

COVID-19 Online LISTENING POST

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

USA, Center for the Study of Groups and Social Systems, 30th August 2020, 4:00pm-5:45pm EST

Participants: 12 participants including the convenors

This was the fourth Listening Post hosted by the Center for the Study of Groups and Social Systems. Listening Posts offer an opportunity to gather “virtually” to share our individual preoccupations, and then collectively make meaning of what these concerns might reveal about society, or a segment of society, the home, community, nation and world unfold.

This Listening Post took place in the context of multiple significant events including the ongoing global pandemic caused by the virus COVID 19. Since January 2020 when the virus was first identified in Wuhan, China over 20,000,000 people have tested positive for the virus and approximately 4% have died from the virus. In March 2020 a public health emergency was declared for the Northeast United States and almost overnight large systems shut down their in-person operations and many workers transitioned to virtual/remote work, while record numbers of Americans were laid off and essential workers, i.e.. Medical workers, public transportation workers, food and farm workers, grocery and delivery workers and so forth remained at work keeping the essential functions of the country running. New York City was a major hotspot in the US for the virus for much of the spring with high rates of infection and death, overwhelmed medical systems, a shuttered entertainment and hospitality industry amongst other things. The pandemic revealed significant health disparities in the US wherein the COVID death rates for Black and Brown people were markedly higher than for the White population. In the midst of peak infection rates in the US, the extrajudicial killing of a Black man by a White police officer, shown on video to the world, sparked protests across the nation and the world, against police brutality and for racial justice. The Black Lives Matter movement gained traction in broader communities in the US, with Portland, Oregon being an epicenter for demonstrations that have taken place every night since May 28, 2020. All over the country there have been demonstrations and protests for justice for a number of Black individuals who have died at the hands of police under questionable circumstances, including Breonna Taylor, a young woman who was fatally killed by the police who used a battering ram to break into her apartment on a “no-knock search warrant” after mid-night and was shot and killed with 8 bullets while she was asleep, after her boyfriend fired a single-shot in self-defense.

On the west coast in California, they have experienced record high temperatures across the state, and they are experiencing a record season of wildfires.

And this is a Presidential election year and two senior White male candidates are vying for the Presidency. At the time of this Listening Post, both the Democrat and Republican conventions had just ended and approximately two months remain before the US citizens vote for their next President.

- I. **Preoccupations:** The mood of the group was decidedly more anxious and depressed than in previous LPs. The prominent preoccupations seemed to be around violence, fear, safety, and a familiar tug between care for self (and/or protection) vs concern for others, and the presence of guilt at not attending to the losses of others. The idea of containment was a preoccupation: containment of fear and anxiety for others and self-containment. A palpable sense of powerlessness was there as well. The election of the next President of the United States is very much on the minds of participants. There was a presence of both hope and terror, depending on the candidate who would prevail in the election. Hope was generated by the Democratic conventions and its candidates, while fear was evoked by the Republican Convention and the current President of the United States. Family and generational knowledge and inheritance were also preoccupations. And lastly, some vague awareness of what is absent, who is absent and the power or significance of that absence in our understanding of the world.

Content shared by the participants:

- Not feeling very well – sinus infection
- Missing my patients
- In touch with how much I depend on my interaction with them for feeling good.
- Grateful for work. Anxiety about illness.
- Republican national convention – politics.
- Frightening fascistic moments – never thought I'd live to see this
- Overwhelmed by it – making plans to leave the country. In denial and terrified at same time.
- Being unemployed. Lost job as of August 10th. Okay for now – but not sure what will be the case 6 months from now may also depend on elections
- Reparations – for not addressing the job loss last time.
- It's so hard to think about illness. Guilt for managing to be this way.
- Elections. Try to stay positive. Every so often, get a reality check and now in Kenosha. Cannot bear to watch that either. Teetering.
- We really are on the edge – hopefully, things will be better in the future.
- Being a daughter, sister, being apart from my family. Feeling loss. Missing family. How to be a good daughter and sister. Going out makes my family nervous. Alone, but not alone. What happens to me affects them.
- Sense of – this isn't what I planned

- Violence – What would happen if people marched down my sidewalk?
- The expectation of violence
- Black men – moved by their stories. Missing my father. Good black and not good black men.
- Myself – pre-occupied with self and thoughts. From West Indies. This election is familiar. Caribbean – also a lot of violence around election, where who one will vote for is kept secret. Liberated
- Pre-occupied with how pre-occupied I am with me
- Doing everything virtually
- Violence and politics – scary to experience and witness
- Pandemic – just now feeling impact of it –
- I have to hold it together for everyone in my original family
- Feeling what everyone was feeling in March – June
- In L.A. – don't want to be on laptop/zoom. Decided to join today – struck by conventions and the fierce opposition to giving up white supremacy. Large segment that is willing to abandon democracy to keep white supremacy in place.
- Can't sleep. People have given me weapons to hold because they are afraid of how they might use them. Made a commitment to myself – that if someone gives me a gun, I will never give it back, ever. I have a gun in my house. And it is in a difficult place to find. In the middle of the night – thought maybe I should move the gun to a place that is closer and more accessible. Curious and disturbed to think about it.
- When you have a gun – you are much more likely to turn to it without considering other options– vs. if you didn't have one, you wouldn't even think of it.
- Struck by how powerful a force fear is. Always viewed country as scientifically progressive. The speed at which this has gone out the window – how we are so quick to label each other
- We can't seem to put legitimate differences aside
- How do I help my kids understand this?
- This has been one crisis after another
- But also, hopeful – for too long we didn't talk about what is legitimately going on in this country.
- Trump has been a catalyst to get angry – hope that we can challenge that into change
- Killing off Trump won't take the problems away.
- Pre-occupied with self – leaving job – as of tomorrow – will have effectively left. Left on her own terms. Had the option to leave in terms of early retirement – one reason. It's a privilege I've earned. I resigned 6 months ago. As the chair – you must stay until academic year. Never had the experience of stating intentions to leave and having a long time to leave. Feel like I'm escaping. Like an octopus. Fascinated with them and their tentacles. People are trying to hold on to me – and the system is trying to hold on to me.
- Happy to be leaving but complicated
- Politics – conventions are boring.
- I have anxiety about elections – and I am oppositional to making the republicans evil. I

- am more interested in discussing – how did this happen and why are we here?
- I wonder if we're all really in this together?
- Some will be in more danger than others
- Fear more regularly since RNC – what will our country choose?
- Not hearing from the Midwest. Who is our country? And what will we choose and what will it be like. More fear. Where do we go from here? All the work there is to do. Will the election matter? What ways do it matter/doesn't matter. What actions can I take? What does really matter?
- Listening Post - a point at the enemy line for movement between enemy lines
- What would I look like in the French resistance
- You think electing Biden will fix things – not true. As I almost hit 60, the more I think that the more I want to leave this to the next generation.
- Hard to listen and tune back into what I personally feel.
- Worried, and frightened and anxious.
- I don't feel like we can have much impact.
- Finding life in a micro-scale is interesting and rich. Miss people, hugs, and parties, but still feel enriched.
- Still feel the need to feel informed.
- Find moments of excitement – like the NBA boycott.
- Perhaps we can speak with one voice versus so many
- Impacts of pre-occupation.
- Ripe for wanting a savior

- II. **Themes:** There were 3-4 prominent themes that emerged from the material presented by the participants:
- a. Seeking of safety from threats of violence, fear and insecurity, perhaps through any means possible, and the wish for containment expressed in the wish for the election of the 'right' President.
 - b. A preoccupation with self and a sense of passivity about one's impact on the larger political scene accompanied the wish for the election of the 'right' President emerged as a major theme.
 - c. Countering the wish for the election of the 'right' President, was a somber sense of the profound problems and divisions in the country that are too great to resolve because of a fundamental selfishness and perhaps fundamental divisions, and yet we are all in this together.
 - d. Are we depressed, or in the depressive position? Are we in retreat, or are we able to contain and sit with the knowledge and understanding of the atrociousness which we are witness to, and then act?

Content shared by the participants:

- We are functioning in defensive ways – a cover for what?

- Some themes I noticed: violence and lack of safety
- Powerlessness. Investing hopes in a charismatic leader – we aren't adaptive and we just depend on a single figure. We have gone through period of relative times of conflict, but maybe they were necessary. Too much hope on the anti-trump. Is it because we feel powerless?
- White supremacy and balance
- What's the cover – choice of the two candidates we have out of all the people from the democratic party, look who we chose?
- Men are used – how white men are used. To take up leadership, to fulfill fantasies of leadership. This is an enactment of the need for a white man to take up the role.
- Kamala Harris is the shadow president. If Biden were to win – that he won't be able to sustain the power.
- An unconscious wish or need for Kamala to be there.
- THEME – for need for a savior
- Where are the men of color? What is the meaning of absence?
- Something threatening about a strong black man
- Absence and fear of a black man as a theme (by the absence of black men)
- Theme – setting up the gun against suicide.
- Fear of killing ourselves.
- Recognition of one's role in the mess?
- THEMES – Constructs
- Powerlessness and how powerful I could be if I wanted to be
- Cult leader – people join the cult in the first place
- Theme – of avoiding my role in the mess
- Cult and savior – and powerlessness!! What are we defending against?
- We will do anything to lower our own anxiety – whatever it takes to lower our own
- Anxiety
- Theme – against seeing my role in it
- Feels like a showdown
- Theme: things can get real quickly.
- Theme: depressive position – spirit – it's as though – depression vs. depressive position. We are trying to expand our ability to hold the atrocity, and still find agency.
- Theme – trying not to lose capacity to stay on my feet.

- III. **Analysis/Hypothesis:** Four hypotheses surfaced from the material shared by participants as follows:
- a. As a community, country we are all in the same boat with people we don't like, don't understand and we don't really want to deal with them so we deny the necessity for real work together and put our hope in savior leaders, or a particular party platform, unconditionally.
 - b. That the pandemic revealed a level of interdependence that previously was denied between and among individuals and systems and this realization threatens the American identity as rugged self-sufficient individuals.

- c. That the death and decline of the white Patriarchy itself both feared and longed for may be inevitable, and the fear of the loss of that safety and familiarity is stoking a level of civil disintegration not seen for decades. A process of redefining of the identity of Americans, and the nation of America.
- d. All the schisms, injustices, race and class inequities and problems that the pandemic revealed have been percolating for years and some would say that they are systemic. These persistent deficits and the failure of the social-economic-government and commerce system as a whole to resolve these deficits has left a large swath of society vulnerable, scared and angry when faced with the threats to survival posed by illness and environmental precarity. To cope with this level of anxiety we seek to put our faith in a party or an individual leader in an almost cult-like manner. And yet, the possibility that things can get much worse and that people can do great harm to others is real, though some of us may be in denial about this real possibility.

Content shared by the participants:

- Pro-Trump or Anti-Trump
- Because of differences we do not want to deal with, we deny them, resulting in [?]
- Some people say that – white progressive people are the worst people at furthering equity progress.
- Because of terror of my contribution to the current reality, members of society strengthen their differences, resulting in
- What role does the pandemic play – we are quite interdependent!! This idea – is one that westerner’s revolt against stoked our anxieties because it threatens our identity.
- Something about interdependency is hard to tolerate!!! It’s terrifying! That is part of what is being defended against.
- Historically – rugged individualism vs. dependency. We hate dependency. New Zealand acknowledges people’s dependency.
- This rugged individualism theme – classic fight between ways of thinking about care and interdependency.
- Connecting with pain and grief, and remorse and regret – defending against those feelings.
- There has not been a real reckoning. There is so much grief on all side. For pain experienced and afflicted.
- We don’t want to talk – because we’re in pain
- Safety. Giving up of not having a white male in power – evokes feelings of feeling safe.
- Feeling safe and familiar.
- The death of the patriarchy – and it’s taking a long time and it’s taking us with it. The onslaught that is being felt – that people of color coming to this country and having to be imprisoned.
- Is this about the inevitability of the country – may not live to see it.
- Shedding a virus – dormant. Process of shedding. If you see a gun in the first act – often

you see a gun in the 3-rd. act.

- Terror of survival – what does it take to sustain ourselves – false sense. You can't talk about all that is happening that isn't great

Convenors: Mo Sook Park and Janice Wagner