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Reflexiones sobre los retos de la investigación en tiempos de emergencias

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In 2020, in the face of the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic, measures of quarantining and social distancing have had to be taken. This has created a situation that changes the dynamics and lifestyle of the population worldwide and presents important aspects to consider when researching mental health and behaviour.

Because of its high level of contagion, this health emergency forces us to migrate from traditional face-to-face university life to the virtual campus, whilst trying to maintain the same communication and sense of community, with our students. This environment has tested us as individuals, teachers and researchers and made us more flexible, creative, willing and sensitive to the impact of the educational style, research and interventions amidst coronavirus, whilst still not losing our sense of community.

Conducting research during an emergency has important challenges to consider, due to the vulnerable situation faced by participants such as those affected, first responders, health personnel, the community and media reporters. This affected population is served by a variety of international agencies, government institutions and NGOs involved in the response. As a researcher it is important to know and consider all the official protocols and relevant actors involved in requesting access, responding to and presenting results.

In any scenario during an emergency, performing face-to-face fieldwork is high risk because of difficult access and possible contagion. It is also important to keep in mind the physical and emotional state of all participating actors. Therefore, it is recommended to do research for specific purposes and of high relevance, while not ignoring their contribution to science.

Other challenges we face in researching during times of emergency are the limited time, the pressure to act, the tension between the investigation and the immediate emergency response to the needs presented by the pandemic. This is the time to carry out collaborative research, that is, to generate professional networks and interdisciplinary work.

For all of the above, it is important to take into account what topics and what kind of studies are needed at that time, to seek national and international financial institutions that are interested, empathetic and supportive of research in the areas of health and social behaviour to develop and promote public policies during this time of crisis.

Moreover, we cannot set aside the important and controversial issue of ethics when conducting research during emergencies. Ethics refers not only to the behaviour of people directly involved in research but also to conflicts and dilemmas between the ethical values and principles at stake. León (2012) considers that a disaster of natural origins cannot be considered moral or immoral, or a just or unfair situation; however, their consequences can be treated in this way because they are responsible to a secondary degree, to the extent that their impact or effects could have been avoided or diminished. Finally, solidarity puts us in each other's place and moves us towards a place of compassion.

It is often heard that the ethics of research refer only to the ethical review protocols involving people, without regard to it as a much broader issue. For this reason, researchers should also reflect on:

How can we significantly include the needs of those affected in an appropriate and ethical study in the face of the difficult contexts in which it is carried out? This is especially important when many of the decisions are made at the policy or economic levels, such as what and when funds should be used for emergency prevention and care.

Also, how do we ensure that ethical aspects are prioritized in a pandemic context where the urgency to respond is so important?

Research conducted during emergencies can pose particularly complex and challenging ethical problems, including the protocols to be authorized by the ethics committees of research, where time is an important factor, as well as the difficulty of obtaining signed letters of informed consent by the participants, especially when they face imminent physical and emotional vulnerability.

As mentioned above, conducting research during an emergency is a great opportunity to ethically share and use the information collected between researchers and participating institutions. It is important to consider collaborating with researchers who are already involved in work that addresses the ethical dilemmas presented to them whilst doing research.

All these factors contribute to the risks of researching during times of emergency, however well-intentioned the research is, it could also cause direct harm and this is often not considered due to the ethnocentrism of the researcher. However, there may also be risks in not undertaking this research.

Finally, it is important to consider that: research is for the well-being of society and for a common and socially ethical good to improve preparedness and responses in current and future emergencies.

References

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