

Narratives on face mask wearing from members of Navigating Knowledge Landscapes Network - the contribution No. 12

Country: **ITALY**

Lucia Martinelli

MUSE - Science museum, Trento, Italy

E-mail: lucia.martinelli@muse.it

Received May 15th, 2020

Since February 2020, in Italy like in the other Western Countries, we perceived COVID-19 spreading in China as novel epidemics of our millennium, i.e. something jet dangerous but essentially dangerous for people living in “the other” part or the world. During those days, I went to my habitual Chinese tailors, giving my respects for the situation in their home country, and feeling that we were the lucky safe ones. After the first cases of disease discovery and the first deaths in the North Italy, however, people started to perceive that a virus was undermining their “safe living”. Also due to the contradictory opinions by the experts, including representatives of the scientific community, some perceived this disease just alike “a stronger influenza”, some were scared, and some were not sure about what to think. In any case, we felt the novel feeling to be the “contagious ones”.

Italy was the first European country to officially detecting the presence of the syndrome in its territory, and to adopt measures to contain its spread. The various regions have been affected with different percentages of contagion. In Trentino, where I live, the situation resulted one of the most serious. Likely reasons are: tourism and health-care/elder people structures. In fact, because we had (finally) snow and many tourists came to skiing during the weekend of 7th / 8th March 2020, people moving around was extremely dangerous. Moreover, as in other regions, particular “red spots” have been the houses for elder people. In some of them there is also the suspect of scandals since they opened their doors to infected patients from hospitals which did not had enough beds. Also a number of workers in the hospitals (medical doctor, nurses etc..) were victims of the virus, because at the pandemic beginning, they must work without personal protection devices, including facial masks. As well, some of them brought the infection to their own families.

The phase-1 of lockdown started officially on March 11th. By law, we must stay home except for serious reasons that needed to be officially certified if the Police stopped you.

Reasons were to buy food and to go to pharmacy and journal and tobacco stores but only in the ones located most closely to your home. You could not move within different municipalities (vent if that could be closer to your home as compared to the ones in your same municipalities). During this phase, day after day, those measures became more stringent and going out for a walk was allowed only within 200 meters from your home. Going out to work was allowed only for mandatory activities, only some essential industries could stay open whilst manufacturing and services companies were closed as well as any other commercial activities. Facial mask and glow wearing became mandatory for entering in close spaces. Buying masks was hard since they were not available and, if available, their price had become exorbitant. Some clothing industries, which otherwise were not producing, decided to re-convert their expertise into facemask production. Many people start producing their own cotton and re-usable facial masks, some very creatives, also as suggested in a number of tutorials available in social media. That “community masks”, after some constraints, were officially allowed to use, finally, as it was for the official and certified “surgical” ones.

In Italy, since May 4th, we entered in the so called "phase-2". This phase is gradual. It means that until May 18th we still had to move inside our region, still carrying with us the official document format in the case the Police stops you. Just a few commercial activities are open, only some working places are open, it is allowed to go out for open-air sport, meeting relatives including “official” partners and avoiding crowded. From 6 years age, we must wear facial mask –the fine is 400,00 €- (with the exception for people suffering from asthma and with peculiar facial characteristics) and glows (this latter if entering in shops). In the case of open-space sports and in particular for heavy exercise, mask wearing is not recommended because of the risk to breath back your emitted CO₂, which will be unsafe and even dangerous. Observing distance, accordingly, is more appropriate.

I can understand that, according to temperature and environmental conditions, wearing a mask can me sometime hard. Standard surgical mask, for instance, are big for my face and something almost arrive to my eyes.

Still, in some regions, the levels of infection are still not low enough. Thus, this is a 2-weeks experiment to check how disease spread works. If the infection percentage will decrease, from May 18 other activities will be allowed, and more freedom (such as crossing regions and opening borders) might be allowed.

Phase-2 means to stop the heavy lock down and go back to “normal” life. But what is “normal life” during this pandemics? May a life to be considered “normal” whilst adopting the (never experimented before) protocols necessary to reduce the risks of virus spread? Wearing facial masks, for example, in a country where culturally nobody is used to wear it?

In this delicate phase-2, a major visible contradiction concerns the request of combining business with public health and safety. Bar, restaurants, beauty centers and other shops and touristic activities press the government to finally open to the public, since the economy is really bad and they are losing a lot of incomes. Moreover, bars and restaurants do not agree with the roles of “(social) distance” they have to respect to avoid infection spread (number of people inside/distance between tables etc...). Employers are scared about the responsibility they may have in the case their employees got COVID-19 affected during the working activities.

People go back to work to restart economy, people are claimed to go to restaurants, bars, shops, beauty-shops, but how much is the potential risk to fallow into a new pandemic outbreak? How much we can count of individual’s responsibility to respect the safety rules? Looking at the crowd assembling in “movida” in many Italian cities, could we end up in confiding in people’ sense of responsibility? I think that this phase-2 is very critical, since the virus is still around. It is hard to find the most suitable boundary between public health safety and economy. I’ve noticed that conservatives care more for the economic aspect, whilst progressives care more for the safety issues.

Risk perception is quite personal. Some do not care. Some other are worried about phase-2 since they felt safer in their microenvironment they created during the lock down. “Convivere”, i.e. “live together with” the virus is the expression used by experts and media, to describe the phase-2, but this narrative could result quite distressing: how glad would someone be when living with a sub-microscopic entity, which results such dangerous?

When walking in a city as well as when in a trekking path, I’ve noticed that many people respected the rule of facial mask wearing, some other not. In this latter case, when I came close to them, I felt affronted (probably my expression show this). When I walk and nobody is around me, I do not have my mask on the mouth and nose, however, when I’m approaching people, I pose it in the proper way and smile (with my eyes): I consider this a sort of “greetings and courtesy nod”, a way to say “I care for your health, do not be afraid by me, we will help each other”. I consider it as a message of solidarity.

I think that institutional communication has a crucial role in motivating citizens to wear facial mask and to properly employing it, i.e. how to handle it and how to cover mouth and nose, as well as how to respect the distances between/among people and the hygiene procedures, i.e. a behavior needed to complement face mask wearing. The choice of words and narrative plays a relevant role in this. *In primis*, the commonly adopted expression ‘social distance’ to recommend a strategy to limit virus spread from person to person, in particular in Countries where the sense of human warmth is quite deep, may evoke a distasteful behavior. Thus, a narrative more respondent to the aim of that practice would better be “safety distance”. Even worst –with the risk of resulting authoritative- is the narrative “to avoid unnecessary social contact with others”, which may result intruding in the personal idea about what is “unnecessary” when considering social contacts, who are “the others2 and who decides about this categorizations.

In this framework, some communication campaigns for the correct use of facial mask by the Italian health ministry are well done. See for instance ‘Per tornare tutti insieme a sorridere’ [to go back to smile together] (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQW1B4tFIKU>), whose claim is based on the need to protect people you love and on the solidarity.

Last, but not least, facial mask wearing proposes the issues of environmental pollution: the number of masks used, contaminated and discarded is amazing high and require to be properly discarded. This is not always being respected.