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AUTOETHNOGRAPHIES FROM COVID-19 TIMES

***Abstract.** Most studies on the effects of COVID-19 have dealt with the general aspects of the economy, education, and public health. However, very few have approached how the pandemic has affected the individual human being. This paper presents five autoethnographies, four from students and one from a teacher, all of whom study/work at the Ural Federal University in Yekaterinburg. The report highlights the feelings and vicissitudes of these five individuals while trying to cope with this deadly virus.*

***Keywords:** COVID-19, online period, education, autoethnography, inner self.*

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АВТОЭТНОГРАФИИ ВРЕМЕНИ COVID-19

Аннотация. Большинство исследований о воздействии КОВИД-19 было посвящено общим аспектам экономики, образования и общественного здравоохранения. Однако лишь немногие из них касались того, каким образом пандемия поразила отдельного человека. В данной работе представлены пять автоэтнографий: четыре от студентов и одна от преподавателя, которые учатся/работают в Уральском федеральном университете в Екатеринбурге. В докладе освещаются чувства и превратности этих пяти человек при попытке справиться с этим смертоносным вирусом.

Ключевые слова: КОВИД-19, онлайн-период, образование, автоэтнография, внутреннее «я».

When Covid-19 started making headlines in at the end of 2019 in China, many regarded it as a Chinese question. Today, having become a worldwide pandemic, the expectations, despite all the measures taken to check it, the hopes are it will become endemic, just as the flu. Covid-19 has equaled humans in that, excuse the irony, both the rich and the poor have had equal access to it; it has also shown that the first type of human beings are more equal than the second. Forbes reports a decline of 58 billionaires in 2020 and that «those who remain are 51 % poorer [by just holding] \$ 8 trillion, down \$700 billion from 2019» [1]. In rich countries, the dispossessed have suffered more due to their unequal access to health care; in poor countries, on the other hand, knowledge of the real effects of the pandemic will take years to be fully accounted. If there is legacy of Covid-19, it is the feeling that the world is not ready for events like this, which according to predictions is only the first.

Furthermore, while search on Covid-19 has mostly been devoted to health and economics, which is entirely natural, research on education has also found its space by focusing mostly on how to revolutionize education[2] and the need to reconceive higher education (HE) [3] as well as the impact of this serious pandemic[4] in accelerating inequality, the new role of innovation, a re-evaluation of the role of

schools, and the transformation of the parental role in the family [5,6], especially women and children [7] as well as men [8], the usual breadwinner in the family. The responses to the pandemic in Russian education were strikingly similar to those of other OECD members in terms of policies and emergency prevention measures at both the macro and micro educational structures including the family.[9] In the rest of the world [10], the school shutdown had already affected «1.2 billion children in 186 countries». These figures only allow to have an imaginable big picture of the pandemic. However, the study of the effects of COVID-19 on particular human beings has not been, hitherto, addressed.

This paper problematizes the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of five young actors in Russian HE. These actors, whose names have been changed, include four graduate students and one of their teachers from the Institute of Humanities at the Ural Federal University.

Methodology

The pandemic self-narrative was obtained from either classmates or friends studying at this institution. No preconceived questionnaire was given to the five informants; rather they were asked to pour their inner life and self out on paper. This open approach allows not to enclose the narratives in a given direction but to let thoughts flow seamlessly. For ethical reasons, the informants' names have been changed when used. The analysis of the narratives and conclusions have been derived from the use of autoethnography's three basic principles:

(1) culture is a group-oriented concept by which self is always connected with others;

(2) the reading and writing of self-narratives provide a window through which self and others can be examined and understood;

(3) telling one's story does not automatically result in the cultural understanding of the self and others, which only grows out of in-depth cultural analysis and interpretation [11, p. 13].

The paper portrays the informants' individual experiences along the COVID-19 pandemic long, winding road.

Results and discussion

When looked at from a general perspective, the first impression the autoethnographies give is that some of the informants focus more on the objective aspects of the pandemic and how material conditions affected their lives: their statements about their psychological effects are not their most salient feature. However, even in those cases when it seems the informant is describing how issues in technology or isolation affected their learning process, each personal narrative reveals how the individual self undergoes transformations as a result of their assessment of outside conditions. In other words, the more the outside world worsens, the more the inner psychological state changes. These changes range from a state of arising tensions as a result of the news and measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic to a state of first acceptance of their need and then to fear followed of terror when the pandemic is raging around to that of complete despair in the future.

The beginning of the pandemic implied a change of perception from being something far and outside the student's surroundings.

Victor, the teacher, says: «I played in class a short video clip from the WHO featuring a Singaporean expert describing what they knew about the virus. I did not feel the students really worried about it and just saw it as a listening and discussion activity». A few days later after the first case in Russia in January 2020, and the rapid spread of the disease during February and March, the country implemented a series of measures to contain the disease. «I was quite calm at the beginning», Sveta describes, «since I have always been a homebody, the lockdown was easy as long as I thought that it wouldn't last long». Certainty and hope are shaken when the unexpected last more than usual. «But as soon as I started to realize that it [the pandemic] would last long if not forever, I started to feel bad right away», Sveta continued.

A similar situation, though looked at from the new learning conditions, was mentioned by Natalia who had to undergo a period of adaptation to the new learning conditions. She was frustrated at first because she could not succeed in learning at the pace she was used to due to the increased demands and the resulting effect on health. «After the first unsuccessful attempts that showed neither teacher nor students were

prepared to switch to online learning, many things became an obstacle to the extent that at the end of 2020 I started feeling chronic mental and physical fatigue». When elaborating on the same issue, Ksenia, a student and teacher, felt extremely disappointed when she realized she could not motivate her pupils in the same way nor keep their levels of attention. «During the first implementation of online learning, I felt some of the students despite being online, seemingly paying attention, could not focus on the task and many were not motivated at all. This made me feel very anxious. On the same topic, the teacher adds, «I tried to help my son's classmates with their English, to give them something extra, so that they kept the little they had learned alive. As a result, we organized a small group to work online forty minutes two times a week. Unfortunately, not all families had the adequate equipment, broadband and latency for online educational work. In some case, noise and the very parents interfering in the process hindered my work. I had to invent an excuse and gave up after three sessions».

Other health problems this first online learning period are described by Marina who despite being calm during the defense of her BA diploma, says that «spending a lot of time in front of the computer brought me posture problems and pain in my back and legs», and unfortunately the period «spoiled my vision too». This is also an issue raised by the teacher who despite trying to exercise felt that every day he felt worse with back pain, cramps and numbness in the legs.

In a review article connecting the relationship between the psyche and soma, Kumar and Yeragani [12, p. 233] contend that though previously considered independent, «there is a complex network of feedback, mediation, and modulation among the central and autonomic nervous systems, the endocrine system, the immune system, and the stress system. This may explain why lack of communications with her parents, the inability to make a medical appointment, and find her daily medication led to Sveta's «depression and anxiety disorder» which in the case of the teacher was «unusual higher blood pressure» probably related to anxiety; «a sensation of despair», in Natalia; and surprisingly «comfort», in Ksenia. It seems her being at home all the time, and her «careful approach» to the situation saved her from its bad effects.

Only Sveta and the teacher mention fear in their account. The former asserts, «In isolation, I started to feel sad, trapped in my apartment, and worried that I could catch the virus or worse that I could transmit it to others. At the same time, I had to study online ... with the sun shining and the birds singing. In autumn, I experienced the worst depression of my life». These feelings referred by the student are entirely normal. What she lacked was nearby support. Prolonged isolation and lack of human contact can lead to mental problems. Empirical investigations on adults and adolescents confirm a connection between feeling alone and depression [13], while others have interestingly found a more explanatory nature for depressive symptoms among adolescents linked to lack of contact with friends [14]. Though none of the students is actually an adolescent nor an older adult – where most studies have been focused on – words like emptiness, lack of financial resources to buy medications and the subsequent need to put a financial burden on her mother have made her feel guilty until now.

The source of fear for the teacher is different. «My first preoccupation were my children and my wife. As I am much older, in case I caught the virus and had a fatal outcome, she had to be healthy enough to raise them». Fear of death is natural in humans, especially when they have a big compromise with their family; parental love implies that kind of compromise which is translated in many different ways that go beyond their role as breadwinners. «I was also afraid of bringing the disease home. As a result, I learned not to touch anything in the public transport if possible, carried with me a sanitizing agent, and disinfected with detergent any container as well as the door and bathroom knob». These may seem extreme things to do, but the logics was in trying to limit as much as possible the areas of contagion. «Of course, I was also very worried because I have a large extended family, and even though I knew they protected themselves, there was no guarantee they would not get sick».

The perception of their teachers' work during the pandemic was also an aspect the student informants wrote about. Their words allow the authors to contend that the informants were disillusioned with the way some of their teachers approached the online period. According to Oxford Learner's Thesaurus, to feel disillusioned means disappointed because the person you admired or the idea you believed to be good and

true now seems without value [15]. What if not can be interpreted from Marina who asserts that «Lectures and seminars were not fully implemented, and the teachers seemed to be talking to themselves without any interaction with the students». That is, this student is not satisfied with the teacher's competences and performance during the teaching learning process. «The personality of the teacher», Ksenia argues, «decides everything: either they can teach online (know how to do it technically, can adapt their lessons and still attract attention) and have a desire or not. As for the educational institutions, the way they control the teachers can also determine the quality. If the teachers are asked to give lessons online in Zoom (for example) and later will be checked, they will have to do it. But when they are asked only to give lessons, they can send an exercise by e-mail. This isn't the same». These are very strong words that touch the moral fiber of the profession.

«When one goes out of the comfort zone in the teaching profession as it happened during the online period, keeping in touch with the students and asking for feedback are essential» the teacher insists, «the change of medium from the classroom to the screen implies different ways of doing the usual things. It is not a matter of screen or sound; it is a matter of communication, of finding ways to get the message across, ways that go beyond words and embrace the full multimodality of semiotic systems». True, probably only few of those in the profession who had to work online had the technological competence to teach online; this is understandable. What is not is the lack of a professional response to the new demands with little preoccupation for the learning outcomes.

Finally, except for the teacher, none of the other informants has been vaccinated against COVID-19. Even though the Sputnik V's efficacy was validated by internationally reviewed data published in *The Lancet*, one of the oldest and best-known medical journals, they do trust in the vaccine. Though not anti-vax, three students may have been influenced by the seemingly culturally transmitted lack of trust in anything coming from the state, a belief reminiscent of Soviet times. The other student is eager to be vaccinated; she contends that her family had Soviet medicine in high esteem. Their conflicting points of view confirm that attitudes, as individual

constructs transmitted from generation to generation, difficult to challenge because the symbolic powers of historical discourse embed themselves in the culture to such an extent that unconsciously they flourish in the language and actions of its members. This same inference may be applied to the reluctance of some informants to write about their feelings and the inner self, though their words reveal them. When this study was Even though three informants were asked whether they had been afraid or not during the pandemic, their denial may probably reflect a cultural trait. Though fear as a psychological drama is depicted in the literature of, for instance, Afinogenov (1904—1941), the historical feats speak of the intrinsic values of this fearless great nation. However, this in no way precludes that the individual under hostile conditions may feel threatened, which is not weakness but the need to voice a natural human feeling. Probably, if many would acknowledge fear as something natural, many life events such as premature death as a result of accidents, for instance, or drug addiction would disappear.

Conclusions

Drawing generalizing conclusions, as research demands, becomes a very complex intellectual exercise when talking about on human experiences as a result of the conflicting subjectivities involved in the research, on the one hand, the informant tasked with emptying his soul on paper; and the researcher, tasked with interpreting that soul, on the other. However, somethings must be said.

All five informants experienced the pandemic and online education in very different ways. For some, the period had more material than psychological effects, though for all, this implied a new reality that seems to be the new normal that they are learning how to live. How this new reality will later affect the psychological wellbeing of not only the informants but of the Russian population as a whole depending on their job, social class, and region may become a ubiquitous topic for social sciences research in the next few years.

A few more words come to mind: though the economic impact of the pandemic has been serious, it is an imperative to boost the material, spiritual, and working environment incentives for doctors, regardless of their specialty; for teachers,

regardless of the educational level; and researcher, regardless of their areas of expertise. These three non-economic sectors are the fundamental basis for the development of any country. The first guarantees the health of the other two; the second the formation of the first and the third, and the last one the social and economic advancement of the nation.

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