

Living in the new normal: People's responses to exist during lockdown

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Abstract: Lockdown is a contradictory state in which inhabitants of any country are told to stay indoors to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus, yet they are only allowed to leave their homes to acquire necessities (Pirayani, 1-5). During the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown creates disorientation in people's lives and puts them in predicaments. The lockdown compels individuals to grapple with their dilemmas in this paradoxical situation. The recorded testimonies of Tenzin Palyon, Jose K. Jose, and Roy A. Parekatt depict their responses to their predicament by selecting the right choice to survive and adapt to the new normal. The paper posits that the choices Tenzin Sherab, Jose K. Jose, and Roy A. Parekatt made in their contradictory situations, along with their varied responses, helped them regain their identity and achieve autonomy, enabling them to live a meaningful life in the new normal. Barry Schwartz's theory of the paradox of choice as a tool to critically investigate the varied responses identified in their lockdown testimonials. Barry Schwartz mentions paradoxical choice in his (2004) book *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*. In 2008, a new term, the new normal, emerged. In the context of this study, this term explores how the COVID-19 epidemic altered significant aspects of human survival. Cultural theorists contend that emotions within a person interact with culture during a crisis. Human resilience, recuperation, and reconstruction overcome a paradoxical circumstance to give rise to the new normal. The study highlights risks and problems by delving into the contradictory lives of people who endured distortion, negative liberty, anxiety, and restricted access to necessities while under lockdown.

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Introduction

India's lockdown aimed at reducing virus transmission and saving lives has caused significant disruptions and damage in various aspects of society, including culture, education, and economics (Wesselbaum et al. 2022, 569). The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown have significantly impacted people's lives, leading to abrupt transitions and changes in their future perceptions. Lockdown transformed into a new normal, allowing individuals to explore contradictory situations by making the right choice in their dilemmas. The forced confinement became the new normal for everyone, and as Bill Gates responded 'In an Ask Me Anything' session on March 18th, on this new social practice, "[e]ventually we will have some digital certificates to show who has recovered or been tested recently or when we have a vaccine who has received it [sic].' For many readers, this was a 'gotcha' moment." This was a sign of their survival, as evidenced by the recorded testimonies given by the witnesses (Siraki et al. 2023, 140). The paper examines the testaments of people that reflect "A New Normal?" a theme that reflects the exigencies of our circumstances and our anticipation of a new sociocultural landscape in the eventual post-pandemic era" as the digital records of their lockdown experiences (Célestin 2023, 227). The new normal lives discussed in this paper do not discuss practices like social distancing, wearing masks, or using sanitiser alone, but rather a cultural, social, mental, and physical change that happened in the lives of people that society had forgotten in the pre-pandemic period. This paper applies Barry Schwartz's paradox of choice theory to analyze how individuals navigated decision-making in constrained situations during the COVID-19 pandemic:

There is no denying that choice improves the quality of our lives. It enables us to control our destiny and come close to getting exactly what we want out of any situation. Choice is essential to autonomy, which is fundamental to well-being. Healthy people want and need to direct their own live (Schwartz 2004, 8–9).

Schwartz's theory suggests that while choice is critical for autonomy and well-being, an excess of options can lead to anxiety and distress.

In the context of the pandemic, individuals faced limited choices that compelled them to reassess their autonomy, control, and identity. Complementing this framework is resilience theory, which examines

how individuals and communities adapt to crises and restore normalcy across physical, emotional, and social dimensions. The ability to adapt to adversity was often reflected in the choices people made. Additionally, identity formation theory is the key in understanding how individuals renegotiate their personal and social identities in response to the pandemic's shifting landscape. Social adaptation models further highlight how marginalized communities, such as Tibetan refugees, used collective strategies to cope with the contradictions of lockdown life. By adopting a multi-theoretical approach, this paper explores how individuals responded to the paradoxes of pandemic life, reclaimed autonomy under constrained conditions, and reconstructed their identities within the "new normal," providing insight into broader cultural and psychological processes of adaptation, independence, and resilience.

A plethora of studies conducted on people's lives during COVID-19 are relevant to the present study. The article does not address individual experiences but rather how the lockdown has supported psychological health, strong connections, and social support in America by encouraging family-based resilience during COVID-19 (Campos et al. 2014, 2). Catalina Ramirez-Contreras (2022, 1) explores the hybrid lifestyle of youngsters in the new normal, focusing on the impact of virtual conversations on their sleep and eating routines compared to pre-pandemic conditions. The article lacks research on people's responses to disorientation and identity loss during the new normal, unlike Simpson's study on sameness and difference during COVID-19. It provides insight into an individual's power to regain identity (Simpson et al. 2023, 1–3). The article explores paradoxes faced by employees during the pandemic crisis, particularly with work-from-home options, focusing on various organizational issues but not migrant labourers (Pradies al. 2023, 1–4). The study explores how people's choices and responses in contradictory situations help them regain identity and achieve autonomy, using Barry Schwartz's paradox of choice theory. The research paper examines how people respond to their choices when faced with a dilemma, aiming to reclaim their identity and find meaning in life to adapt to the new normal.

Tibetan refugee community

Mr. Tenzin Palyon, a student at Bangalore, is a Himachal Pradesh-based refugee from the Tibetan minority. He was torn between

adhering to the directives of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Indian Government, as he grappled with his survival as a physically challenged individual during the COVID-19 pandemic. He faces both physical and mental challenges, affecting his mobility within the rooms, his education, his ability to make friends, his absence from traditional school, and his decision to attend online classes. His frustration, disorientation, and loss of identity and meaning in his life were vividly depicted. As Francesca De Lise, Keon Luyckx, and Elisabetta Crocetti (2024, 911) point out, “Identity processes continue to evolve and change throughout the lifespan and are particularly central during adolescence when individuals undergo multiple changes physically, psychologically, and socially”. At the same time, Tiago S. Jesus et al. (2021) discussed the ten problems of people with disabilities.

(1) Disrupted access to healthcare (other than for COVID-19); (2) Reduced physical activity leading to health and functional decline; (3) From physical distance and inactivity to social isolation and loneliness; (4) Disruption of personal assistance and community support networks; (5) Children with disabilities disproportionately affected by school closures; (6) Psychological consequences of disrupted routines, activities, and support; (7) Family and informal caregiver burden and stress; (8) Risks of maltreatment, violence, and self-harm; (9) Reduced employment and/or income exacerbating disparities; and (10) Digital divide in access to health, education, and support services” (Jesus et al. 2021, 2).

Tensing understands these problems and chooses to share them with his Tibetan community, friends, and family by using Zoom meetings, and WhatsApp video calls to regain liberty and autonomy over his life by investing some faith in his subjectivity. Moreover, resilience theory provides a framework to understand how Tenzin coped with the physical and mental challenges of lockdown. Despite his frustration and loss of identity, Tenzin demonstrated resilience by drawing strength from his Tibetan community and the teachings of the Dalai Lama. Kaur (2022, 2) discusses the dignity of the Tibetan community as “The theory of being a compassionate sentient being had been brought to practice by the Tibetan community to contribute to the wellbeing of natives and their community”. Furthermore, Tensing chooses to adhere to the teachings and sage advice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, expressing his gratitude for being a part of the Tibetan community.

Research conducted by Giulia Andrighetto et al. (2024, 1) on cultural changes in communities is evident in Tenzin's life and his community as "Tightness-Looseness theory contends that societies that have experienced chronic ecological and social threats—frequent disease, warfare, and environmental catastrophes—throughout history develop tighter cultures to maintain order and survive chaos and crises". Tensing becomes quite fond of everyone before beginning to read, pray, and meditate. He then had the knowledge and bravery to live fearlessly. The results show that the support he gets from his parents and friends in the Tibetan community contributes to his feelings of happiness and hope. The study found that Tensing and his team coped with the absurdities of the lockdown and adapted to the new normal by using self-governance, discipline, community solidarity, and cognitive understanding.

Overcoming cancer during the pandemic

In a similar spirit, Mr. Roy A. Parekatt has provided recorded testimony on his lockdown experiences. During the lockdown, Mr. Roy was battling cancer and faced the uncertain prospect of either dying from the COVID-19 pandemic or surviving to see the new normal. Despite having graduated from K. E. College Mannam, he never experienced hopelessness; now, his cancer diagnosis has left him without hope. Roy was facing this problem, but he had the unwavering support of his family and close friends. His family has always taken care of him, which has helped him. Even though they used to meet in person, his buddies called him frequently. His loved ones assisted him in regaining hope and faith throughout this difficult period by acknowledging his mental and bodily suffering (Yi et al. 2010, 219–23). Consequently, he gains the confidence to survive in the new normal conditions. He decided to maintain his physical and mental well-being. Kristin A. Vincenzes and her colleagues cite William Glasser's theory to illustrate the significance of choice in survival, as exemplified by Mr. Roy.

William Glasser initially coined choice theory to help understand why people act and think the way they do. Glasser believed that people are intrinsically motivated to meet five innate basic needs: fun, power, survival, freedom, and love and belonging. These needs are universal and often overlap with each other. In the event that a person is not able to meet one of those basic needs, it creates pain and discomfort. As an individual makes choices to balance pain and pleasure, it impacts the person's total behavior: acting, thinking, feeling, and physiology. Glasser believed that a person can directly control

their thoughts (mind) and behavior (action) whilst indirectly controlling their feelings and how their body responds (Vincenzes et al. 2021, 1–5).

Roy's decision helps him recover from mental anguish through regular phone calls from his friends and the affection he receives from his family. According to the study, his existence gains greater significance as he engages more with his family and friends. Annie Issac's novel *My Days in Solitude* explores the life of Tessa, a cancer survivor who achieves both mental and physical well-being with the support of her proactive family members and friends (Isaac 2020, 45). The narrative highlights the striking similarities between Tessa's journey and the experiences of others. Mr. Roy employs a similar approach to get power and independence to adapt and thrive in the new reality brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the meantime, he discovered the likelihood and possibilities of his lifespan. Besides, he reestablished his connection with nature and began farming. Elham Emami describes Kiue's perspective on nature's healing process.

According to Kiue, the number of green plants in the joint neighbourhood spaces had a great effect on reducing the psychological fatigue of the residents. Residents near to nature are more likely to be capable of coping with the major issues of their lives. Such residents feel more hopeful and less helpless about their issues (Emami et al. 2018, 70).

In particular, Roy felt that farming on his small agricultural land helped cure or heal his mental distress along with his physical deterioration due to cancer. Being in nature made him feel stronger and more connected. It gave him the confidence to improve his nutrition, general health, and well-being, making his life more meaningful. In addition, Roy believed in nature's capacity to heal, rehabilitate, and restore his faith in his survival in the new normal. As a result, he was able to regain his sense of self and identity. Over time, he developed a deep connection to nature, appreciated its benefits, and became aware of its therapeutic potential. It enabled him to keep up excellent connections with everyone and make his life meaningful with quality in the new normal, as Holli-Anne Passmore et al. (2023, 1-2) state that "Philosophers such as Note and Haybron have written of nature experiences as inspiring meaningfulness in our lives".

Roy Parekatt's battle with cancer during the pandemic presents another illustration of Schwartz's paradox of choice. Roy faced a stark dilemma: the possibility of succumbing to either cancer or COVID-19. Yet, paradoxically, this limitation of options enabled him to focus on

regaining control over his life. Schwartz's theory helps explain why Roy's decision to pursue physical fitness and reconnect with nature became an act of autonomy and survival. Rather than succumbing to hopelessness, Roy chose to cultivate resilience by engaging in meaningful activities, such as farming, that reconnected him with nature and his community. This response can also be framed through the lens of resilience theory, which suggests that engagement with nature can foster psychological recovery and well-being in times of crisis. Roy's connection to nature served as a coping mechanism, helping him reclaim his sense of self and purpose despite his illness. Additionally, identity formation theory supports the notion that Roy's actions were a process of reconfiguring his identity within the constraints of the pandemic, as he moved from being a passive cancer patient to an active participant in his recovery.

Lessons from the Kuwait War

Jose K. Jose found himself in a difficult situation, as the lockdown restrictions prevented him from seeing his granddaughter and friends. He decides to bide his time until the borders reopen, using this opportunity to better himself and his family. He has had similar contradictory experiences in the past, during the Kuwait War. This experience assisted him in deciding his life and the fate of his family during the COVID-19 pandemic. His thorough understanding and sharp thinking helped him respond proactively to change the destiny of his life and that of his family during lockdown (Kato 2017, 475–80). The Kuwait War experience taught him to adapt to changing circumstances. His attitude towards lockdown life was similar to that of the past, moreover, as a process of self-education and reconstituting his identity, power, autonomy, freedom, and liminal spaces. It depicts the resilience expressed by Jose to survive in the new normal.

As Thiemo Breyer (2022, 384) defines, "Resilience would then not amount to swinging back into a 'normal' initial state or regaining a homeostasis but as a metamorphosis of the self". Jose also responded to this new normal with patience as he has staunch faith in God, which became stronger during the lockdown. He lived with faith and hope that the COVID-19 pandemic would culminate like his previous experience of the Kuwait War. It depicts the psychological capacities of patience, consideration, and responsibility to cope with contradictory situations. Similar to Jose's life, Mathew Pinalto (2016, 39) quotes Kupfer's idea of the virtue of patience as "the disposition to

accept delays in satisfying our desires—delays that are warranted by circumstances or the desires themselves”. Jose’s patience helped him to listen to himself to understand his problems which led him to understand the problems found in his family and neighbours. Josekutty became more independent, mature, and socially active during the COVID-19 pandemic though he was old and had wishes to accomplish. His answers, responses, and testimony served as a platform for him to get his elderly friends’ attention. Jose’s response and attitude are similar to Kaplan’s Attention Restoration Theory (ART). Kaplan R. defines the theory:

Socially responsible behaviour often requires inhibiting personal feelings and concerns in favour of group norms and values. An individual unwilling or unable to do this is unlikely to be an acceptable member of a group. Such a person, lacking the support and protection provided by group membership, would be in a most vulnerable situation should some threat or hardship arise (Kaplan et al. 1989, 177–79).

Consequently, his family helped Sri Lankan maids who served at their home. Besides, he assisted the poor through a church-sponsored campaign by supplying essential groceries (Aletta et al. 2023, 1712). Jose became socially active and responsible, enabling him and his family to interact with people and the environment in times of trouble. His reply offered several options for them to live under the new normal circumstances (Levinger et al. 2022, 1).

Analysis and discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying lockdowns introduced significant challenges that forced individuals to navigate paradoxical choices, reshaping their autonomy, identity, and resilience in a rapidly changing environment. This section synthesizes the experiences of the individuals discussed in the case studies—Tenzin, Roy, and Jose—applying Barry Schwartz’s paradox of choice, resilience theory, identity formation theory, and social adaptation models to analyze their responses.

All three individuals experienced constrained choices during the pandemic, which shaped their responses to the uncertainty of lockdown life. According to Barry Schwartz’s paradox of choice, having limited options often forces individuals to re-evaluate their sense of control, and paradoxically, can lead to a greater clarity of purpose. Tenzin, as a Tibetan refugee and physically challenged student, faced restrictions in terms of mobility, social interactions, and

education. Yet, through his engagement with his community and spiritual practices, he reclaimed autonomy over his life by focusing on activities that reinforced his identity and connection to his cultural roots. The constraints of his situation allowed him to reconfigure his goals, focusing on internal resilience and community solidarity rather than external freedoms.

Similarly, Roy Parekatt, while battling cancer during the pandemic, faced a stark decision between succumbing to his illness or fighting for survival in the new normal. By choosing to focus on physical fitness and reconnecting with nature, Roy exemplified Schwartz's argument that constrained choices can sometimes lead to a more empowered sense of autonomy. Instead of being overwhelmed by the limitations imposed by both his illness and the pandemic, Roy utilized his restricted environment to foster resilience, as seen in his decision to engage in farming and build stronger bonds with family and friends.

Jose, drawing from his experiences during the Kuwait War, similarly navigated the paradox of limited choices by applying his past resilience strategies to the new challenges of the pandemic. His patience and proactive approach to helping his family and community show how, even within the confines of lockdown, individuals can exercise autonomy through acts of social responsibility and care for others. His resilience in the face of repeated crises reflects a conscious choice to transform external limitations into opportunities for personal and communal growth.

Resilience theory offers a framework to understand how individuals like Tenzin, Roy, and Jose adapted to the unprecedented disruptions caused by the pandemic. These individuals practise resilience by using internal and external resources to rebuild their lives under lockdown. Tenzin's spiritual practices and support from the Tibetan community allowed him to maintain psychological stability and regain a sense of purpose despite the challenges of isolation. His ability to adapt to the constraints of online education, limited mobility, and the absence of in-person social interactions speaks to the broader theme of cultural and emotional resilience in times of crisis.

For Roy, resilience was deeply tied to his physical and mental well-being. By reconnecting with nature through farming and focusing on his health, Roy not only survived the pandemic but also regained a sense of control over his life. His experience highlights the intersection of resilience and identity reconstruction, as his actions allowed him to

reshape his narrative from one of illness to one of recovery and empowerment.

Jose's experience also underscores the role of resilience in adapting to contradictory situations. His ability to draw from his past experiences during the Kuwait War and apply them to the pandemic illustrates how resilience is not just a response to immediate crises but also a skill that can be cultivated and refined over time. His active involvement in supporting his family and community during the lockdown further highlights the importance of social adaptation and collective resilience in times of uncertainty.

The lockdown forced individuals to renegotiate their identities as they faced new social, emotional, and physical challenges. Identity formation theory suggests that crises often prompt individuals to reassess their sense of self, as seen in the case of Tenzin, whose identity as a Tibetan refugee was reinforced through his adherence to the teachings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and his engagement with the Tibetan community. His choice to lean into his cultural identity and maintain strong community ties reflects a broader process of identity reconstruction in response to the pandemic.

Roy's experience demonstrates how physical health and personal resilience can play a central role in identity reconstruction. As he faced the dual challenges of cancer and the pandemic, Roy's identity shifted from that of a patient to that of a survivor and advocate for well-being. By focusing on physical fitness and reconnecting with nature, Roy transformed his narrative, using the constraints of lockdown to rebuild his sense of autonomy and purpose.

For Jose, identity reconstruction was closely linked to his past experiences and his ability to apply lessons from the Kuwait War to the present crisis. His proactive efforts to support his family and community during the pandemic reflect a social adaptation model, where individuals navigate crises by adopting socially responsible behaviours. Jose's resilience and adaptability allowed him to not only survive but thrive in the new normal, reinforcing his identity as a community leader and resilient individual.

Across all three case studies, common themes of autonomy, resilience, and identity reconstruction emerge as key factors in navigating the paradoxes and contradictions of pandemic life. While each faces unique challenges, their ability to adapt to limited choices, reconnect with their communities, and rebuild their identities in the face of adversity highlights broader cultural and psychological

processes that are essential for understanding human responses to crises. The application of Schwartz's paradox of choice, resilience theory, identity formation theory, and social adaptation models offers a comprehensive lens through which to analyze these experiences. The constrained choices imposed by the pandemic may have limited freedom in the conventional sense, but they also created opportunities for individuals to redefine autonomy, build resilience, and reconstruct their identities in ways that allowed them to adapt and thrive in the new normal.

Conclusion

The study examines the experiences of individuals with physical disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tensing, a disabled individual, experiences stress related to safety, social interactions, and education. Jose's thoughtful reaction aligns with Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory. Roy's determination enhances his quality of life, and nature can treat cancer. The theoretical framework employed in this study centred on Barry Schwartz's paradox of choice and complemented by resilience theory and identity formation theory provides a comprehensive lens through which to examine how individuals navigated the contradictions of lockdown life. The experiences of Tenzin, Roy, and Jose highlight how constrained choices, far from paralyzing them, became catalysts for reclaiming autonomy, adapting to new social realities, and reconstructing their identities in the new normal. Resilience theory further elucidates how these individuals, with the support of their communities and through engagement with nature and spirituality, overcame the psychological and physical challenges posed by the pandemic. This multi-theoretical approach not only deepens our understanding of individual responses to the COVID-19 pandemic but also offers broader insights into how human beings adapt to crises. By integrating these frameworks, this paper contributes to ongoing discussions in psychological, sociological, and cultural studies about the interplay between choice, autonomy, and resilience in times of uncertainty. This study has further scope to examine the dilemma of the human mind using different psychological theories which have not been used in this paper. All the theories and approaches used in this study can be reused to study post-COVID conditions of the human mind as well.

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