

**EXISTENTIAL MIGRATION DURING THE PANDEMIC IN LATVIA:
INSIGHT INTO SOLUTIONS AT THE INTERSECTION OF
RELIGIOUS SCIENCE AND HUMAN GEOGRAPHY**

**EKSISTENCIĀLĀ MIGRĀCIJA PANĒMIJAS LAIKĀ LATVIJĀ: IESKATS
RISINĀJUMOS RELIĢIJPĒTNIECĪBAS UN CILVĒKGEOGRĀFIJAS
SASKARSMES LAUKĀ**

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Abstract

Recent research trends related to the understanding of the meaning of philosophy and its use in interdisciplinary research in human geography. Therefore, the article aims to demonstrate a pilot model of an innovative methodology that forms the interface between human geography and philosophy. The terms “home experience” and “existential migration”, conceptualized by psychotherapist and philosopher Greg Madison, have been used to summarize interviews with migrants who have voluntarily chosen to integrate into another country, society, and culture in order to find a place to live in harmony with their individual being. Research on authenticity of life as a motive for migration has not developed so far, but it makes it possible to link the analysis of human experience, which is the focus of phenomenology, with empirical data sources. The mediation of human geography findings and axiological theory ensures that concepts of a philosophical nature form the architecture of a unified system of knowledge, in which empirical data are organically incorporated. In this case, they are the data from the many large-scale studies conducted in Latvia on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly of the lockdown, on the population of Latvia. They all form a single text, which is examined by qualitative content analysis and cohort methods, revealing the nature of interpersonal relations in Latvian society, which are important in solving migration issues.

Keywords: Home experience, existential migration, impact of Covid-19, relationships between human geography and philosophy.

Introduction

For the first time in Latvia in the study of human geography, religious science, and philosophy of religion researchers are also involved together with lawyers, sociologists, demographers, and migration specialists. In Latvia previously research on religion and migration processes has developed separately. Only recently researchers of different fields have begun to understand their interrelationships. This new turn is reflected in the State Research Program implemented by the Faculty of Geography and Earth Sciences of the University of Latvia in the project DemoMigPro (“New research solutions on demographic and migration processes for the development of the Latvian

and European knowledge society”. VPP-Letonika-2021/3-0002). The DemoMigPro project aims to provide new knowledge and solutions for studies of demographic change and migration processes to foster the sustainable development of society in Latvia. It presupposes the evaluation of newcomers into various areas, their integration into Latvia, and how inclusive European society is. One aspect covers newcomers’ integration through religious communities. Recent research worldwide has demonstrated the role of religion and religious organizations in immigrants’ social, medical and existential well-being within their host societies; it has highlighted the connection between existential well-being, integration and social cohesion (Dahlin et al. 2021). Philosophy and especially the philosophy of religion and religious research for its part can offer deeper insight into the human factors that influence migration processes and could explain them from the perspective of human experience.

Geography has always had a relation to philosophy:

“Many of the great thinkers of the Western philosophical tradition have written explicitly on many of the key issues of concern to geographers. [...] Geography has always been based on philosophical positions, but until relatively recently these were largely unexamined” (Elden 2009, 144; 149).

One of the newest and most profound analyses of contemporary philosophy trends in relation to human/ humanistic geography is provided in the collective monograph *Contesting Geography* (Philipps 2017, 29-30).

Addressing the issue of migration, the strategy of current philosophical research has four trajectories.

First, thinkers are trying to develop a completely new and universal philosophical mindset to understand migration and local community experiences in the context of state-centric order: “The migrant hints at the possibility of a different arrangement of the world: she represents deterritorialization, the fluidity of movement, autonomous crossing, the hybridization of identity” (Cesare, 2020, 9). However, the arrival of a large number of migrants can exacerbate tensions and give rise to violent clashes between local populations and recent arrivals. Thus, at the same time, researchers do not miss the analysis of the critical role of the state as both an actor and arena in the migration-conflict nexus (Côté et al. 2018).

Secondly, philosophical archeology analyses the genesis and dynamics of views on migration that are current but rapidly becoming outdated. For instance, in order to understand the current attitude towards immigration with all its challenging aspects, it is necessary to go back to the origin of the European migratory regime, based on the concept of the guest worker. The latter defined migration as a purely economic phenomenon but “since it clashes with the philosophy of rights and solidarity embedded in European democracies, this model has been repeatedly remoulded.

Therefore, European countries have had to come to terms with the instances of inclusion, equalization and the recognition of diversity, [...] thus shaping the image of a Janus-faced Europe” (Zanfrini 2018). Consistent with this is migration discourse analysis, which focusing on how history and historical memory are used to make claims about the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others in public discussions on immigrant integration in Europe. These debates often sustain categorizations and classifications of the population in terms of “natives”, who are allegedly historically rooted, and “non-natives”, lacking historical roots (Bertossi et al. 2020; Dessewffy 2021).

Thirdly, it is an analysis of various concepts and their historical explanations, and assignment of new meanings to such concepts as hospitality, identity (a turn from national to regional and cultural identity) and language, to mention a few. In the case of Latvia, for example, one of the first questions about the relationship between migration and identity was the socio-linguistic research on the very sensitive issue of the impact of the migration on the situation of the Latvian language (Latviešu valodas aģentūra 2012).

Fourthly, the philosophy of religion and study of religion is the most relevant philosophical theoretical and methodological basis for analysis of the links between religious communities and migration in the interdisciplinary realm.

On the one hand, the increase in migration in the 20th and 21st centuries has had social, political and economic implications, but has also effected change in the religious landscape, in religious beliefs and practices and in the way people understand themselves, each other and the world around them. Therefore, religious study addresses questions which originate in various geographical locations and demonstrates new modes of interconnectedness between religion and migration (Frederiks et al. 2016). On the other hand, despite the dramatic worldwide spread of religious-based discrimination, persecution and conflicts, both official data and academic literature have underestimated their role as a root cause of contemporary migrations (Zanfrini 2020). The most important source for research on the relationship between migration and local religious communities can be found in the field of pastoral care ‘because assistance to migrants is a task and challenge for the Church’ (Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, 2004) and for all the religious centers. For instance, in Poland the Divine Word Missionaries of Fu Shenfu Migrant Centre help Vietnamese migrants to integrate into the Catholic Church and local communities in Poland through pastoral care, legal advice, Polish language classes and charitable work (Hounaké 2018). In this context, the above mentioned research project has yet to obtain data on the work of the Pro Sanctitate

movement with the growing Vietnamese religious community in Latvia, and they would be of internationally comparable value throughout Europe.

Meanwhile, this article pays considerable attention to the possibility of applying a philosophical approach to the Covid-19 pandemic in Latvia. The aim is to get an insight into the possibility of solutions at the intersection of philosophy and human geography.

Methodology

According to the philosophical methodology, the concept serves as a principle for the development of data interpretation architecture. It allows us to see and distinguish the essential human experience that, supported by data, characterizes the dynamics of human life during the pandemic.

In terms of unified innovative knowledge system, there is need for its architecture principle. One could refer to Aristotle's ontology of human engagement with the world (Kavanaugh 2007) or to Immanuel Kant's architectonic principle in the transcendental doctrine of method, by which he means "the unity of the manifold of cognitions under one idea" (Manchester 2002, 622). Such a unifying architectural principle is necessary because of the epistemological state of the human mind, which must process an immense amount of the production of other human minds, namely images, speeches, and writings, to distinguish specific forms of experience in this mirror of reality.

The daily experience of the Covid-19 pandemic leads us to a preliminary conclusion about the significant impact of lockdown on the dynamics of human life. "Existential migration" is a suitable concept to analyze this, because nominally it coincides with the "migration" term, which is so important for our project, although each of the sciences involved explores it differently. In the realm of reality, it resonates with our study, because it reveals new essential aspects of human existence in order to enrich the overall study. What, then, is "existential migration"?

The use of the concept of existential migration, invented by phenomenologist and psychotherapist Greg Madison, allows us to provide an understanding of "home experience", which took on a completely new meaning during the pandemic lockdown, affecting people's lives. On the one hand, during the Covid-19 pandemic, home became the safest place to stay; on the other hand, home appeared to be both a workplace and a test site for sometimes-excessive social communication in a small social group.

Returning to the roots, Greg Madison conducted research with migrants, but his findings allowed for further generalizations. Phenomenological interviews with voluntary migrants, individuals who choose to leave their homeland to become

foreigners in a new culture, reveal consistently deep themes and motivations, which could be labelled “existential”. Rather than migrating in search of employment, career advancement, or overall improved economic conditions, these voluntary migrants are seeking greater possibilities for self-actualizing, exploring foreign cultures in order to assess their own identity, and ultimately grappling with issues of home and belonging in the world generally. Therefore, Greg Madison insists that home is not only connected with a territory, the usual “home as place”, but is the result of human interactions, which are able to create a home feeling in any time and place (Madison 2006).

In opposition to this, Madison describes an “existential migration”, while defining it as the necessary way to truly ‘home experience’. He stresses that existential migration seems to sustain enhanced possibilities for self-awareness; authenticity arising from confrontation with the alien and the non-ordinary. ‘Authentic homelessness’ may offer the potential for human dwelling in awareness of the *unheimlich* (germ. “not-being-at-home”, a reference to Martin Heidegger’s ontology). In the broadest sense, as Madison writes, “the existential migrant, the term I used to describe us, chooses to leave his or her homeland, pushed out by deep questions that can’t be answered at home, pulled into the wide world in order to discover what life is.” (Madison 2009, 7). In this way, the concept of existential migration clarifies the possibility that “home” in its conventional sense constitutes true exile from values such as authenticity, awareness, pursuing self-potential, freedom and valuing the ineffability of existence. In terms of existential migration, the suggestion is that we are *not-at-home* not because we have been exiled from home, but rather because we have been exiled by home from ourselves.

Consequently, it is possible to speak about the home experience in connection with the authenticity of human beings. Therefore, the application of this research tool is quite appropriate for the analysis of data on the pandemic situation in Latvia. From the hermeneutical point of view, it is possible to generate home experience as the experience of a human being everywhere and any time. Paradoxically, but during the lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic people had to face existential migration in order to survive at home.

From the point of view of methodology, a middle-level theory would allow the linking of general philosophical positions with the interpretation of empirical data. This is exactly what human geography has to offer in researching Covid-19’s impact on the well-being of the population in Latvia at various geographical scales: “These set the need to assess the extent and ways in which socio-demographics have determined different spatial behavior, and attitudes and shifts in employment patterns. Moreover, Covid-19 displays geographic inequalities among the age groups of the

population in Latvia: the outbreak is causing severe health, social and economic challenges, many of them being directly related to demographic factors” (Krisjane et al. 2020). In such aspects of daily life, behavior patterns such as work-life balance, alcohol usage and work regime show variations between regions (Apsite-Berina et al. 2021). The findings of these studies shed light on the aspects for analysis in the body of empirical data and can reveal something important about a person's relationship to the authenticity of his or her life. Data presented in research projects about impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the population of Latvia serve as a source for qualitative content analysis, and the hermeneutical method of the texts' interpretation (Gadamer 1961) supplements it. For description of the new-emerging values, the axiological approach is relevant. The qualitative content analysis detects the character of existential migration during a pandemic in Latvia. Several large-scale and smaller studies, and reports on the impact of the coronavirus Covid-19 pandemic on the population of Latvia made up a single body of the text for content analysis (Aptauja 2021a; Aptauja 2021b; Centrs 2020; Karnīte 2021; Latvijas Banka 2021; LETA 2021; LETA 2022; LKA 2020; LR TM 2021; Naudiņa 2021; Oficiālās Statistikas Portāls 2021; Rancāns et al. 2021; Reine et al. 2021; RSU 2020; RSU 2021). Cohort analysis units are experts' practical solutions for overcoming ill-being and indicate level of 'cohesive social capital'.

Results

Even a cursory glance at social networks is enough to discern phenomena associated with the time of the pandemic lockdown: personal anxiety due to the alarming and frightening manner of information in the mass media; societal divisions over vaccination; lack of communication skills in small groups such as family members; fear of dialogue with oneself in silence. The pandemic revealed that a person in Latvia in self-perception is a function rather than a self. Consumption and the various activities that inevitably stopped during the pandemic had had obscured the fundamental truths of human existence. People quite often coped with those symptoms, which actually indicate a lack of authenticity of life, with medication, or “medicating” such as over-eating, alcohol, disputes, aggression and shouting to relieve stress, self-isolation from social contacts etc. However, a clarification of values in everyday life also developed, and this became the cornerstone of the architecture of existential migration during the pandemic in Latvia.

Hermeneutical interpretative analysis of the population's statements on social networks allows for newly discovered values to be distinguished. They are indicated by applying a table of values to specifically described life situations and the value-based conclusions provided by respondents.

Value of Life: the rise in deaths from Covid-19, personal contact with the deaths of family members, friends or co-workers has led to a reassessment of what had previously been lost in the everyday rush – the crucial importance of the presence of close ones. This affects also a change in the perception of the Other: instead of being seen in a functional role, the whole of the human being was revealed.

The Value of Truth proved to be very important both for information on treatment of the Covid-19 disease and orientation in a mixture of information and conspiracy theories, as well as for issues of social justice, such as the use of state funds in the pandemic, access to medical services, job retention and economic support of small businesses.

The value of communication and interpersonal relationships was also rediscovered; the lockdown was like a litmus test, showing both the weaknesses in relationships and individual shortcomings which needed to be fixed in order to maintain the relationship.

The pandemic lockdown seemed to force a rediscovery of the value of human freedom and thus led to a rethinking of how human freedom could be better exploited, particularly in searching for an authentic way of life. Thus, through axiological measurement, it is possible to link specific expressions to the very general concept of existential migration. It is the rediscovery of values during a pandemic lockdown that “takes people out of their homes” in some kind of existential migration in order for them to be at home as a relationship, not only a place. Meanwhile the sharing of values takes place in interpersonal communication, which was limited during the pandemic and revealed shortcomings in the quality and authenticity of the human interpersonal relationship. For instance, in the sphere of culture, only 20% of creative people estimate that they can continue fully with their creative activity. They are disproportionately representatives of architecture, design, literature, media and the visual arts. Obviously, on the other hand, lockdown had a great influence on the population's ability to satisfy their needs for culture and social communication in the sense of attending concerts, theatres, and other large-scale cultural events (LKA 2020).

The term “wellbeing” could be at least partially the empirical equivalent of the “home experience”. It’s noteworthy that the concept of subjective wellbeing is not considered a homogeneous concept among researchers: “Also in Latvia subjective well-being is most often identified with life satisfaction, happiness, success and achievements, at the same time it is just one of the components of life quality” (Apsite-Berina et al. 2021, 29). However, in this context as the main indicator appears to be work-life balance: “According to the survey results, the most significant changes during the Covid-19 pandemic were related to the balance between work and personal life. There was a strong sense of loneliness observed for those respondents who live

alone in households, as well as non-employed retirees and students” (Krisjane et al. 2020, 53). In human geography research it was found that work-life balance was significantly more disturbed among those living in more densely populated, core parts of the country. Moreover, involvement in remote education has put additional pressure on the assessment of subjective wellbeing and work-life balance among those living in the Pierīga region (capital-city region). Subsequently, “targeted emotional and practical local, regional or national level support to families with under aged children and those in full-time employment would allow to harmonize daily work-life duties, particularly targeting exposed groups such as women, for example” (Apsīte-Berina et al. 2021, 34). In accordance with this, other surveys also show that the main concerns of employees during lockdown were: 1) balance between work duties and personal life (32%); 2) “whether the Covid-19 crisis will affect my company” (31%); 3) how to find motivation to work (15%) (Aptauja 2021 a). These results lead experts to an understanding that there must be use of more intangible stimuli like emotional support, personal interest on the part of the employer in the employees, and mutual understanding.

Apart from individual struggles to maintain one’s work-life balance, there were also intra-family and distant learning challenges in Latvia. This may have contributed to the increased levels of parental burnout and family violence (Krisjane et al. 2020, 56). In addition, the number of weddings decreased sharply during lockdown (12.03.2020–09.06.2020) and was 36% lower than in the corresponding period of 2019. Conflicts in marriage and even divorce cases due to permanent co-existence at home during lockdown were noticed, as well as a rise in violence at home. (In any of these areas there are no accurate quantitative data.) Improving communication skills and respecting the private space of others were highly recommended as solutions. It is obvious that the root cause of illbeing phenomena in a very important sphere of subjective sphere of wellbeing is shortcomings in communicative strategies, both in the public sphere and in the field of interpersonal relations, as the emergency adversely affected populations’ wellbeing: “It affected behavior and communication with other people within family and society” (Krisjane et al. 2020, 54). In turn, communication shortages are linked to disturbance of the authenticity of human existence.

Another important indicator of illbeing during the pandemic is mental health. In the experts’ evaluation, the mental health of young people is at a critical level, as 63% of young people in Latvia admit that their mental health has deteriorated during the pandemic (LETA, 2020). As a healing tool the young respondents themselves mention their urgent needs: “more time with friends” (60%), “physical activity or sports” (48%), “psychologist’s consultations or psychotherapy” (37%), “assistance in studies”

(29%), “joint activities with family” (28%) (Centrs 2020). Moreover, half of the population considers that the pandemic is having a negative impact on their mental health (Leta 2022). Latvians are concerned about the economic situation in the country (73%) and admit that they have felt fear about their future because of the Covid-19 pandemic (51%), and desire to plan their finances more actively (52%) (Aptauja 2021b). Consequently, in all the mentioned cases, an inability to properly share values in communication are diagnosable.

In social science terminology, researchers point to the character of “cohesive social capital” during the Covid-19 pandemic in Latvia. Namely, respondents agree that they can rely on the closest circle of people to them: relatives, friends and like-minded people. However, as social distance increases, trust in other people declines. Closeness to people in their place of residence drops, but the reliability of “people as a whole” becomes even lower. There is avoidance of permanent relationships with strangers and people driven by a shared interest rather than an emotional experience (RSU 2021, 83). In the context of our research with respect to the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, this can be interpreted as meaning that the social environment is quite weak for making connections and interactions, which constitutes the home experience for a wide variety of people in society.

The importance of outdoor activities in gardens, parks and other natural areas increased significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic and was associated with a positive effect on the physical and mental health and wellbeing of individuals. Consequently, in the context of human geography research, “regional differences in subjective well-being can be explained not only with changes in daily routine – remote work and education – but also with population density and outdoor leisure opportunities. The subjective wellbeing of residents is affected to a lesser extent in those regions where population density is lower and access to outdoor activities more open” (Apsite-Berina et al. 2020, 34). This kind of indisputably beneficial experience was during the pandemic a form of existential migration *par excellence*, which allowed one to engage with oneself and to return home to generate there, in the place of close co-existence with people, some kind of home experience, i.e. genuine human interactions.

Conclusions

From a methodological point of view, this study reveals the possibility of creating a unified knowledge system with the aim of promoting the growth of the knowledge society. In the interdisciplinary study of human geography on the challenges of migration, the creation of an intersection with philosophical research can be evaluated as an innovative methodological approach. The philosophical concepts

“home experience” and “existential migration” were used in a pilot model of the methodology, showing how concepts with a high degree of generalisation can be linked to empirical data sources and their interpretation.

For this purpose, the use of value theory mediation ensures that general concepts are linked to empirical research. In its turn, human geography research on the impact of Covid-19 on the Latvian population was integrated as a middle-level theory. This identified two main areas of subjective wellbeing, characterised by the most dynamic changes during the pandemic: work-life balance and mental health assessment. These clues led to the main points in an analysis of data from a variety of surveys. The data set forms a single text that is interpretative of the social cohesive capital of the society.

An indisputable beneficial experience during the pandemic was a walk in nature, going outside the home as a form of existential migration, which allowed one to engage with oneself and to return home to generate there, in place of close co-existence with other people, some kind of home experience, i.e. genuine human interactions.

In our society genuine human interaction is, obviously, limited and does not provide enough possibilities for the home experience which Greg Madison talked about. However, in the global world, during large-scale difficulties and limitations, mutual solidarity between people or a much larger “cohesive social capital” in society would be of very great importance. Such an aspect would certainly be taken into account in research into migration challenges in the formation of a Latvian-European knowledge society.

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Kopsavilkums

Raksts ir eksperiments vienotas zināšanu sistēmas izveides laukā, jo parāda, kā ir iespējama vispārnozīmīgu filozofisku jēdzienu, cilvēka ģeogrāfijas pētījumu un empīrisku datu sintēze. Šajā nolūkā ir izmantots “māju pieredzes” un “eksistenciālās migrācijas” jēdziens, ko ir aprakstījis psihoterapeits un filozofs Gregs Medisons, apkopojot intervijas ar migrantiem, kas ir labprātīgi izvēlējušies iekļauties citā valstī, sabiedrībā un kultūrā, lai tālumā no mājvietas atrastu savai esamībai atbilstīgu dzīves ceļu. Dzīves autentiskuma kā migrācijas motīva pētījumi līdz šim nav bijuši attīstīti, taču šajā gadījumā tie dod iespēju saistīt filozofiju ar cilvēka ģeogrāfiju un pēc tam ar empīriskiem datiem. Cilvēka ģeogrāfijas jomā veiktie pētījumi par Covid-19 pandēmijas ietekmi uz Latvijas iedzīvotājiem veido t.s. vidējā līmeņa teoriju, kas norāda uz divām subjektīvās labbūtības sfērām, kurās pandēmijas laikā notikušas

visdinamiskākās pārmaiņas: darba un dzīves līdzsvarošana un psihiskā veselība. Atbilstīgi šīm norādēm ir iespējams interpretēt dažādo citu pētījumu datus par Covid-19 pandēmijas, jo īpaši mājāsēdes, ietekmi uz Latvijas iedzīvotājiem. Dati veido vienotu tekstu, ko var pētīt ar kontentanāli, par kohortācijas vienībām izvēloties ekspertu ieteiktos risinājumus situācijas uzlabošanai. Tie ir kā norādes uz trūkumiem starppersonālajās attiecībās un komunikācijā, kas ikdienas steigā pirms pandēmijas mājāsēdes bija palikušas neievērotas. Tāpat datu interpretācijai palīdz filozofisko vērtību teorija un hermeneitiskā metode.

“Eksistenciālās migrācijas” visizteiktākā izpausme bija cilvēku došanās brīvā dabā. Cilvēka ģeogrāfijas pētījumi apliecina, ka pandēmijas mājāsēdes negatīvās ietekmes pārvarēšanai ir reģionālas iezīmes, proti, vislabāk tās izdevās pārvarēt vietās ar mazāk blīvu apdzīvotību un attiecīgi lielākām iespējām laika pavadīšanai ārpus mājām. Citiem vārdiem, bija vairāk iespēju “eksistenciālajai migrācijai”, kas cilvēkam deva iespēju nonākt kontaktā ar sevi, izvērtēt savas dzīves patiesās vajadzības un pēc šādas dzīves autentiskuma atjaunotnes, atgriežoties mājās, īstenot labākas, cilvēciskākas starppersonālās attiecības, kas veido patieso “māju pieredzi”. Taču tādu cilvēks vēlas piedzīvot arī visā apkārtējā sabiedrībā un kultūrā. Tas pieprasa cilvēka dzīves un komunikācijas stratēģijas uzlabošanu kā sabiedriskajā telpā, tā arī starppersonu attiecībās, kas ir nozīmīgi arī migrācijas jautājumu risināšanā.

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