerged throughout the pandemic. Some of them were discovered through desk research, others – through the interviews and talks we conducted with people from different

countries (sample: 25 people). Please note that these practices are not the only ones. Actually, we would like this paper to be an open call for more relational practices that we would like to further explore.

Becoming the authors of the new reality

1)   There is a saying attributed to philosophers such as Wittgenstein that is quoted by the founder of narrative approach, Michael White "words create worlds." Social constructionism brings forward an idea that our realities are co-constructed through the verbal exchange. The Economist published an article on the effects of the pandemic of language, bringing forward such words as[1]:

1. ドライブスルーお見合い **(doraibusurū o miai)**

Drive-through matchmaking (noun) - singles in Japan flirt with one another from their cars, in the empty car parks of wedding halls, arranged by match-making agencies

2. **Coronalingus**

"To get down to it (virtually) during lockdown (verb)" - refers to dirtier sexting

3. **Cuomosexual**

"A devotee of Andrew Cuomo (noun)", the governor of New York

4. **Zumping**

"The act of ending a relationship during a Zoom call (noun)"

5. **Coronavirus and chill**

"To watch (virtually) a film or tv show with your quarantined partner (verb)"

6. **Quarantinderen**

"To use Tinder while in quarantine (verb)"

7. Covidivorce

"A covid-induced break-up (noun)"

8. 冷静期 **(lěngjìngqī)**

a) Cooling-off period (noun)

b) A 30-day wait to get a divorce in China

From the narrative standpoint, creating new words to describe the experiences is a powerful way to reclaim the authorship that was taken away by the events we seemingly do not have power over (the pandemic, the lockdown, the limitations in communication, government handling of the crises). It's interesting that the new words formation, so easily available in contemporary American English, is not at all a norm in some other languages, like Russian. Having looked for the post-pandemic words that appeared throughout the [carantine]quarantine, we can't really name a few. It is of interest to us to further explore this topic and find out how it relates to the overall feeling of authorship among primarily Russian-language people.

2)   There is a great sense of urgency that people mention in our conversations. There is clearly a group of people who realize that now is the time to explore, experiment, try things out.

First of all, this relates to their connection with themselves. People started sewing, playing the piano, moving apartments, traveling, taking vocal lessons, consider changing jobs and countries of living. Many started trying out new spiritual practices – like new meditation formats and attending new personal development programs. All of this came out of the desire to better connect with themselves, "true and authentic" selves. One of our respondents said: "You can only discover yourself through living. And I haven't really allowed myself to live".

There are people who decided to open up relationships, to end or start relationships, to come up with new relationships formats. For some those were thought-through decisions, others decided to go for new practices because

"it's better to regret the things done rather than the things not done." Practices that were previously regarded as fantasies, something that "would be nice to try out" started being regarded as opportunities now. For instance, young men and women in Russia and the US claimed to explore their potential polysexuality through the dating apps – that was not relevant for them before. They knew of polysexuality but identified as heterosexuals. Yet, the pandemic invited them to try out different versions of their sexual identities.

3)   Some people in Russia and the US started living in communities. Obviously, communal ways of living existed previously. However, throughout the pandemic this tendency was intensified as people's response to the lockdown was to go out of the city with a group of friends. After the lockdown was over, they chose to stay with the same group of people and make it their new standard rather than a time-bound practice. This response is also related to the loss of trust into governments and institutions and desire to create a sustainable "state" around themselves. Renting houses together, doing group meditations and reflections, sharing meals became an option not just for "hippie-type" intellectuals, but for broader circles of people. Communal living for them started standing for security, belonging, being able to share joy and pain and manage the otherwise difficult-to-manage reality. In San Francisco, we met people living in friendly communes, attending each other's houses and events. Being disappointed with governments and how they arrange our lives, they created a network of communities around themselves that has a potential to grow into an alternative system with shared values.

4)   Following the previous topic, it is important to mention protests – that became stronger in 2020. While there is a lot of awareness about the Black Lives Matter protests, and obviously there will be papers devoted to this very important movement reshaping the face and soul of American society, we would like to talk briefly about the protests in Belarus. After the current president Lukashenko falsified the election results, the people of Belarus started peaceful protests that were met with extreme violence from the government police and military forces. The people of Belarus however kept the protests entirely peaceful/not breaking even one

window glass or attacking police. The images of women dressed in white giving flowers to the police, singing songs invited a wave of solidarity among people with Post-Soviet roots all over the world. The call of US-based Belarus entrepreneur Mikita Mikado to those in military forces and police to refuse from fighting the peaceful population received numerous applications. Having been fascinated by the beauty and peacefulness of the protests on top of the government violence, people all over the world stood in solidarity with the people of Belarus.

5)   A very different and large topic is remote relationships. The lockdown brought about both the extreme helpfulness and extreme disappointment with the remote. Having been first excited to jump on zoom, people shortly developed zoom-out and started returning to voice messaging, calls, and even email. Of course, one of the answers to the lockdown and socializing limitations became the post-lockdown euphoria (to be described later). However, some people did form new relationships and started using online formats they haven't tried before (and this is not about Zoom or Miro used for personal communication next to professional).

One of the formats that we discovered is having voice messaging friends or remote roommates. For people living separately, away from families and communities, this has become a solid way to be in close, casual, practical relations not having to move in with the people they don't want to live with. Everyday casual exchanges on a variety of topics starting from what one had for breakfast or what they are putting on, helped people to create closeness on a very down-to-earth level.

Another format that became more acceptable for adults was sexting. While previously sexting was seen as a dangerous occupation of young people, during the pandemic it became a way of co-creating intimacy and sustaining closeness for adult people as well. Sexting provided to our respondents a magic circle where they could be safe and welcome, opening a door to creativity and improvisation. While still not talked much about, we are wondering whether practices like this will contribute to sex positivity.

6)   Post-lockdown euphoria

Having seen the crowds on the streets of Moscow after the lockdown was over – and the crowds on the beach of San Diego, we talked to people at both places about how this corresponds with the previous behaviors. Looks like the limitations for people were so difficult, and the lack of interactions with the world and people so painful, that their post-lockdown response was to connect in all possible ways. Of course, this was mostly true for younger people. While some of the people are still quarantining, and the large cities like New York are showing a lot of Covid-cautious behavior, some places are celebrating the end of being socially distant and disconnected through going into the beaches and streets.

7)   Of course, there are a lot of practices, responses to which still have to be discovered. If previously closing one's face with a burka was regarded as causing doubt and undermining trust, for many people now an open face is causing exactly the same responses. People were saying they did acquire an automatic reaction of leaving the room with a mask which stayed with them even when they were going out of their bedroom into a living room. Though masks of all colors and fabrics became available, so people can express themselves, still it doesn't leave a lot of space for facial expressions. The question is which practices become a response to closed faces. Except for the obvious protesting-to-wear-masks behaviors.

8)   Business and politics require a lot of immediate attention, 'getting back to normal' fast. While talking to Anne Liese, Guerin-LeTendre (UK) and Aurelie Glorieux (France) at a discussion group on this topic (that actually provoked part of the thinking behind this article), we concluded it would have been helpful to give some space to recognize this has been a tough experience, give space to grief and sorrow, give space to understanding what's emerging for people and between people. Many people claimed the sense of being lost, and lacking connection with themselves first of all.

Anne Liese expressed a particular concern about the caregivers, who have significant influence over people and haven't been receiving enough care and

recognition (especially in countries like Russia with high numbers of doctors' deaths).

9)   Being not able to touch/hug people lost to the growing interest in bodily practices, next to the desire to explore sensuality and be more around people. While new gestures have emerged (like saying hi touching the elbows), still the lack of physical contact is provoking responses that also have to be further explored.

We are currently gathering a databank of all the responses to 2020 (including but not limited to the pandemic), for our semiotics and narrative research. Having covered the major topics that emerged in our conversations with people in the US, Russia, Belarus, UK and France, we would like to hear from more people and countries. Please let us know what resonated with you and which practices you observed in your media or immediate contexts.

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(Endnotes)

1   See "Pandating the virus" 2020

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