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# COVID-19 Experiences of Stage Performers

## *Narratives from Turkey*

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### Abstract

This article focuses on the experiences of artistic performers in Turkey from a primarily interactionist theoretical stance and aims to explore how they have been affected by the COVID-19 crisis. The lockdown policies implemented in Turkey have had dire consequences for these performers, exposing them to a new social position of insecurity and uncertainty. They have suffered not only from a lack of economic resources but also of the social interaction that in prior circumstances provided them with the grounds upon which they construct and present their social self. The findings of the study show that the closures of performance spaces fractured the day-to-day routines that would normally provide them with a secure social self since they lacked the ground (the physical stage) through which they have physical interaction with others (their audiences). The narratives in the study demonstrate that not being able to be on-stage endangered the process of the social construction of the self as performers and that they sought new ways of reconstituting the performer-audience interaction in order to ease the negative effects of the pandemic conditions and to secure their selves.

### Keywords

COVID-19 – performers – social self – tactics of the self – everyday life

## 1 Introduction

After the first reported case of coronavirus in Wuhan, China on 31 December 2019 (Coronavirus disease [COVID-19] update n.d.), the spread of the virus escalated to global levels, and a pandemic was soon declared by the WHO (World Health Organization). Countries have been deeply affected socially, politically, economically, and psychologically (Banerjee and Rai 2020) and in this respect, the pandemic has entailed far more than a health crisis in any narrow sense. Although the crisis brought about by the virus has in many ways regenerated and heightened social solidarity between altruistic volunteers and those who needed help (Matthewman and Huppertz 2020: 677; Ergur et al. 2020; Karakaş 2020; Meza-Palmeros 2020: 117), it has also unveiled the deficiencies of social organizations globally. Thus, as Connell has suggested (2020), it has become crucial to take into account the social dynamic aspects of COVID-19.

The impacts of COVID-19 engendered further inequalities based on age, ethnicity, employment, education, and gender (Matthewman and Huppertz 2020). Pointing to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic with regard to economic, social, and health consequences, Clemente-Suarez et al. (2021) suggest that quarantine policies implemented by many countries inarguably brought an end to many businesses and sectors. Due to lockdowns and other restriction policies, millions of people have lost their jobs. As Karakaş has pointed out (2020: 563), the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative economic impact both on the micro and macro levels, with effects on individuals, groups, sectors, national economies and the global economy. During this period, those with lower incomes have experienced job losses and/or cuts to their income, while employers or those on higher incomes have been faced with losing their jobs and/or getting cut their incomes while many employers or other higher earners have also faced a significant decrease in their incomes due to the decelerating or halting production processes and the minimized consumption patterns of consumers. Eşsiz and Durucan (2021) shed light onto the effects of COVID-19 on selected sectors in Turkey, showing that the sectors most deeply effected by the pandemic are tourism, entertainment, travel and accommodation, and that all these sectors have economically downsized while the consumption in the electric – electronic sector increased due to both the remote working and education model and “stay at home” implementations, which trigger the need for smart phones, tablets, laptops, and small home appliances.

Turkey had its first COVID-19 case declared by the Health Minister on March 11th, 2020 (Zorlu 2020), and the restrictions on various areas of social life such as education, entertainment activities, work, transportation, tourism, retail, meeting events (i.e. conferences and congress) (Demir & Esen 2021: 89) were

implemented over the ensuing weeks. As increasingly many people commenced working remotely, restrictions continued, while suddenly many workers in the entertainment sector became unemployed. Although it is difficult to follow the exact dates of preventive actions it can safely be estimated that from March 13, 2020 to June 2020, performers could not perform or work at all in physical performance settings with an audience. For musicians, by September 2020, the order came permitting live music performances until midnight – a declaration that is still in force (Eşsiz & Durucan 2021; Restoranlarda gece müzik yayını yasak 2020). This process should not be considered linear, since from June 2020 up to May 2021 lockdowns were implemented at intervals by the government over many weekends and religious and official holidays. This resulted in instability and revenue loss for the performers, who had already been through many other negative effects of the pandemic. Until the performers returned to the stage, they were unemployed for almost two years and during this period, some financial supports were provided by the government for workers in the artistic field. However, besides being an unsubstantial amount, this benefit program was only available to a minority of performers as a prerequisite of qualification for the program was to be a registered employee, while the majority of artistic employees work in an unregistered capacity (Abatay 2021; Tokyay 2020).

Furthermore, for stage performers, one of the foundations of social interaction space and the ways they socially construct their 'self' within these on-stage interactions profoundly changed. Thus, they suffered not only from economic resource scarcity but also from a lack of much of the social interaction providing them with the foundations upon which they construct and present a social self. They experienced this process in different ways both positively and negatively, as argued below. At times of social crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, as Saladino et al. have suggested (2020: 2), suicidal behaviors are more likely to occur among those who are relatively more vulnerable to the effects of the crisis at hand. According to the Union of Musicians, Müzik-Sen (Music-Un), 102 musicians died by suicide in Turkey from the beginning of the pandemic between 2020–2021, all in conditions of financial difficulty exacerbated by unemployment (Salgın dönemince işsiz kalan 102 müzisyen artık aramızda yok! 2021). Many artistic producers took action in order to draw attention to this impasse by publishing declarations on social media and composing music to raise awareness about the obstacles musicians were facing (Sanatçılar, yaşamını yitiren müzisyenler için seslendirdi 2021).

The pandemic has influenced societies in a global scale and different groups in societies have experienced these influences differently with regard to their gender, class, occupations, and age. It can be suggested that the pandemic

roughly placed people into two sorts of positions: those who were able to continue, even if in a different manner what they were doing before the pandemic (through masking and social distancing guidelines or by working remotely) and those who were not. Stage performers such as musicians, theater actors, and dancers were considered to be in the second position for this study. They had all of a sudden and completely been apart from their performance spaces. However, this is not at all to suggest that only performers have been impacted by the changing conditions of the pandemic; for instance, education processes have been transferred online and many employees have commenced work remotely. Yet it can be claimed that the sudden loss of spaces for performance has a deepening factor in terms of the effects of the pandemic and the fact is that stage performers constitute a social group who had this experience during the pandemic as their spaces were closed down. These people were confronted with losing the basis through which they identify and actualize themselves socially by interacting with others. For performers, these interactions, taking place on-stage in the presence of an audience, seem as significant as their overall social encounters. COVID-19 lockdowns, in a sense, fractured their everyday experiences and damaged the social trust that is normally constructed through these experiences. Damaged social trust has implications beyond the level of merely personal feelings and entails a loosening of the bond between individuals and society. On-stage interactions, encounters, and cultural production are fundamental means in everyday life through which artistic performers socially construct and present themselves.

Retreating from all these activities during the pandemic period jeopardized both the safety area of everyday routines, individuals' feelings of social being, and their social self, since "selves can only exist in definite relationships to other-selves" – meaning that the existence of a self can only be at stake in the reciprocity of other-selves (Mead 1972: 164). As Mead points out (1972: 142–144), the self is the product of social processes and there are always multiple selves belonging to any one person, which are being presented based on the social circumstances an individual is involved in. Individuals continue to be members of broader society and immersed in a web of interactions in their everyday life. Yet, it can be asserted that being on the stage itself – a social process involving on-stage interactions and those with audiences (others) – constitutes one of the critical repertoires of the self for artistic performers.

The literature on the social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic usually focuses on its macro social-economic aspects; thus there seems a need for more micro-level sociological studies so as to comprehend its influence on diverse social groups. Therefore, this article focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic experiences of stage performers in Turkey, via an analysis of qualitative data obtained

from in-depth interviews with members of this demographic. By drawing on the interactionist theoretical claim that social processes in everyday routines are key both for how society is constructed and for the self to be built and presented, this article primarily seeks to analyze the experiences of artistic performers in Turkey during the COVID-19 crisis. It seeks to find answers to the following questions: (1) How did artistic performers cope with the lockdowns during the pandemic while they were not able to perform as their routine? (2) What did they feel and experience when they were prevented from performing? (3) How did the interruption of this routine affect their social existence? (4) What did they fall back upon in order to ease that interruption during the pandemic?

## 2 Theoretical Framework: Self, Interaction, and Everyday Life

The construction of a social self entails being in social interactions with others and can only be preserved by means of these interactions, especially within daily routines, as Giddens (1986) has suggested. The significance of such interactions comes in terms of providing individuals with a secure and trustworthy space for constructing, maintaining, and presenting themselves.

Everyday interactions between individuals can be said to be fundamental to the embodiment of the ultimately abstract entity that is *society*. These interactions also provide individuals with the basis on which they construct, present, and maintain their selves. As DeNora has suggested (2005: 149), people, by means of utilizing interactions occurring in day-to-day life, constitute social structures, involve themselves in the “business of being”, and exist as actors who have the capacity to perform consciously in a particular social situation. For Blumer (1986: 83), to consider the actions of individuals as the mere product of social structures is to deny and ignore the fact that acting individuals have a self. By this claim, he (1986) draws attention to the process by which people make indications to themselves before taking an action. The process of indication involves the assessment and meaning-making of a situation on the part of consciously engaged individuals. Thus, it can be suggested that the social situations triggering the indicative process of individuals are the sources of selves since it can only be claimed that people have selves if interactions between individuals and situations occur. In other words, the self is constantly socially constituted through recursive social interactions embedded in everyday life between individuals in various social contexts. In most cases, people know how to behave or to act in a given situation by means of the rules and norms of society, since these situations are part of their everyday life; but this

does not mean that the actions of human beings are simply determined by these rules. At the same time, it can be claimed that the social behaviors of individuals exhibit a routinized and settled character.

Giddens (1986: 60) argues that, by acting in a routine manner in the course of day-to-day life, people construct their secure social spaces. Thus, he underlines the significance of everyday routines for both the constitution of social worlds and an individual feeling of trust. He (1986: 64) emphasizes that the systematic character of everyday life, which is constituted by the recursive actions of individuals, is the source of a social structure in which people feel secure through this same systematicity, and conceptualizes this feeling as “ontological security”. Ontological security refers to the autonomy of bodily control in foreseeable routines and encounters within the recursiveness of day-to-day existence (Giddens 1986: 64). Thus, ontological security, based on everyday routines and taken-for-granted interactions, is crucial for the social self to be constructed.

For the interactional construction of the self, the existence of the other is inherently crucial, since individuals can only have a self if they can see themselves through a lens provided by others (Mead 1972). According to Mead (1972: 151), the relational character of the self with the other and the need to be looked at from the perspective of the other begin as early as childhood. Through games, even if playing alone, the child constructs an other, with whom they then shift roles. Thus, the child plays both her part and the part of the other she constructs: “The child says something in one character and responds in another character, and then his responding in another character is a stimulus to himself in the first character, and so the conversation goes on” (Mead 1972: 151). Afterward, the imaginary character of the child substitutes with the real members of society, who are generalized others for an individual. That individual takes the attitudes of the others as the base of her own attitudes. The interrelation of the attitudes of individuals constitutes the framework of the self and thus, it is built upon the responses of the members of a community of which that individual is also a member. That is to say, “selves can only exist in definite relationships to other-selves ... Our own selves exist and enter as such into our experience only in so far as the selves of others exist and enter as such into our experience also.” (Mead 1972: 164). Blumer has claimed (1986) that individuals perform social acts by virtue of interpreting the acts of others by making meaning of the cues coming from others. Thus, people recognize what they are doing, why they are doing it, and know and confirm themselves only in a process of social interaction.

Following this, it can be stated that during the COVID-19 pandemic and the severe social restrictions that were enforced, live performers lost not only the ground of their on-stage interactions but rather, they became disconnected from one of the sources of the self that can only be constituted through their

physical interactions with their audiences in a shared physical environment. Therefore, the experiences of the performers during the COVID-19 pandemic and the new actions taken by the performers in order to ease its impacts, as argued below, should be considered as an interactional process, since the situation (Blumer 1986: 9) has been experienced and interpreted by the performers in terms of its influences on their social existence.

As has been outlined, the self is constantly being constructed socially within the routinized character of everyday life in a variety of contexts. As Goffman suggests, concerning the significance of contexts for the selves, (1967: 3) it is “not ... men and their moments. Rather moments and their men”. With this statement, Goffman highlights the importance of the social situation for the self and its organization. The constitution and the organization of the self have contextuality. Contextuality means that individuals present themselves to others in a given interactional condition that provides the framework for the behaviors of the individuals who are in that interaction. Thus, selves occur both during and according to the interactions individuals involve and can only be comprehended within the framework of such everyday interactions (Goffman 1956). In other words, the contextualities of everyday interactions include the meaning from which the behaviors of individuals emerge.

Ontological security (Giddens 1986) depends on the everyday interactions of individuals through which they constitute their selves. It follows that a fracture or a disruption of these routine interactions brings about a crisis for the self. Therefore, from the theoretical standpoint of this study, “to catch the process of interpretation” of stage performers seems is essential. To do so, it is not sufficient to focus merely on their condition, but on how that condition is being evaluated by the individuals in that condition (Blumer 1986: 86). Thus, this study focuses on how the actors of stage performers were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, prioritizing how they have interpreted and managed the conditions of this global health crisis, an event that has threatened their ontological security which, in a sense, depends on their roles as performers.

### 3 Methodology

The qualitative method is recognized as the best way to capture people's experiences and practices in their own words and intended meaning. Qualitative research aims to investigate and understand phenomena via a narrative approach (Maxwell 2013). For this study, we utilized a narrative approach to reveal and provide deeper insights into the experiences of the performers. We conducted individual, semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten artistic

performers aged between 25 and 40 in 2021 between January and March. Of these ten interviewees, four are musicians, five are theater actors, and one is a dancer. All the interviewees were reached through the social contacts of the researchers.

While the field research was being conducted, theaters, cinemas, restaurants, and live music venues had all been closed for almost 12 months. All interviewees were fully informed about the purpose and content of the research. Their consent was received verbally concerning their voluntary participation in the research and the recording of their voice during interviews in order to protect their rights. The in-depth interviews were conducted online via ZOOM between November and December 2020, since due to social restrictions it was difficult to conduct face-to-face interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Deakin and Wakefield (2014) mention, online interviews can be useful to contact participants who might be difficult to reach face-to-face.

After the data collection process, all the interviews were transcribed and transferred to the MAXQDA database. The names of the interviewees were anonymized and all interviews were identified by numbers. The thematic analysis technique incorporating familiarization, coding, generating, reviewing, and defining themes was used (Guest et al 2012). Subsequently, the transferred data was codified by paying attention to the saturation of narratives under each theme. The themes were constructed from these codes by drawing upon the principles of the thematic analysis technique in order to figure out the narratives and lived experiences of interviewees.

The data analysis revealed five main themes: firstly, *Performance as Construction of Social Self* (section 4); secondly, *Being at the Margin* (section 5); thirdly, *Fraction of Everyday Routines* (section 6); fourthly, *Tactics* (section 7); and, fifthly, *Alternative Routes of the Social Construction of the Self* (section 7 again). In the following sections, the themes of Tactics and Alternative Routes of the Social Construction of the Self will be analyzed together. The other sections then address the remaining respective themes.

#### 4 Performance as Construction of Social Self

Each individual lives in a world of interactions that opens up to different experiences of socialization. As Simmel (1971: 43) notes, “many actions which at first glance appear to consist of the mere unilateral process involve reciprocal effects.” Similarly, the synthesis of the performers, the stage (as physical space), the audience, and the performance (production) form a group, and this group becomes a unity based on mutual interaction and relationship. In Simmel’s (1971: 73) sense, unity is the consensus of interacting individuals, and it is the

total group synthesis that consists of unitary and dualistic relations. From this point of view, we argue that there is an ultimate unity between the performers and the audiences. This unity enables the performers to socialize and realize themselves through their interactions with the audience. At this point, the stage (as physical space) and the production object appear as unifying elements. Thus, it becomes possible to talk about a specific and “unique” social relationship between the two, as the interviewees themselves tended to frame it. As Giddens (2003) states, the social relation is the directly lived relationship with the other – that is, the relation of “us”. The performers complete and make sense of their existences in the context of this relationality. The self arises as doing an act in consideration of the effect of her/his behavior. According to Mead (1972:158), “the self reaches its full development by organizing these attitudes of others into the organized social or group attitudes”. In this sense, the social self refers to the process of interaction with the other. Therefore, the self exists socially day by day and it is the product of a social process that entails an ongoing experience (Mead 1972).

There is a special meaning attributed by the artists to the relationship between the performer and the audience. As Simmel (1971: 128) pointed out, there is a feeling that motivates association and which drives individuals toward forms of existence in the experience itself. The various stages of lockdown and other social restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the togetherness of the audience and the performers at a certain moment on the stage and limited the performers’ customary forms of self. The main reason for this is that the performers – who define the self through this specific relationship and make this definition as part of the self – had lost one of their means of self for an indefinite period. For example, Interviewee 8 described the relation she established between the presence of the audience and the theater and how it was interrupted by the pandemic as follows:

Of course, there are too many negative things; we can’t be collective, we can’t be in motion, we can’t interact. The theater is something that contains all of these. We need to interact; we need to be a group and we are so disconnected from that right now ... You cannot do theater alone, there is no theater without an audience.

INTERVIEWEE 8, theater actor

This narrative indicates that the self is achieved through relationality and that this construction has been interrupted by the pandemic restrictions. As Freund (2006) states, a social relationship emerges as a combination of individual and collective meanings. At the same time, it leads individuals to create the self through this relationship. For example, Interviewee 9 explained the

relationship he established between his existence and the rupture of this relationship with the audience after the closing of the stage as follows:

The excitement of being on that stage, the freedom of self-expression, the satisfaction of the ego ... I am nothing on my own now. What would I become if I did not do something to express myself? The effect was something like nothingness. I feel worthless, oppressed, compressed. That's why I can put earning money in second place; that just doesn't satisfy your ego. I want to be applauded and appreciated ... There is a classic conversation; why don't we applaud the architects after they do their work? The man's job is architecture, the man built the house, he did his job, bravo, everyone applauds. They don't need such a thing. We do. We want to hear applause.

INTERVIEWEE 9, theater actor

Based on what Interviewee 9 said, it can be assumed that there is a clustering in which their productions are affirmed only because they identify themselves with this presented production based on the stage, the performance, and the presence and approval of the audience. The COVID-19 pandemic and closure of performance spaces endangered the existence of the performer by disrupting this cluster, and as the interviewees said, this experience results in a sense of worthlessness, since dance, music or theatre performances require an interactional ground that entails the existence of audiences and their exchange of messages with the performers (Setiawan et al. 2020). In this respect, ontological security becomes controversial for the performers since they define and create themselves under the gaze and reaction of the audience.

The interruption of the process of the social self – which is an endless process – emerges as a problem, and as Simmel (1971: 130) observes, “the problem is that of the measure of significance and accent which belongs to the individual” in the social milieu. There is a direct relationship between self-actualization and the feeling of importance within in the group, as stated by Simmel. For the performers, applause is a symbolic indication of both the presence of the audience and the affirmation of the performer. As Blumer (2004: 100) points out, individuals interact by commenting on and responding to others' behavior and practices, and they constitute their acts by referring to these comments. Interviewee 3's opinions in this context were as follows:

There is nothing you can get a response from or anything that affects you. Showing your creativity is something that occurs with communication

and interaction. I think this sums it up exactly: I'm doing something. In other words, this is the biggest wound for people who are involved in the performing arts. We are useful when we appear on the stage because we are not doctors, lawyers, or like other professionals with certain titles. Because when you can't produce, you feel useless. This is probably true for every profession, but it is more valid in our profession. You can't produce, you think it's useless, your way of being is lost, then you question your reason for existence. It starts with knowing yourself. When you cannot create, produce and feel useful, your purpose of existence is lost.

INTERVIEWEE 3, theater actor

Similar to what Interviewee 3 stated, other interviewees also reflected on their established relationship between performance, presenting, and existing – suggesting that presenting the performance to the audience is a prerequisite for existence. Thus, sharing the same space and being close enough physically to others to be noticed are crucial for people to exist socially (Goffman 1963: 17). In this sense, the physical encounter of the performance, with a present audience in a shared space, can be considered the fulfillment of the interaction between the performers and the audience. With the combination of all the elements of this cluster, the social self is completed. The satisfaction experienced by the interviewees with applause emerges when self-creation takes place. Interviewee 5, a theater actor, explains his perspective as follows:

Despite that – I say that with *despite* underlined – we exist in life with applause or by bringing something to life on stage and with that excitement. Because we can't give up on this, we try to live by tolerating certain things. The first thing I can say is that a process without applause has begun for us ... Our job occurs at the moment when you are face to face with people, your breath is mixed with theirs or those moments are intertwined, seeing people watching you, and real contact.

INTERVIEWEE 5, theater actor

Based on the relationship that interviewee 5 established between applause and the state of absence, it can be said that applause is a signifier of the production of the social self. The craving for applause and its relationship to satisfaction for the interviewee shows that these are important means of self-actualization and that they are jeopardized by the closure of performance spaces. It reflects the sociality of the performers' existence. The self is the individual in relation to others. Thus, while performers talk about themselves, they also talk

about themselves as part of the relationality with others (Mead 1972) along the lines that we described above. In that sense, it is important to emphasize that the state of subjectivity is established through the relationship with the audience.

## 5 Being at the Margins: “We Are Left out of Support”

The performers’ shared feeling of being ignored during the pandemic has two layers that are interconnected. The first layer presents itself as the deprivation of economic resources – with each of the performers stating that they have been left alone without any financial support while their professional activities were halted due to the preventative measures against COVID-19. The second layer refers to their interpretation of the government’s lockdown policies as unfair, since, for instance, the activities of entertainment sectors and artistic performance spaces were halted due to the nationwide restrictions, while shopping centers were open as of the time this field work was conducted. The overlapping of these two layers resulted in a vulnerable social position that the performers have been left to overcome. For instance, according to a news article written by Abatay (2021), there was no legal regulation for the theaters that have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. One actor reflected that he became unemployed as a result of the pandemic and started to work as a construction worker in order to survive economically, adding: “... this feels extraordinarily bad. I forgot to be on the stage. Theater was the only place I can breathe in, it was a space of life”.

One of the prominent experiences performers put forward is that they are the others who are the first discarded individuals in the society, especially in times of crisis. It seems that performers at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic have been regarded as those who should abide by the codes of moral consciousness and take their social responsibility as a duty for the general functioning of society (Durkheim 1984: 3). Interviewee 3, a theatre actor, said that “It (*the government*) doesn’t consider you as an individual. It doesn’t think of what we are doing as an occupation,” while others stated:

These are difficult times for everyone but especially for those who are in our community. Whenever something bad happens in the world or our country, the activities of performers are suspended; musicians cannot earn, dancers cannot earn, singers cannot earn, etc.

INTERVIEWEE 10, singer

People don't understand that restriction first endanger us. All the disasters in the world endanger us first. Not only disasters, but the news of martyrs also endanger us first (referring to the soldiers who lost their lives) ... Our stage performances are being canceled because of these and people could not comprehend this: we pay our rent, bills ... This is what we do for a living. They think that we make music just for pleasure.

INTERVIEWEE 1, musician

The interviewees feel that they occupy a marginalized social position since they view themselves as being treated as if they are the enemies of society, which indicates a severely abraded trust between the performers and the state. Some of the interviewees indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic has been an accelerator and an excuse to restrain artistic activities. Interviewee 8, a theater actor, expressed this issue in the following way: "The first restriction is enforced on theaters ... and I cannot think of it as a good intention."

What does it mean, that much hostility to music, to art? We do everything we can for the country to develop. A country where art cannot improve is not a developed country. They (*the government*) do their best to downgrade art ... They primarily target art.

INTERVIEWEE 6, singer and musician

Their claims of being at the margins are also based on the reflection that the implementations of the government in order to counter the spread of the virus are biased. Reflecting on the policy of maintaining restrictions on performance spaces while shopping centers were allowed to open up, they described this as irrational. As can be seen, what is at stake is not only that they found the prevention implementations solely irrational and biased but more importantly they found them to be damaging to the bond individuals need to feel if they are embraced by society.

Shopping centers have been open since June 2020 and in July restrictions were being ended, but not for us. Putting aside economic conditions, I say, 'Hello! I am here, too.' What am I going to do? Shopping malls are open but we cannot perform in open areas such as parks while keeping social distance with masks. Why? Because shopping malls are normal, part of everyday life – but theater, music, performance arts ... This feeling is devastating.

INTERVIEWEE 7, theater actor

Today you can get on a plane full from nose to tail, but apparently people can be infected in theaters even when they sit with the next seat left empty. For sure, something different is happening, it is obvious. How can these people bring home bread? How come they have no support? It is a trivialization of the sector as a whole ...

INTERVIEWEE 2, musician and composer

These narratives demonstrate that, even if the closures and restrictions are found to be necessary, economic difficulties which performers have had to face left them to conclude that they have been discarded, left alone without any support – where such support should have been provided by the state. Interviewee 4, a professional dancer and dance instructor, stated: “We are trying to survive. We are literally hungry. This is the first time I am in such a condition.” Another interviewee reflected on the uneven closures and absence of support as follows:

Everywhere can be closed if it's necessary but we are asking for *economic* support ... We are left out of support because they don't consider theater actors to be an occupation if you are not in a state theater ... They have to give that support. Monthly economic support could be provided to the owners of theaters and they could also share this support with us – just an idea. Support would be support even if it was a small amount.

INTERVIEWEE 9, theater actor

## 6 Fractures of Everyday Routine

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic on a global scale has dissolved the economic, cultural, and social structures and everyday routines of individuals on which these structures are based. The fracturing of these routines has required their reorganization at both the micro and macro levels. For instance, countries were suddenly faced with the need to plan their economic projections according to the almost unpredictable situations of the pandemic, many education systems had to switch from the physical classroom to a remote online scenario, and people had to find new ways of socializing and meeting their loved ones. All these changes and attempts of agents to attune to them express the need to construct new trustworthy routines – demonstrating the significance of the everyday both for social structures and individuals.

Thus, in terms of this study, performers' deprivation of their pre-pandemic activities – which are the crucial components of their everyday

routines – impairs their social trust in social organization and is experienced as a crisis arising from the sense of uncertainty. It can be comprehended through the lens of the concept of “ontological security” (Giddens 1986: 64), which is constituted by means of the routines and encounters of everyday life, as outlined above. Therefore, the dissolution of the systematic character of daily life triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic is being experienced by the performers interviewed here as a radical “ontological insecurity” (Giddens 1986: 62). Some interviewees explicitly pointed to this socially ontological insecurity as follows:

We have gone into a period where we don't understand what is going on. It's like 'What happened? What is going on?' It is something like you have reset your whole social life. What will these people do? The people who gave their hearts, aims and years to their jobs are asked to leave to do something else. It's not possible!

INTERVIEWEE 7, theater actor

The systematic and recursive character of everyday practices needs to have time to provide people with a secure social system. It can be suggested that the more these routines extend over time the more exacerbated their social insecurity becomes, due to the deprivation of their everyday routine experience. As Banerjee and Rai (2020) point out, the everyday life of humankind mostly follows a regular and certain trail, thus it follows that this sudden breaking of the routine causes insecurity and uncertainty.

What is important here, in terms of performers, is not only the loss of a routine practice but also their bodily ability and habit. Regaining the disposition of the body after the pandemic, which is a prerequisite for performance, and placing it into an everyday routine is a challenging process.

It has been 21 years as a professional dancer and I have been a principal dancer for 17 years ... These 21 years were very busy – without pause, holidays ... We were performing for 12 days consecutively. We were always on tour ... It takes a long time to recommence with that. It is difficult to perform, to control your breath, to have your muscles working if you stop for a while ... We were on stage, we were earning money, traveling ... All of these seem more valuable now as we lack them ... No one knew that we would be in such deep deprivation.

INTERVIEWEE 4, professional dancer and dance instructor

Some performers pointed out that they experienced the fracturing of their everyday routines as a result of an alteration of the nature of their performance

area, even though they have returned to the stage. This changing nature of the routine character of performances involves emotions that could not be received anymore, the dissolution of common patterns of interaction, and the disruption of the temporality of a performance.

Now there is a reality of audiences with the *surgical* mask, that's very weird. Are they laughing or not? How are they watching? Their faces are covered. There is a blockage concerning the transmission of energy ... Laughter can be heard but believe me it becomes muffled. You cannot hear it as was in a normal performance.

INTERVIEWEE 7, theater actor

It's fine to come back from work early but on the other hand, our days of performing decreased from six days to once a week, and now that is done, too. Our live performance ended at ten o'clock last week. We normally *start* at ten. When we started to perform at seven, some of our friends said 'you are going on-stage before my working hours end.' Some of them couldn't come anyway. We had to cut back the money we earn from performances since ... people couldn't come in these hours.

INTERVIEWEE 1, musician

These narratives show that insecurity has been experienced on two levels. Firstly, during the earlier phase of the pandemic, the performers faced a crisis of unforeseeable uncertainty; secondly, they sought to adjust to this condition and to reorganize their daily life constructing new routines in order to constitute ontological security.

As mentioned above, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the restrictions of artistic performances and entertainment activities, people working in these areas were faced with a major crisis of uncertainty, since the routines through which they construct their sense of self in a secure manner fractured for an indefinite period. The statements of one of the Interviewee 9, a theater actor, reflects this insecurity: "I don't have the strength to work. I don't know anything *apart from acting* though. I cannot see my future, I don't have self-confidence either." Two of the interviewees identify the ontological insecurity they experienced as follows:

We don't have a plan and we are not in the situation to make a plan. The plan is just to survive ... We'll see how it's going to be ... Artists, dancers, musicians, etc. don't have a plan. We don't know.

INTERVIEWEE 4, professional dancer and dance instructor

Firstly, I was shocked. We were experiencing something the world was experiencing. For sure, the first impression was panic. It is like ‘What am I going to do? How am I going to sustain my life? How long will it last like this?’

INTERVIEWEE 6, singer

Although the interviewees said that they found themselves in an uncertain and insecure position, their narratives also reflect that they reflexively consider themselves and seek to reconstruct a new space where they feel secure through their new routines, however fragile or tentative those may be.

Therefore, individuals have experienced double pressure since the lockdown process, which caused uncertainty in everyday life and interrupted the performances of existence. However, as Bennett (2005) points out, the spaces and extensions of everyday life are highly plural and contested, constantly being (re)defined by processes of movement. Also, individuals strive to return to their everyday life routine, thus they produce tactics that can be a response to the loss of ontological security.

### 6.1 *Making Use of the Pandemic and Overcoming Fractures*

Uncertainty and unforeseeability are the conditions of the present form of society, a condition characterized by Bauman as liquid modernity. As Bauman and Raud have suggested (2018: 94), people’s journey of self-construction within social settings is an everlasting process in which they have to revise themselves in a rapidly changing world in terms of economic, political, social values, health, etc. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fact that people – especially those in a more vulnerable position – are always required to be prepared. Interviewee 8, a theater actor, suggested and highlighted the significance of the reflexive character of the actions of individuals: “We should have the strength to produce immediately new alternatives, we have seen it.” This draws attention here to how people seek to constitute, even if temporary, new orders within the fractured structures of social existence. Further, it can also be seen that some interviewees make new meanings of the conditions of the pandemic by viewing it as an opportunity of sorts.

In the same manner, the reflexive character of the individual action especially triggered by a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic leads people to consider the ways through which they can reconstitute their ontological security as mentioned above. As Interviewee 6, a singer, stated: “... then we started to think about new solutions with my team-mates. I guess one somehow would keep up with everything, get used to it.” Another interviewee reflected on their use of their newly found available time as follows:

I never went out, for three months. Never! I didn't feel so unhappy. It is like an opportunity. I did work, a lot. I wrote a lot of songs ... It contributed to me positively in terms of production. I read a lot of books and saw lots of movies. I wrote a lot. I studied techniques.

INTERVIEWEE 2, musician and composer

All these attempts through which individuals in the study have sought to ease the impact of the pandemic brings us to the tactics people draw upon in order to construct new routines that reflect similar influences on them with their previous social interactional routines.

## 7 Alternative Routes of the Social Construction of the Self and Tactics

As mentioned, interaction and relationality are the key elements not only for the construction of the self but also its maintenance. Along with the closure of performance venues, performers were devoid both of their economic sources and of social interactional structures. One of the interviewees expressed their struggles with this deprivation:

I wake up without any aims now, there is nothing you can do ... I lived so attached to it that I broke down spiritually and bodily. Really! I've missed doing my show. I've missed people. I've missed being applauded and yes, I admitted, I've missed my ego that I feel on the stage. The things that affect me the most are not hearing the applause, not living within the chaos of the process of getting ready *for the stage*.

INTERVIEWEE 10, singer

Interviewee 10's narrative indicates that the process of preparing for the performance has ritualistic meaning and these rituals are also considered a significant part of interactions. It is clear that, as argued above, in order to construct the social self, people need others to whom they present themselves and interact through their presentations, i.e. products of performance. These products of performance may involve singing, playing an instrument, dancing, or staging a play, all of which in familiar routinized circumstances have been done before audiences, who give feedback and responses to the performers on-stage. For the performers, these interactional relationships are of such significance that when they are deprived of them, they tend to simulate an

interactional environment resembling such on-stage forms of interaction. As one of the interviewees stated:

I cast my boyfriend, my brother as audiences and asked them, ‘How did you find it? Was it fine?’ so I handled the need to be appreciated in this way. I attributed the feeling of being applauded and approved by the family members. I asked them when I painted, whoever I am with, or on social media ... (*She mentioned making Instagram posts about meals she cooked*) I thought that maybe someone would write something, would say ‘good job’ on Instagram when I put something in the oven ...

INTERVIEWEE 5, theater actor

As another interviewee indicated, regardless of using social media, all these efforts should be seen as efforts to maintain a social self that was previously constructed by stage productions and interactions.

... I rather think like ‘they don’t know what to do’ than to see a difference between the one who *uses it* (social media) and who doesn’t. It is the panic of how to be useful. It can be something like, ‘I’ve actualized myself up to now like this, how can I do it in this lockdown?’ I find it very understandable.

INTERVIEWEE 7, theater actor

Bauman and Raud (2018: 81) claim that “The production of the self is an interaction which is persistent, sustained, everlasting ... between ‘I’ and ‘You’ or ‘It’. It (*Self*) is the product of the complementary actions of two agents – ‘I’ and ... ‘You’”. This interactionalist aspect of the self seems more crucial for such performers and its significance for the participants of the study, as demonstrated by the narrative below, becomes evident in relation to the disruption to the interactional routines that took place in performance venues. Therefore, as the interactional ground considered crucial for the self was being disrupted by the pandemic conditions, some interviewees stated that they sought to construct new interactional grounds to substitute for those that had been fractured. For instance, using social media services, according to Vandenberg et al. (2021), during the lockdowns across Europe, musicians rapidly adopted live-streaming services such as Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, and started to use these services as a tool for both earning money and socialization. These digital means of interaction are a fruitful tactic for some interviewees, even though they also find them unsatisfactory and even unreal.

I recorded videos. At least I thought I'd feel better if I recorded and shared them. Then I thought, 'What am I doing?' I felt bad. Then I said, 'Why are you retreating? Maybe you are making a couple of people laugh, that's your job ... It is not like being on the stage though, it doesn't satisfy you.

INTERVIEWEE 9, theater player

I have never been like this ... Now I upload Instagram stories while even singing a reprise. I fill this gap like this, I guess ... I receive applause there, they say, 'It sounds great' ... These applause received from social media, I think, are support for everyone. Because there are so many live streams ... There are some friends of mine saying, 'We closed down and are starting live streams.' It is not like being on the stage. I find it kind of schizophrenic. There is one screen, some people you cannot see are watching you, and it's not real. You'd look at the screen and say, 'Yes, my friends' ... I posted online excessively in this period more than I have ever done before.

INTERVIEWEE 2, musician and composer

The above narratives illustrate that being in mutual and immediate interaction is crucial for the performers' sense of self. Such immediate mutual interaction involves performances and audiences who take on the role of giving feedback, and this should be in a flow. However, as the social restrictions implemented during the pandemic rendered it impossible to have immediate interaction with such audiences, people endeavors for new ways of reconstructing interactional conditions. According to Banerjee and Rai (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic affected face-to-face social interaction and elicited the need to find other ways of interaction in the era of digitalization such as using social media and conferencing platforms (Instagram, Zoom, Skype, etc.) and of digital hang-outs opportunities in order to create social ties and at least to maintain already existing ones. Interviewee 8, who is a theater actor, stated, "We can do a lot of activities online. There are theater actors who consider social media to be a new and alternative door." One musician in the study stated,

We figured it out so that we took song requests on Instagram for a given amount of money ... Not that much, however much they would like to pay ... We want it to be as if people came to listen to us and they wrote their song request on a napkin. We didn't determine a price ... It, in fact, was fine, we maybe are away from our stage but we are not away from music.

INTERVIEWEE 6, singer and musician

Individuals can only construct a self and organize themselves (behaviors, manners, voice tone, etc.) if they can see themselves through the eyes of others (Mead 1972: 151). Therefore, the self cannot be considered apart from social interactions with others (Bauman and Raud 2018: 88). For the performers in the study, having feedback and reactions are evidently a key source for their selves.

Sometimes we needed to have the appreciation and approval of a mass we created in social media live-streams, doing something different. We did something we wouldn't do otherwise, for instance opening a live-stream. We needed to get credit, to be told, 'You're great!' – to be satisfied.

INTERVIEWEE 5, theater actor

Not surprisingly, drawing upon social media is one favorable channel for the participants, providing them with a space to be in interaction with others, but it is not limited to this alone. As shared by one of the interviewees, the tactics for constituting a space in order to interact with others by means of performance can run over the boundaries of the digital into the non-digital world of interactions.

We decided to make – to whatever degree the police allow it – our music not inside our homes, but outside in the streets with people passing by. We thought that at least both they'd feel fine and we could keep on with what we're doing, maintain our performance ... We thought that we could make our voices heard by people in another way.

INTERVIEWEE 4, professional dancer and dance instructor

## 8 Conclusion

This article has produced a framework, based on an interactionist theoretical perspective (Blumer, 1986; Giddens 1986; Goffman 1967; Mead 1972), to explore the COVID-19 crisis experiences of stage performers. The empirical data shows that the on-stage routine of performers is crucial for their social existence and self-construction. However, the closing of performance venues interrupted the everyday routines and stage performances of the performers on different levels. Firstly, the lockdown caused disconnection of taken-for-granted relations involving performer, performance, stage, and audiences. Thus, relationality – the primary source of self-affirmation for such performers – was interrupted. Second, the performers experienced insecurity and uncertainty in everyday

life due to the lack of interactional relationality. Finally, under vastly different conditions, they had to be reorganized themselves and in terms of their routine, by engaging in attempts to construct new interactional grounds simulating their on-stage interactions with audiences to reconstitute their ontological security.

The conditions of lockdown in Turkey resulted in these performers not being able to produce artistically in the manner they were accustomed to, and not being able to (re)construct a self for an uncertain period of time. The significance of such a rupture to the participants' routine should not be underestimated – especially when performers associate their selves and their self-actualization with the artistic production presenting on the stage to audiences the performers socialized with is being considered.

In conclusion, the construction of self is never a completed process; rather it entails an ongoing process in which individuals are always in a mode of 'becoming' through interactions and relations with each other. What has been interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic for the performers is the process of becoming that occurs on the stage. This interruption is especially crystalized when its deficiency is felt in everyday life. As demonstrated in this study, this interruption had a profound impact on stage performers. The tendency the performers show to reconstruct their ontological security and their relationalities simulating on-stage interactions is a strong indication of how deeply they have been struck by the lockdown process. Even though the self involves a process of becoming, it can be claimed that the components of the self and social existence for the performers are determined by the stage, performance, audiences, and self-affirmation.

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