COVID-19 Online Listening Post 2020

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Part I: The sharing of preoccupations and experiences

A note of group composition and dynamics:

The group was made up of 9 participants from countries such as: the UK, Italy, Germany, Greece and Argentina. While all was setup for the session to begin on time, about 30 minutes before starting the convenor and co-convenor realized that the Zoom account was already in use from another Online LP taking place in another country at the same time. For a moment, it was debated if the session should be cancelled at short notice due to technical difficulties. It was decided not to as the technical difficulties were deemed as a natural part of the online process. Another account login was secured and the session went ahead, but with some delay of a few minutes.

Upon commencing, members were notified that the session would be recorded (as decided in LP Steering Group at an earlier date) which was accepted by the majority of the group but made one particular member uncomfortable to the extent that that member's camera was switched off and she participated with voice only. Adding to this, the crossing of the time boundary was also noted and some discomfort was expressed in connection to this.

The session was markedly different when convening the large group and when breaking up in smaller groups. Namely, in the large group there was lack of emotional engagement, fragmentation and difficulty to follow-up on individual contributions and preoccupation with numbers and the competition between countries. While in the small groups, there was a general consensus of greater emotional engagement between members, collaborative dynamics and on-task dynamics giving rise to meaningful contributions and hypotheses.

Preoccupations and Experiences

From early on, the group was observably preoccupied with security and insecurity in terms of the ability to put together the meeting in a timely manner and the handling of personal data. It seemed like old habits (like participating in an LP) were now undergoing significant change: from face-to-face to online, from national to international, from one time-zone to several, etc. The

group associated this to questions around the emerging of a new reality, as a member said referring to COVID, "Are we to learn from this experience or are we supposed to return to our previous way of life? Should we forget?"

There were expressed preoccupations that the everyday reality for each country is different from what is mentioned in the media and there was a wish to connect between citizens of different countries. But this wish was also accompanied by fear of "having it worse" than the neighbouring country and competition between countries in claiming the title of being "the best" in dealing with the crisis. A member mentioned how "some stereotypes have turned upside down" with South Italians appearing more disciplined than the North or the Greeks more so than the Western Europeans. The group suggested that the relationship between citizens and state might also have contributed to these differences (i.e. southerners more distrustful of state apparatus resulted in the taking up of more individual responsibility). There was some pleasure in that reversal of roles but also uneasiness in a kind of new world order which created more uncertainty about the future.

Finally, there was expressed uncertainty and a longing of authoritative figures (like scientists) that would appear and take charge of the current situation ("what's the learning from this? What will come out of this experience? ")

Part II: main themes

1. **Competition vs. Collaboration (two parts of the same coin):** this theme was connected with difficulties experienced in the large group in sharing personal and emotional experiences in a content of collaboration rather than one of competition. Notions of security and insecurity were closely linked to trusting in each other to keep one safe. New boundaries have been erected between citizens and there was a marked preoccupation with assimilating new boundaries (COVID cases by country) and respecting old, traditional boundaries (such as, time).
2. **Reality – what was, is and will be:** the transformation of society through this current crisis was also an important focal point for the group. There was expressed ambivalence in terms of wanting to go back to "how things were before" and "going forward" to a new, but unknown, reality. The group was unsure what we are to take from this experience and whether society will manage to assimilate what is taking place (a trauma of sorts) or deny its existence and attempt to revert to an illusion of previous "normality". For now, it seems that (economic, social, racial) privilege was one of the few things which are keeping us safe. This realisation was accompanied by feelings of guilt and envy which were bound with feelings of competition in terms of socio-economic, national and racial background.
3. **Trusting each other and in search of certainty:** trust or the lack thereof, was a deciding factor in the large group as well as the small group sessions. It seemed as the members of the group were struggling to "find each other" and trust if the 'other' was a friend or a stranger, an ally or an enemy and safe to be with or a threat. It was suggested that the biggest threat to each other's health is one another (as potential carriers) rather than the virus itself.

Part III: Analysis and Hypothesis formation

Any emerging hypotheses were mainly connected with 'trauma' and the experience of still experiencing trauma and the inability to process it while it is in progress. The members suggested that society is in survival mode, type of 'fight-flight' which is also evident by the presence of the military in civilian life and the commonplace political narratives of being in "a war" or of "fighting an invisible enemy".

The start of a hypothesis was brought forward by one of the small groups centred around the collective trauma of two World Wars resurfacing, an experience of self-inflicted harm on humanity where the young and healthy are once again in the firing line - very much like young soldiers were during the Wars.

It was also hypothesised that part of the group's difficulty to connect in the large group plenary might be relevant to the physical isolation and social distancing that were (and in some cases, are) all experiencing - a difficulty in connecting outside our confined, relational and physical space.