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“The personal is political”: Practising reflexivity during the pandemic

“Lo personal es político”: practicando la reflexividad durante la pandemia

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Normally my editorials tackle critical social issues and are not personal. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has personally affected us all and as a result, our personal and professional lives have become more intertwined than ever before. Some have lost family members and close friends during this difficult time or have become sick themselves. Others have had to shoulder the responsibility of childcare and assist with online learning during the pandemic, whilst trying to maintain the same workload as before. Everyone’s experience has been different and previous experience has taught me that trauma cannot be measured. I lost two friends to COVID-19 in the last year. To say that the pandemic has been difficult is an understatement and words can do little justice to the loss etched on many people’s hearts during this time.

But where does the personal belong in our working lives or research for that matter? Many suggest that research should be personal because reflexivity is key to this process. As researchers, especially qualitative researchers we are expected to practice reflexivity. Reflexivity can be seen as self-monitoring or has been more aptly described as “the action of a subject towards an object” and the movement is constructed as “subject-object-subject” (Archer, 2010, p. 2). However, the boundaries between reflection and reflexivity can be fuzzy but reflexivity always bends back towards the subject (Archer, 2010). It is an intentional action. This is not to be confused with introspection which Kant voiced his displeasure with in 1804 due to his well-documented discomfort with the splitting of the self between the observed and the observer (Archer, 2010). Reflexivity has also traditionally been used in feminist research to highlight power imbalances. It has also been bolstered by Denzin and Lincoln (1998) to enhance the credibility of qualitative research. Flood (1999, p. 135) once stated that “Without some degree of reflexivity any research is blind and without purpose”. Recently, researchers such as Greene and Park (2021) have called for more qualitative research on COVID-19 to include sections on reflexivity in which researchers document the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on them. I second this because I believe it

will only serve to enrich research and will provide valuable accounts for our archives, strengthening our collective memory of the pandemic as researchers. However, there is still a reluctance to put the “self” in research as many academics believe that any movement away from the traditional third-person recounting of a study will lessen its quality (Smith, 2006).

Reflexivity entails reflecting on how our prejudices and beliefs have informed our own life experiences. Essentially being vulnerable. This allows us to better understand ourselves and therefore better understand our research and the role we play in it. Reflexivity allows us to contextualise our work, which is important because as you know in research, context is everything.

So, what is there to reflect on in the last two years? How can I practice reflexivity in this context? The pandemic has shifted our daily experiences of face-to-face contact to online meetings and Zoom calls. The nature of how we socialise has changed as many of us practice social distancing and work from home. People have become more socially isolated than ever before, and the feeling has become visceral. Obviously, this is all having implications for our mental health. I still have not been able to visit my home country, South Africa to see my family and friends as COVID restrictions make travelling even more difficult. In my home country of South Africa, only 6.1% of the population of the country is vaccinated^[1]. Whilst, in Mexico, close to 40% of the population has been administered at least one dose of the COVID vaccine (Mendoza, 2021)^[2] and this statistic does not account for people in Mexico who travelled to the US to receive their vaccine. Whilst most people I know in Mexico are vaccinated, most people I know in my home country are not. Many developing countries have only just begun their vaccination programs and vaccine inequality in the developing world is worrisome, especially since vaccine inequality will only prolong the pandemic (WHO, 2021).

Currently, the Delta variant of COVID-19 represents 67% of all cases in Mexico (Valadez, 2021)^[3], and is highly contagious with a recent study finding that it is two to three times more contagious than other variants (Li et al., 2021). The Delta variant has also been linked to more cases of hospitalizations, and therefore should be considered more deadly than other variants (Sheikh et al., 2021). The unvaccinated remain most at risk. I lost someone I knew to the Delta variant so recent developments on the Delta variant are at the forefront of my mind.

These are some of the global developments that occupy my thoughts, mostly because they directly affect my life. The personal is again political.

Professionally, the COVID pandemic has affected my field of work and has brought about another shift for the journal. It has created an impetus for a move to a continuous publishing model and the emphasis has been placed on digital publishing. I spend a lot less time in the library and in meetings and a lot more time researching digital trends in publishing, working on our different digital platforms and troubleshooting technical problems. *Psicología Iberoamericana* is currently following a continuous publishing model, which will help us make research available to the

community as quickly as possible. Now, universal digital object identifiers (DOI) will be added to all articles, making them more easily identifiable.

Other professional trends include the importance of preprints. Preprints have become especially popular during the pandemic as researchers rush to get their work online (Else, 2020). The publishing environment has become more fast-paced than before and there has been a significant growth in manuscript submissions from men, which is probably attributed to women having to stay home and care for their children during the pandemic (Else, 2020). There have been winners and losers during this pandemic, and it is clear that COVID-19 has highlighted the already existent gender inequalities in society.

The pandemic has shifted everything, from the personal to the professional. There has been no part of my life that has been left untouched by COVID-19. Before the pandemic it was normal that our personal and professional lives were alienated from each other, but the pandemic has forced them to collide.

Reflexive exploration should be valued in research, and it is the responsibility of each researcher based on their research goals, values and the methodology involved, to decide how to best practice reflexivity (Finlay, 2002), because as Finlay (2002) believed an absence of reflexive analysis will only compromise a study. But it is not just qualitative research that benefits from reflexivity. We can all benefit from more reflexivity in our lives. Reflective practice allows us to critically reflect on how our own experiences during this pandemic have informed our beliefs and identities. It helps us become aware of how this pandemic has changed us, both in personal and professional ways, because one thing that we can be certain of during these uncertain times is that the COVID-19 pandemic has irrevocably changed how we live our lives. There is no going back to "normal".

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Notes

- 1 This reflects the statistics in South Africa on the 11th of August. Trends may have changed since this article was published.
- 2 This claim of 37% was calculated on the 11th of August 2021. Trends may have changed since this article was published.
- 3 This claim of 67% of all cases being the Delta variant by the OPS was made on the 4th of August 2021. Trends may have changed since this article was published.