



RESEARCH NOTE #2

Research in a time of COVID

by Christine Berkowitz

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Since this research began in the spring of 2019, events have taken place that have had a significant impact on our social, cultural, political and economic environment. Who would have thought that just a year into the process we would be facing a global pandemic that to date has killed over 7 million people world-wide?

As of March 16, 2020 in response to the pandemic, the university moved all classes online and the campus went into lockdown. We moved our research operations and communications into a virtual space, which limited our research access to other than digital archives and in many instances made it more difficult for individuals to participate in oral history interviews. No longer able to conduct our oral histories in-person, we moved to videoconference and began holding our team meetings virtually. The threat of the spread of the virus, concern for the health loved ones, ourselves and the isolation took a toll on us all. Our team meetings shifted from being primarily work oriented to sharing how things were going and how we were coping with the isolation and stress of working and learning from home.

Given the unprecedented events, we decided to document our own experience in dealing with the impact of the pandemic and held two recorded conversations on June 26, 2020, and a year later on June 4, 2021. As you will see from the reflections that follow, this pandemic experience brought into high relief the challenges faced by members of the team as students and as residents of the surrounding Scarborough community – the uncertainty, fear and anxiety; the impact of social isolation; the precarious economic realities; and the daily lived experience of racism.

We opened the conversation with the question of how things were prior to the emergence of the pandemic. Hope and excitement for the future - graduation, job applications and future studies -- quickly turned to uncertainty and a sense of powerlessness. As one student put it:

“...whatever felt really bright pre pandemic, kind of felt like, "what were we supposed to do next?" Especially for people who are graduating or applying, it seemed very bleak, and that's where I was.”

Once the campus and city were in lockdown, the reality of the isolation hit. A powerful sense of loneliness, concern for and loss of connection with family members crept in:

“It's just like a feeling of permeating loneliness that kind of seeped through almost every aspect of my life. Because as a student, my entire life is based around my academic schedule and my work and everything. And suddenly not having... Not being tied to that anymore; it was just the strange sense of detachment.



Staff at UTSC prepare hundreds of care packages for students remaining in residence 2020

Source: *UofT News*. <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/staff-u-t-scarborough-deliver-hundreds-care-packages-students-remaining-residence>



Parks closed to the public due to spread of COVID.

Source: *UofT News*, <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/covid-19-takes-toll-health-children-and-youth-disabilities-u-t-researchers>

“[my youngest grandchild] has really struggled with the isolation from his friends. That [lack of] social contact has been really difficult for him. And he's really struggled with just sort of unfocused, anger and frustration ..., even though he does a lot of connection with his friends online, through gaming and different things, but it's not the same.”

“it was difficult hearing how a holiday that people were looking forward to, in a time where family is central, was kind of being overshadowed and overlooked. And I felt like it was just kind of the beginning of this sense of isolation, especially from people you love or care about.”

And that extended isolation of more than a year created a fear of its own as we contemplated and dealt with the lifting of the public health restrictions...

“there's almost that little nagging feeling I feel a little when things are starting to get back up and going. It's just, do I even want it to open up? Because now I'm so comfortable. I know a certain way of living and a certain way of doing it, and I kind of know what to expect. And now when things change, that's a whole another life adjustment.... am I even ready for that? I don't even know what it will take....”

“I think about the garden program that we had. I remember we had a little volunteer orientation session, and the kids came. They're 14, 15. They're like, "I was so scared. We were texting. I was thinking about it all night, texting each other all night, worried so much how I was going to talk to other people here because I have gone a whole year not speaking to anyone new, and I don't know how to engage with anyone." These are crazy, detrimental things we haven't really thought about.”

“Why does everything opening up and everything going back to normal also have to mean that the more accessible options that we had created have to suddenly be abandoned? So for example, in university, online classes, yeah, they're difficult, but they're also preferable for a lot of students, maybe some students who have health issues, some students who have mental health issues, some students who maybe just aren't able to make it on time... Why does going back to normal have to include taking that option away ...?”

We struggled with the fact that we had no experience to draw on to help us move through this moment. We sought guidance from those in leadership positions. The messaging that praised innovation, heroes, and encouraged self-development, combined with messages to take care of your own health and well-being, were perceived to be addressing a privileged few and caused a great deal of confusion and self-doubt:

“... It's a mixed message you're talking about, like, oh, the world has kind of stopped, and you can take this time to recenter yourself, but also the message that the world hasn't stopped, and you have to keep going and going...It makes you think, am I grappling with the situation correctly or incorrectly? And am I built different than these other people? And where do I fit in? And what does the idea of productivity mean? Because you think, oh, productivity has changed, we can work from home now, things are different. But in the same sense, it really hasn't. The things we still value are very much the same, same capitalistic-entrenched sort of ideas.”

“I know so many family members, community members who have had to go to work regardless of how they're feeling mentally, physically, and such, because who else was going to put food on the table? Because they didn't have any choice. And no one, I think, talks about the dehumanizing aspect of not being given a choice and being forced to do certain things.... I think a lot of marginalized communit[ies] and people of color really understand that. Even what you're talking about, like, "Stay strong. Be kind to yourself. Be safe," so many people that look like me aren't given the privilege to do that or the space to do that.”

“... when you see celebrities going, "Oh, this pandemic really gave me time to explore myself. I picked up," I don't know, "wine tasting," ... You have all these rich people who can work from home... They're not putting up with picky customers. [Those people that don't have a choice are] doing all the stuff on top of pandemic, and everyone's going, "Oh, yeah, rediscover ourselves, bake bread," whatnot. It's just, ugh.”

“I'm really worried about my parents because my parents basically have this small food business. It's a small food stall that they run at the Pickering Flea Markets, which is open on Saturdays and Sundays, and it's basically...where we get our income from. But because of the pandemic, it had been shut down...for the past four months. So basically in my house, there was no income for four months and my dad's other job that he works from Monday to Friday,... my dad works seven days a week. He was also laid off of that.”

“How can you ask people to choose between their health and putting food on the table.”

Members of the team reflected on the marginalization of their communities...And the systemic barriers that exist across the country and locally that limit access to needed services and equitable treatment for many communities. This is a condition that certainly pre-existed this moment but that the pandemic brought into clearer focus:

“I think the pandemic really highlighted the different barriers within our own country. And really specified how different communities are helped or included in policy and decision-making and how so many different people are left behind. And ev



UTSC supports local restaurants.

Source: *UofT News*, <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/it-s-our-turn-be-there-them-u-t-scarborough-joins-effort-support-local-restaurants>



Protesting against Asian discrimination in 2021

Source: *UofT News*, <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/anti-asian-discrimination-rise-canada-u-t-researchers-find>

though those always existed within the country and our infrastructure, I think the pandemic really brought that to the surface on a really grand scale.”

“It just feels so unfair... I guess I'm always thinking about the greater community and the people who look like me ... And I think, especially being able to work on the vaccine rollout and project, it has been so hard and so heavy seeing the kind of decisions that are being made.... Scarborough is one of the hottest places. Scarborough,...you see all these pictures of people in huge lines, waiting out in the sun, the lines snaking around...then they're places like North York ...they were getting vaccinations like no tomorrow....Why can't we just do those things to make sure that the people are getting the vaccines and our communities are protected?”

“I feel it's really disappointing to see marginalized communities turning on other marginalized communities as well. So in my apartment building, it's a majority Muslim, South Asian, Indian, mostly population....some people from Thailand, immigrants from China, but mostly all immigrant populations. And someone on my floor,...an older man living in one of the apartments had to go to the hospital and immediately other neighbors, they started warning, "Don't go near his house. This man has COVID," even though nothing was confirmed, it's none of their business. And it turns out this man just had a stroke...It just really brought out ugly racism in our own community as well. So it's frustrating.”

The daily lived experience of racism and colonialism occupied a great deal of our conversation...

“my mom works at a nail salon, so she had experiences with microaggression and racism with her customers. Or even, because I live at home, because I live alone, I tend to take public transit and I think whether people are willing to admit it or not, there was an apprehensiveness, especially around Asian people where if I were to cough or sneeze, people kind of look at you or shuffle away subtly.”

“... for my parents, they came to Canada as refugees from Vietnam after the Vietnam War, and they experienced prejudice then. And then during the SARS, that was another round of prejudice, especially to the Asian community. And then now, since to them, it's in their head, they've normalized this sense of racism.”

“...people, rather than educating themselves they'd rather, almost like in fear, make these assumptions and blame a group,...I don't think people realize that, whether I'm Chinese or not, which I'm not,...people are going to attack you, it's that kind of apprehensiveness of, "Oh, am I going to be attacked?" Or, "what are people saying or doing?" [laughs]

“...as a woman of South Asian descent, what I found difficult to deal with was the racism that is ingrained so easily in our everyday lives and having to have these sometimes very difficult conversations with members of your own family and having to re-educate sometimes older people or even younger people about, no, it's not okay to say these kinds of things. It's not okay to treat people with darker skin kind of apprehensively and think that they steal or treat Asians, as you were saying, Asian people eat bats. Like come on. These are difficult conversations to have but realizing that change has to begin at home.”

When asked whether this might be an opening for change....

“I think people of color, like the people who are affected by it are always having these conversations. I think people who are in power, the people who are not educated [about these issues], for example, the white community or privileged communities, it's more important for them to be having these conversations within their communities or holding each other accountable.”

This lived experience of racism extended to campus life as well...

“Sometimes I feel like I work double as hard and I still feel like I'm seen as lesser.”

“this white student in our class, I guess we were just talking about grades and I had the highest grade in the class. And she's like, "You know maybe it's because the professor is Muslim that you've got the high grade", and it's just that burning shame I felt since then....We're seen as well... It's probably cause you're a minority that you got it. The professors a minority too. That's why you're doing so well. Not because I busted my ass off every single day...It's tiring. I know this isn't COVID conversation anymore, but it's tiring.”

“...our professors our instructors spend a lot of time up in the air talking about theory and just keeping their noses in books. But they need to acknowledge that things like racism, things like colorism within colored communities, these are a lived experience. [Colonialism] is a lived experience. It is difficult and it is painful. I think that's [the] best way to describe it is that it is so, so deeply painful as immigrants, as children of immigrants. And events like the COVID-19 pandemic really reveal the depth of that pain and of that grief and how far reaching it is and they need to acknowledge that it's something that we deal with every day.”

Several team members expressed that the pandemic had caused them to rethink what was important to them in terms of their studies and their desire to give back to the community. As one student put it...



Social distancing in the park. 2020

Source: *UofT News*, <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/without-more-covid-19-testing-and-tracing-ontario-should-continue-distancing-it-reopens-u-t>



Pop-up Vaccine Clinic at UTSC.

Source: *UofT News*, <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/u-t-scarborough-hosts-weekly-pop-vaccine-clinics-area-residents>

“It's one thing to do research and... academic freedom and whatnot, but how are you actually going to apply it to the communities around you?...What is this doing for the people around you, the world around you? How is it going to make their lives better? When you're researching something, it should be able to go somewhere, able to grasp something out of it, even the research that you're really passionate about,...How do you make the connections with the world around you, with the people around you, with the themes around you?”

As immigrants and children of immigrants, they struggled with the realities of having family members suffering in other parts of the world. They feared for those distant family members and struggled with their own sense of privilege living here in Canada...

“It's kind of hard to talk about...But there was one week in particular in Ramadan where it was basically every single day, the phone was ringing, "Someone had passed away." And I think the tally by the end of the week was 17 or 18 people in my very close family, and that included my mom's dad, my grandfather. He passed away, and it was really tough, especially on my mom, having to see her go through that because for the past few years, she's made a point of saying, "The minute he gets ill, I'm hopping on a plane, and I'm getting there."...we had her visa and everything already, but then flights shut down. The entire world,...shut down. Having to just grapple with that grief...There's not a way out of it. There's no people around you where you can disperse it amongst them and make your burden feel lighter. That grief, it's what you eat, it's what you breathe,...It becomes everything that you are.”

“how can you reconcile living here in the West where people are complaining about...work from home fatigue while people are just dropping like flies on the streets. It's just crazy.”

“... comparing where we are now and back home, I don't know if you guys feel it but a sense of survivor's guilt as well.... We can criticize and whatnot, but I'm still surviving, and I'm not going through the pain and tragedy and the heaviness that it is back home....How do you kind of cope with it? I feel like I haven't even begun to really process that.”

“... it's one thing to understand your situation and understand that other people maybe are treated worse or better than you, but...just because you can bear it, it doesn't mean it's what's best for you. And that's something that I really learned within this pandemic is, not only is that guilt of feeling like I've survived this, but it's also that guilt of, oh, my trauma isn't as bad as this person's trauma. But at the end of the day, just because you can bear it, just because you're used to it, and you've adapted to it, it's not necessarily the best for you and your mental or physical well-being or those around you.”

“it's more than just the virus itself that we're kind of grappling or trying to make peace with. It's everything else...Especially in Canada and the Western world, the idea is, oh, ... once this virus is gone and we can take care of it, everything is going to go back to normal. But there are so many other ... variables that are also part of the problem, part of the depression and the pain and the hurt. Those are things that you're not going to be able to get vaccinated and take away.”

“I think it's interesting, where there are just things growing up, where it's, "What do you want to be when you're older?" And it's, well, I don't dream of labor, ... why is that such a normalized question? Or even when people ask, what do you want to be? Why are you asking me what I want to be instead of who I want to be? Shouldn't that matter more, figuring out my identity and my needs and kind of realizing who I am more than what I can serve or provide to my community in that way? And I feel like this pandemic really showed, who are you, huh?”

A fundamental question indeed – Who am I? What matters to me? What can we learn from this moment that will help us in our examination of the past and our aspirations for the future? From a collective institutional perspective, who are we?

Writing an institutional history is challenging and often commissioned to commemorate or celebrate progress and growth. One student reviewing the official timeline for our campus progress produced to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the campus remarked that she could not find herself in that official narrative. The experience of the pandemic shows us only too clearly that if we only document the successes -- innovation in the face of adversity, the achievements of those we choose to recognize as champions -- and overlook or silence the stories of struggle and adversity then we will fail to truly learn from the past. Linde suggests that stories of disaster or what not to do are as important as those of triumphs, changes in direction and the heroes that emerge as role models. (Linde 2009, 222) We need to see our institutional memory “as multiple memories -- dynamic “live conversations.” (Corbett et al. 2018, 560) This is about social interaction and lived experience not simply recording facts. As the events in the past become more distant there is the risk that we will lose the connection with that past lived experience and see current events as ahistorical, as brand-new experiences disconnected from their past.



UTSC supporting local food banks. 2020

Source: *UofT News*, <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/covid-19-u-t-scarborough-partners-city-aid-organization-deliver-bulk-food-local-food-banks>

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