

# THE SOCIAL PARADIGM OF FEAR IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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## Abstract

This paper started from the premise that emotions occupy an important place in one's life, giving meaning to human existence, and it was shaped by the need to understand human behaviour and the essence of society as a whole. The approach of understanding led us to an analysis of emotions that goes beyond a single subject and up to a broader one, the sociology of emotions. The contemporary society is marked by perpetual change and is disturbed by the uncertainty that affects both the psyche of individuals and the structures of the society. Today, negative emotions, and implicitly fear, easily propagate between individuals and take on a strong social character, and the perception of individual and collective threats is often the result of distorting the real picture of threats, which profoundly affects how fears can be managed. The present study focuses on the theoretical analysis of the evolution of human perception of emotion in general and on the manifestation forms of fears. It also aims to expose an overview of fears, trying to capture their dynamic, oscillating and easily influenced character, from a sociological perspective, focusing on the specific characteristics of the Romanian people.

**Keywords:** *paradigm, fear, anxiety, anguish, phobia, social fears.*

## 1. AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE OF EMOTIONS

Since antiquity, the nature of emotions has represented an important concern on behalf of philosophers and they tried to explain it rationally. In the first stage, the philosophical view of emotion was associated with the master-slave metaphor, which equated the wisdom of reason to the primitiveness of emotion. The metaphor revealed two essential characteristics (Gupta & Sharma, 2021) of this view: the idea that emotion is a brute, dangerous, less intelligent force to be controlled by reason, and that reason and emotion are two different conflicting natures of the soul.

The philosophical considerations of emotions have oscillated over time from mere feelings or physiological responses, completely unintelligent, to virtues of true wisdom, masters of reason (Gupta & Sharma, 2021). The philosophical theories have described emotions as significant responses from a phenomenological perspective of an individual to important events, capable of producing distinct changes and behaviours (Herman, 2000).

The capacity of emotions to render truth or the world realistically is highlighted, in accordance with the association of thought with the concept of abstraction (Herman, 2000). The reasoning starts from the idea that the process of abstraction involves ignoring the aspects of reality that reason considers unimportant, which can irreversibly distort the truth of reality. This way of understanding truth, from an emotional perspective, contradicts the view that emotions distort human knowledge (Levari et al., 2018).

The need to understand the essence of the society as a whole forces us to an analysis of emotions that goes beyond the psychological, philosophical and physiological framework and directs us to a broader framework of the sociology of emotions. The contribution of sociology finds its place in the study of emotions, through the fact that they intervene, through social relationships, in order to obtain real, imagined, anticipated or remembered results (Kemper, 1978; ASCOR Cluj, 2020).

The association between emotion and sociology has long been unusual. It was only after 1970 that the dimensions of the sociology of emotions were studied (Harbus, 2004; Kemper, 1978), concretizing systematic studies on the importance of emotions in the structure of the society (Jderu, 2021). The late emergence of such an important field for understanding human interaction and social organization is the result of weak concerns and erroneous substantiations of

early sociologists, who, with few exceptions, did not provide detailed analyses of the human emotional arousal.

As research in the field of emotions advanced, the superiority of the rational was dethroned by emotionality, knowledge in the social field seeking to harmonize IQ with EQ. By joining the two concepts, two important premises were reached: human society is organized as a set of interdependent elements, and this implies an impossibility of knowing one element without the others (Stănciulescu, 1996).

The need to devise a current theory of emotions, covering the rich variety of phenomena contained in the concept of *emotion*, has been felt among researchers in several social fields for some time. A complete and coherent definition of emotions, from an interdisciplinary perspective, was carried out in the Department of Philosophy of Stanford University (Schreckinger, 2014). The study also wanted to clarify the rationality problem of emotions, taking into account two hypostases: the cognitive and strategic rationality. Through the analysis of the philosophical theories emerged over time, a consensus was reached on a series of topics related to emotions, as following:

1. Emotional episodes include a series of interconnected evaluative, physiological, expressive, behavioural and mental components that help diagnose emotions;
2. The forms of manifestation of a single emotion present a wide range of expressive, behavioural, physiological characteristics, as well as different intensity, duration, stimulation or intentionality;
3. Emotions exhibit intentionality and different forms of representation from one individual to another, from one situation to the other;
4. Although the brain represents the seat of emotions, there are no neural circuits that correspond to every type of recognized traditional emotion;
5. It is believed that emotions often involve conscious experiences, but these are not absolutely necessary for an emotion to arise;
6. The functions that emotions perform are both intrapersonal (coordinates the body's resources to manage crisis situations, influences thoughts, prepares for action) and interpersonal (communicates relevant information in establishing relationships);
7. The dichotomy of emotions and reason is excluded;
8. Emotions can support or hinder the achievement of set goals;

9. Emotions involve assessing the significance of a stimulus, varying depending on the ability to process information;

10. Most of the time, emotions correlate with the changing motivation to act.

## 2. DEFINITION, DIFFERENTIATION AND SYSTEMATIZATION OF FEARS

In recent years, scientific concerns for the study of fear and anxiety have grown exponentially, and many questions and uncertainties about fears have remained unclear. To understand fear in its magnitude, we refer to several forms of it, using the term fears – anxiety disorders. Without making an unanimously recognized separation, we consider it necessary to delimit terms (Chelcea, 2015), such as: anxiety, phobia, anguish and fear, which we will also do.

**Anxiety** is defined by the *Dictionary of Psychology*, as a “vague affective state of restlessness, tension, worry and unmotivated, objectless fear that is psychologically uncomfortable” (Șchiopu, 1997). Essential in this context become *the vague* and *objectless* words that outline the characteristic features of this diffuse, affective state.

*The dictionary of sociology* defines it “as a feeling of anxiety, insecurity, diffuse disorder, both physical and mental, of waiting for an indeterminant danger about which there are uncertainties whether it can be successfully coped” (Zamfir & Vlăsceanu, 1998). If we talk about anxiety, we refer to an emotion or an inner state without an object, which manifests itself on multiple schemes of existence. Fear, unlike anxiety, has a real or imaginary object, the ones correlated with the side of the imaginary may become more severe than those with real object.

More likely, anxiety refers to an emotional trait formed as an inner experience. It is born from what man has acquired as an attachment throughout life with the family of origin and which also dictates in times of crisis. Individuals find it difficult to separate the present from the anxious state and will act through what is strongest in them, which is the emotional state.

From a social point of view, anxiety can generate important social effects, such as increasing sociability, strengthening group cohesion, increasing conformity and rejection of deviants. But, at the same time, it can also produce opposite effects such as: isolation, avoidant and distrustful behaviour, which can cause

behavioural change at community level, losing the sense of identity. Effects can also be felt on the productivity or economic and cultural development of the anxious society.

In *the Diagnostic and Statistical Handbook of Mental Disorders*, fourth edition, it is stated that generalized anxiety is accompanied, most often, by other anxiety disorders such as *panic* or *phobia* (APA, 2000).

**Phobia** is presented as an “irrational and continuous fear of an object, living being, or situation that, in itself, poses no danger” (Sillamy, 1998). The individual is aware of the irrationality of his experience and the fact that his behaviour is determined by attempts to avoid the stimulus that causes the phobia, but also by the fear of intersecting with it spontaneously.

According to *the Larousse Dictionary of Psychiatry*, a specific form of phobia that affects daily life is the social phobia or agoraphobia. Social phobia involves an avoidance by the individual of situations that could generate criticism from others: speaking in front of other people, discussing sexual topics, etc. These may not be noticed if the individual evades the social situations involving them.

In the case of people with social phobia, being the type that mainly affects the social environment, the degree of anxiety and discomfort is so intense that there is a manifest desire to leave the place or situation that causes the experience, which leads to a significant decrease in human contacts, to endangering the social network and a high degree of incapacity, all of which have as generalized consequences the professional decline, financial or community life issues. These aspects make social phobia a much more serious problem for the society than many other conditions, with symptoms disruptive to the society (psychotic phenomena, self-aggression, etc.). In addition, by its very nature, social phobia prevents the individual from seeing a doctor, which delays the establishment of early treatment, increases treatment expenses and affects the health system (Georgescu, 1999).

Social phobia or *sociophobia* represents an unjustified anxiety disorder that occurs in the community, manifesting itself by trying to avoid situations in which the individual can be observed, criticized or negatively assessed by a group of people in a concretely defined social framework. Situations such as speaking to a group of people or meeting strangers can become sources of discomfort for the individual, trying to avoid them as much as possible.

The symptomatology of social phobias has common elements being, most of the times, identified with a *social pantophobia* (Akhtar, 2021), manifested in a broad sense as a fear of manifesting the self in the social.

**Anguish** is defined by the *Larousse Dictionary of Psychology* as “extreme anxiety, irrational fear.” It is the sensation of profound malaise that characterizes this state, generated by the impression of a relative but inevitable danger, towards which the feeling is helplessness (Sillamy, 1998).

Delumeau describes it as having no definite object and being “lived as a painful expectation in the face of danger, all the more formidable because it is not clearly identified: it is a global feeling of insecurity” (Delumeau, 2020).

Anguish can have disorganizing effects on human consciousness, generating a regression of thinking and affectivity against the background of an inner conflict (when aggression is repressed), a loss in love (mourning or abandonment by the loved one) or the reactivation of a feeling of abandonment. There are cases in which it is not the real situation that generates anguish, but the unconscious imaginary representation. If the person is unable to create conditions for adaptation and insecurity persists, the condition can degenerate into neurosis or psychosis, pathological anguish being the most common symptom in the medical practice (Sillamy, 1998).

**Fear, apprehension, fright.** In whatever way we call it, it is a “useful emotion-signal. It is an alarm in the face of danger in order to prevent or mitigate its effects” (Farca, 2020).

The *Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language* defines fear as a “state of deep anxiety and turmoil, triggered by a real or imagined danger, lack of courage” (Dexonline, n.d.).

*The dictionary of psychology* describes fear as a “feeling of uneasiness experienced in the presence or thought of danger” (Sillamy, 1998). There is also a clear distinction between fear and anguish, the former being a normal reaction to real danger, and the latter constituting an objectless fear.

It is fear that helps the individual in the face of danger to mobilize and defend himself. A similar situation occurs in the case of social fear among peoples. Thus, social fear, like biological fear, is learned, negative experiences adding one’s own or observed experiences to other communities. The intensity of danger regulates the physiological or

social effects, either active such as defense or passive, of general paralysis. When trust in authorities or in the defense power of the state are perceived as supporting factors, negative behavioural reactions to fear are diminished, trust increases and behaviour is oriented towards taking constructive measures at society level (Spataru, n.d.).

Since there are many and varied fears, it is necessary to systematize as clearly as possible the forms of appearance and manifestation, which is why we take over a taxonomy that we consider relevant, from Chelcea (2015):

- the nature of the danger (objective or imagined/imaginary);
- the type of manifestation (active, passive);
- the mechanism of production (mainly biological or predominantly social);
- the social status of people who feel fear (their high, medium, low social position);
- the number of people affected by fear (individuals, collections);
- the historical era (Antiquity, Middle Ages, modernity or contemporaneity);
- the political system of manifestation of fear (totalitarianism, democracy).

The society, through its bodies, institutions, culture and spirituality, interposes itself as a protective interface between the individual and the dangers or threats that flow upon him. The history and specificity of society's civilization outline its state, being aspects that define the ability of individuals to face adverse phenomena, but also to recover after this impact, referring more precisely to the level of resilience predetermined by the society to which we belong. A distinction must be made between the effect of a danger that impacts the society and individual's ability to recover (Bădescu, 2020; Elhai et al., 2006).

### 3. THE SOCIAL CHARACTER OF FEAR

The role of fear is undeniable in the evolution of the human species since prehistoric times. Gradually, fear grew, adapted, transformed and refined itself with the evolution of the society, accompanying man throughout life like a shadow. If, at first, we could talk about an absolutely necessary fear in the human evolutionary process, in contemporary society we can emphasize a strong involutive role of it, endangering the well-being of daily living. Also, fear can be the one that makes us

see dangers where they are not or see them much bigger and scarier than they really are (Duduciuc et al., 2013).

The environmental conditions in which the individual is born and grown, but also the ability to adapt to life's adversities are essential elements in defining the individual's quality of life. The incoherence between these two components, the social context and the individual resources necessary for adaptation, determines the emergence of crisis situations, which attack the physical, mental or socio-economic safety of the individual, generating feelings of insecurity, helplessness and discouragement, distrust in the present and future and, consequently, fear (Spataru, n.d.). The major impact on interpersonal relationships, social behaviour and the emotional state of the individual shapes fear as a complex psychosocial issue.

The transformation of individual fears into large-scale social phenomena takes place through social interaction, interpersonal communication playing an essential role in this process, along with the media. Media can play an important role in how people perceive and manage fear. News of negative events or natural disasters can contribute to increased fear among people. The social character of fear is given by the fact that it spreads easily between individuals, but also by the universal character of danger. Therefore, fear claims its social status through its sharing by a large number of people within a community (Chelcea, 2015). Thus, in the event of a major crisis or social threat, such as a natural disaster or pandemic, fear can easily spread among the population. In such situations, people can be influenced by the emotions and behaviours of their peers, as well as the information and messages in the media.

In order to analyse generalized fear at the society level, we need to focus on the process of *emotional or social contagion*, which refers to how emotions and behaviours can spread in large groups through social interactions and mass media. Emotional contagion represents a tendency to imitate expressions and synchronize vocalizations, postures and movements with those of another person, to which one will adhere emotionally (Hatfield et al., 1993). This phenomenon was demonstrated by an experiment (Booth, 2014) that used the social media platform Facebook as support, later challenged by the media on the grounds of violation of personal privacy. This emotional contagion can lead to increased fear and anxiety in the society, causing individuals to feel fear of things that are not necessarily a real threat or to

take extreme measures in order to protect themselves from these perceived threats. This behaviour can lead to a vicious circle of increasing fear and anxiety among the population.

On the other hand, at the social level, the danger can be perceived as coming from the political regime, institutions, organizations, but also as a result of cultural, religious, social or other constraints. Although social nature has its importance, the defining thing is that emotion is transmitted quickly within a society, taking over groups, communities, social classes, peoples and nations (Spataru, n.d.; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The relationship that exists between the individual and the society does not assume a static character, despite some needs common to man, emotions such as love or hate, thirst for power or the desire for submission give it a dynamic character, being part of the formation process of man in the society (Fromm, 1998). Individual fear and generalized social fears are interdependent and influence each other. Individual fear can be transformed as a result of major social fears, such as the fear of terrorist attacks, poverty or war. At the same time, individual fear can amplify or fuel general social fears, such as a person with social phobia or indoor phobia can cause widespread panic in gatherings of people, such as public transport or large public events.

According to A. Längle, the American sociologist D. Riesmann characterized the fear of contemporary man as follows: *“If man no longer has clear goals to achieve and no compass for finding them, then fear helps him to perceive as early as possible all external, social demands. He is in a permanent mood of diffuse fear and seeks to adapt.”* From this perspective, the modern individual, when entering into relationship with peers, is guided mainly by the fear he feels, constantly trying to reduce it. Thus, the socio-cultural influence of fear must be viewed as a whole, not being lived passively, it becomes active by adapting the person and changing individual behaviour (Längle, 2005).

#### **4. SOCIAL FEARS IN ROMANIAN SOCIETY YESTERDAY AND TODAY**

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In our country we cannot approach the subject of fear without referring to communism. A dark period of political rule of Romania, whose instrument of

organization and control was the Securitate. This word triggers the feeling of fear, instinctively, in the minds of people who caught the communist regime. *“The Romania of those years was dominated by hunger, cold and fear”*. The communist system, itself, was implemented and maintained through the actions of the Securitate to inoculate and spread fear throughout the population. The social policy of the Communist Party was oppression, brutality, and violence directed at any potential danger, either real or imagined, that arose against the system. Although the number of people who knew firsthand the repressive measures of the system was quite small, the feeling of fear was intentionally transmitted throughout the society, through the brutality and unpredictability of the measures applied. *“Because of these brutalities, fear came out of the Securitate headquarters, prisons and labour camps, into the streets and into people’s homes”*. The forced arrests of families in the middle of the night, the executions or the accounts of released prisoners about the brutal measures applied to them in prisons spread and impregnated the feeling of fear so deeply in the consciousness of the Romanian people that it became almost a *reflex* (Wilsoncenter, 2006; Lowe, 2020).

During communism, fear was felt differently, depending on the social, occupational category, affecting mainly the category of peasants, clergy, ethnic groups, former dignitaries, members of historical political parties, former army officers, journalists, all of whom were included in the category of *enemies of the people* (Chelcea, 2015; Montagne, 2020).

Around 2000, in the Romanian media, there was an advertisement circulating for a mobile phone network that stated *“The future sounds good!”* And even so, to some extent, this was the Romanians’ generalized perspective on the future. Having escaped the communist oppression relatively recently and hoping for closer adherence to the great European family, Romania’s population was optimistic. The modern world seemed to open up to a Romania – Cinderella, isolated, poor and dirty, but industrious, full of hope and resources, with countless prospects of achievement.

But the prospect of *a bright future* became blurred and confused with the shock of the 2008 economic crisis, and the rosy lens through which the world was viewed gradually began to darken. From the economic crisis to the climate crisis, from the pandemic crisis

to the energy, food or fuel crisis, they all tested the resilience of the population to stress and the permanent change that generated it. *Living a state of multiple crises*, as stated by the European Environment Agency (Bruyninckx, 2022), existence has become marked by increased vulnerability, persistence of uncertainty and a volatility of the sense of security at individual but also social level.

In 2007, Romanians' fears were primarily related to economic aspects of life, such as rising prices or the level of pensions and wages, followed by fear of high crime and unemployment (Chelcea, 2015). Subsequently, Chelcea creates a *pyramid of social fears*, starting from the characterization made to fear by K. Riezler, as "fear of something or for something: illness, lack of money, dishonour, health, family, social status" (Chelcea, 2015) and having as reference *Abraham H. Maslow's hierarchy of needs*, which is based on human physiological needs as the strongest, and at the top, self-realization needs, as the least powerful of them. For the realization of the pyramid, a number of fears were taken into account:

1. Loss of life, suffering (for political reasons);
2. Loss of freedom (for political reasons);
3. Loss of residence: deportations, displacements, forced domicile, eviction, restitution, real estate business;
4. Loss of wealth, confiscation of estates, nationalization, collectivization, theft, bankruptcy, devaluation, speculation;
5. Job loss, purge, compression, unemployment, restructuring, crisis;
6. Loss of privileges or comfort, removal from management positions, demotion, transfer to another job, better pay, management positions;
7. Loss of the future of descendants and of the life, liberty or residence of close ones, non-acceptance of children to studies, victimization of relatives, school dropout, limited access to higher education, lack of jobs.

The research conducted on the basis of the CURS survey, between October and November 2009, focused both on the communist period, 1965-1989, and on the actuality of the Romanians' perspective, at the level of 2009. Following the analysis of the data obtained, the generalized fear of the communist period mainly targeted the oppressive political system, at the level of 2009, focusing on threats related to the economic field. Thus, the social pyramid related to the communist period had the shape of an urn with a solid base, in

which the loss of freedom was the main fear, followed by death in suffering and then the loss of residence and the confiscation of assets. In terms of social fears at the level of 2009, the pyramid is overturned, with its base reduced and its top extended. At an overwhelming difference from the others, there is the fear felt for the future of the offspring, in almost half of the respondents, followed by the fear of losing their job, then their fortunes / assets.

It is worth mentioning that the fear of losing life or freedom registers very low percentages, at the level of 2009, compared to the communist period, which reflects a high level of feeling of freedom and security of life, fears migrating to the area of ensuring life well-being and comfort.

In the process of understanding the present from the perspective of the past, looking into the future becomes fearful and proves an act of real courage, especially since novelty has poured over the world surplus of digitization, distance, austerity, risk, uncertainty, the need to adapt, readapt and especially reinvent. Therefore, in the collective mind, according to political analyst S. Ionita, "a tendency of polarization, a change in the way people relate to themselves and, at the same time, to each other, but also to the events surrounding them" has made its presence in the collective mind (Ionita, 2021; Przybylski et al., 2013).

Even if dangers have always existed, daily life is disturbed by uncertainty and a perpetual change, which seems to tend to affect both the psyche of individuals and the structures of the society. The changes followed with impressive rapidity did not leave time for adaptation and sufficient understanding, creating gaps between values, mentalities and beliefs, bringing present-day Romania to the oscillating state between grandparents' serenity and the multitasking of modern youth, between cauldron and vegan food, between fulfilment through family life or as a trendsetter and between the faith of the Second Coming and reaching the state of nirvana.

The paradigm shift has been instituted at a relatively accelerated pace in the Romanian society. The period of multiple crises crossed focused attention on the axiomatic coordinates of human existence and on the need to establish the principles of life, with personal value, to guide it, without which, the collapse of the being under the weight of the overwhelming feeling of fear is inevitable. As author F. Furedy states: "It is not hope, but fear that excites and shapes the cultural

imagination of the early twenty-first century.” (Furedy, n.d.; Settersten et al., 2020)

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

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From the concrete, outlined fears of the past, current fears become diffuse, more abstract and sometimes even incoherent. Although, the major fears of life retain their place occupied for centuries in the collective mind, such as the fear of death, war or disease, diffuse fears such as the fear of tomorrow, the domination of AI over the human, global warming, manipulation make their way into the daily life of individuals.

The variability of the forms of fear that affect a population, at a certain moment, is extensive and their perception at the social level can be hierarchical differently, depending on the impact of major events, manifested at global/local level or the time and space in which the phenomenon is analysed. For a greater plasticity of expression, we shall liken the description of the phenomenon of fear to a *photograph* taken at a specific moment of time, in a well-defined geographical space, to a certain social category, of certain ages, located on a certain hierarchical level, in a certain socio-political and economic context, etc. Although they are not the object of our study, we will mention here a series of individual factors that impact the hierarchy of forms of fear: the education received, family context, physical and mental health, significant personal events. To be more explicit, even if we stick to the social criteria, the hierarchy of fears will look completely different for a restaurant owner in the COVID-19 pandemic, a resident doctor in the pandemic support hospital or a teacher, in middle age, who has to teach on a digital platform, during the same period mentioned above. Thus, we can observe the variety of factors and the complexity of their interaction, which can intervene on the framework of fears at a certain moment, causing a continuous variation and oscillation of perceptions of dangers.

An experiment conducted in the U.S. demonstrates that individuals influence themselves in the decision-making process by distorting perceptions of the world to meet their personal expectations. The study experimentally shows that when the signal a person is looking for becomes scarce, the person's response intervenes by broadening their definition of the signal

– consequently, being able to identify it even when it no longer appears. From low-level colour perception to higher-level ethical judgments, there's a strong tendency for perceptual and judgmental standards to intervene when they shouldn't. The conclusion of the study leads to the idea that the human brain tends to constantly reprogram its perceptions, depending on the experiences it has had until then.

Because the brain tends to constantly restore its perceptions according to our experiences, a question arises: *Can we still trust the way we perceive things if they really reflect reality?* Is our fear correlated with real facts or distorted personal perception? For the same reason, when people identify dangerous behaviours or situations even though they are decreasing, they can expand the definitions of *dangerous situations* in order to include those they previously would not have included in that category. This we can extend to the human perception of dangers, so the more we seek dangerous situations, the more we will find them, although today's world is safer than at any time in history, living in a *golden age of world peace and security* (Fettweis, 2010; Himu, 1981).

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