



COVID-19 Online LISTENING POST

Part 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS & EXPERIENCES, PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES, PART 3: ANALYSIS & HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

Ireland, Dublin, 25th of Juni 2020

Participants: 10 members (6 women and 4 men) participated in the Listening Post. Two were based in Ireland, four in Britain, and others came from France, Italy, Israel and the United States. Most, though not all, had taken part in previous online Listening Posts in this series.

Themes identified from sharing experiences, feelings and associations

Uncertainty exacerbated by the news of COVID-19 resurgencies eg. In Israel, China, Kazakhstan, is experienced as heaviness in the head - "heavy is the head that wears the crown (corona)" - and stressful. A lostness is triggered by initial cocooning and now a gradual re-opening of sorts - evoking links to a book by Ed Shapiro titled "Lost in Familiar Places" - and signalling feelings of helplessness and regression associated with collective trauma.

The virtualisation of our shared lives - through Zoom and all the other media platforms through which we interact - stands in contrast to the particularity of local experiences of the coronavirus pandemic and the social and political reactions to the spread of the the virus. Members spoke of the importance to them of joining the *Dublin* listening post. There are different national experiences of dealing with COVID-19 and a suggestion that there may be a "competition for messiness" between nations as to which country is handling it worse.

Overwhelming grief is juxtaposed with the opening up of new opportunities - every cloud has a silver lining. For example, an older woman's Covid-related death opens up her apartment for occupation by a young person; the illness and early retirement of another enables organisational renewal, and a sudden spike in cases in Kazakhstan leads to the postponement and deferred pressure to deliver (virtual) lecture. These reliefs in the face of others' misfortune are sources of guilt, a form of survivor guilt: "I've had quite a good lockdown".

A series of contradictions:

So much time / not enough time

In Dublin / yet not there

Knowing / not knowing

Naked fear/ hope of finding vaccine

Safety in numbers (collective action) vs danger in numbers (contagion)

Taking care / under threat
 Older persons shielded at home but exposed to virus in care homes
 Together / not together
 Ability to connect/ disconnect
 Busy dreams/nightmares / quiet less productive days

We formerly neglected to speak about neglect of older persons (neglect in “care” homes) and overlooked low-paid workers whom we now are forced to recognise as ‘essential workers’ to help us stay safe, well and fed during C-19.

As time goes on we have a sense of awakening to something we already know but may have been ignoring/denying - that we are all not ‘all in this together’. Inequalities of status, living/working conditions (retired/cocooning/detached; fatigued from overwork/ perplexed at insufficient community take up of help) and opportunities to progress (Black Lives Matter and Brixton police/street party clashes) are being surfaced. These call to mind a dream about donning a mask, that turned out to be dirty and could not be cleaned, leaving the dreamer in a bind as to whether it was safer to leave it on or take it off.

The pandemic has exposed privilege in various forms, including racial, gender, social and economic. The political situations around the world at this time seem more threatening than the pandemic -“We are in a storm together”. In attending to this we experience guilt, fear, “circular thinking” or “stuckness”, loneliness and despair.

There seemed to be broad consensus amongst the group and a difficulty in activating the break out rooms technically, suggesting elements of basic assumption oneness and perhaps a denial of difference. Splitting was evidenced in one of the breakout rooms, perhaps mirroring the series of contradictions mentioned previously, and polarising mental states.

Hypotheses

Polarisation brings an illusion of mental order to global confusion, making it easier to cope with the powerful emotions evoked by the pandemic such as fear of death, grief at loss, guilt at survival and anger at the inequalities that have been exposed.

We are currently in a fluid state, coming between and alternating with frozen states. The pandemic has unfrozen us from a “before”, in which we were more comfortable, and with which we were familiar, even though things were not really right. In our current fluid state the things that are coming to salience are difference, inequality, separation, and privilege. This gives rise to feelings of guilt, anger, helplessness and loss. We engage or disengage, protest or retreat, as we struggle to regulate these emotions. We do not know what the future state will be - where the “new normal” will settle when we leave the fluid state. Will white privilege be sustained? Will low-paid service work be re-evaluated? Will the relative prestige of nation states be re-ordered? We harbour suspicions that privileged actors will exploit the fluid state to consolidate the tendencies towards inequality that previously existed. Those in power during the fluid state will strive to remain in power afterwards.

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