Original Article

The Ethnography of Students' Experience Studying Abroad: Social Inequalities and Challenges During the Covid-19 Pandemic Crisis

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A B S T R A C T

The covid-19 pandemic has affected various areas of everyday life, especially young people. Many students studying abroad feel like they have been excluded in a foreign country and are fighting with their independence and fears at the same time. This research study aimed at conducting an ethnographic research on the experiences of students who were studying abroad during the pandemic. The research sample was consisted of 27 students from Greece who study in Cyprus. For the researchers' data collection; we used semi-structured interviews, in-depth discussions, and participatory observation. The main result of the study was the emotional surcharge to the individuals who felt excluded due to studying abroad. Students were forced to stay in the foreign country where they were studying with no support from the government. According to them, this fact revealed the lack of political will to consider their needs and their cultural background in order to design any support.

Introduction

The coronavirus Sars-cov-2 (covid-19) first appeared at the end of 2019 in a suburban town of China, Wuhan and has been transmitted to humans by droplets released from coughing sneezing, and talking. The incubation time for the virus to display the first symptoms from the moment someone is exposed is 2 to 14 days. The virus has been transmitted rapidly, causing the closing of borders and creating an unprecedented pandemic. Recent research shows high levels of stress on people after the Covid-19 outbreak [3]. After having been in quarantine, many people showed symptoms of acute stress disorder; subsequently, they observed that they were more likely to report exhaustion, detachment from others, stress when dealing with infectious patients, irritability, insomnia, poor concentration, indecisiveness, and general deteriorating work performance. According to Xinhua Liu (2020), symptoms of depression can last even after three or more years of quarantine. -A research comparing post-traumatic stress disorder on parents and children after health-related disasters found that children submitted to quarantine scored four times higher post-traumatic stress scores than non-quarantined children [10]. Many studies focus on the reactions of people who have lost their freedom, in laws that override social rights and freedoms, and how this constructed exclusion has

formulated a new world order [2]. How do humans find a solution when it comes to a conflict between the individual and the social perspective? As humans are a social species – they turn to excellent social devices that help resolve such issues, rules that have been created, systems of norms and sanctions. Edna Ullmann-Margalit (1977), argued that this type of social situation is one of the basic types of social circumstances where new norms emerge (the other basic types are those related to coordination and hierarchy). And this is what we can see right now. It is probably most visible that governments introduce regulations and financial fines for going out during quarantine or lockdown. However, more importantly, there are informal rules and norms and informal sanctions.

The lockdown restrictions have created a reasonably widespread debate about the nature of the domestic space [4]. The novelty of these situations is that the fear of death or disease makes many people accept these extreme conditions of biocontrol without protest. And they are not only accepting them but demanding them from their governments. There is even an explicit willingness by some to become an active part of the control mechanisms by reporting people who do not conform to lockdown rules. In the case of Central America, people who lived under dictatorships and were exposed to the repressive powers of the states now submit because of fearof the unprecedented mechanisms of social control [1]. The fear of becoming just a biological entity, bare life, at the mercy of an invisible enemy – a virus- which can be anywhere, seems to unleash more fear and willingness to surrender than the repressive political apparatuses. The research gap that we found was mainly (a) that there is no research about foreigners being in another country with no other choice and (b) the lack of ethnographic research for this issue in Greece and Cyprus. So, this research study aimed to analyze the covid-19 experience of students who studied abroad in a foreign country during the pandemic with the imposed quarantine of 2020-2021. Moreover, their difficulty in repatriating to their counties before the closure of airports and their whole experience of this pandemic.

Method

The ethnographic method was selected as the most suitable for this study as the informants were excluded to a different socio-cultural context and due to the researchers' philosophical orientation. The ethnographical methodology that Boas brought forward, as the intensive on site participatory observation, led the after-Boath anthropologists to create total portraits of the societies they were studying. One of the first critical opinions in this perception came from James Clifford and George Marcus. According to Clifford (1988), during their trial to equalize themselves with the physical scientists (physics-chemistry), the anthropologists basically deleted the consequences-results of the researcher's intervention during the research process. In this sense, he pointed that Boas's descendants haven't properly and sufficiently exploded the significant impacts of the same anthropological model about diffusion. In other words, it is not "totally internal," but it consists of a description of the relationship between societies and social groups.

Cyprus was the research context for this study, an island in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. It is the third-largest and third most populous island in the Mediterranean and is located south of Turkey; west of Syria; northwest of Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine; north of Egypt; and southeast of Greece. Nicosia is the country's capital and largest city, where the research respondents live in and the whole multicultural context was of great interest. It is worth noting that Cyprus is the only occupied country in the E.U and it is divided into two parts. This, combined with the constant Turkish threats, makes the environment unfriendly and insecure for some residents. We collected data that included ethnographical experiences, 27 narrations, and notes. The research was conducted with our participation in the daily procedures and activities of the 27 students, which had taken place at the university and their everyday life for 7 months.

The primary tool of the research was the semi-structured interview, which was so helpful for collecting data. The interview allowed us to study both verbal data and body language, which

the respondents offered. According to Papagaroufali, the language is a practical experience that the story-telling is not reflecting or describing the social reality. Still, it constructs it during specific narrative actions, which are achieved by persons in a particular situation and a specific space-time. We also used technological means for the data collection, such as a digital recorder and a video camera. This happened gradually because of the awareness and the unavailability of "invasion" into "patient's" personal space, as a trustworthy relationship was created. When our relationship was developed, technological means became generally acceptable. There were people that did not want to be recorded, so for those cases, the technological means were not used, and conversation in an unstructured interview took their place. After the end of the research, pictures were given to the participants, and a piece of the videotaped data was also projected to them.

Results and Discussion

For the economy of space, it is worth dividing the results into three main categories; The experience of the pandemic in the participants' everyday life, the political accusations and the social control, and finally, the return to their birthplace.

The Experience of the Pandemic in the Participants' Everyday Life
One of the Most Indicative Statements About the First Thematic Unit Was the Following:

Due to the restrictions imposed by the Greek government for the closure of the borders and the airlines, I was forced to stay alone in Cyprus, which changed my everyday life. I only went out of the house for the essentials with the constant fear of the possibility that if I had been exposed to someone and got infected with the virus, I would have no one to help me. This feeling and thought of loneliness overwhelmed me every day; as a result, I have caught myself trying to sleep because this made me feel the time to pass, and only then I could stop thinking of all the above. Moreover, I was eating all day long without being hungry. Therefore, I put on a lot of weight, making me feel worse. The requirements

of the university and the need to quickly learn how to use the online platforms for my classes were something unprecedented to me and made me feel more stressed to meet all those expectations in a concise time. All this pressure, combined with my overwhelming thoughts, led to low academic performance. And my main problem was that I was a foreigner in another country.

The emotion expressed a lot is fear, a primary emotion of human survival of real or imaginary danger or threat. The respondents experienced fear coming from the need for survival under the pandemic's unknown conditions and then because of the emotional distress and the realm of irrationality, which made them feel like this.

The Covid-19 pandemic and school closures can significantly impacting the development of students' skills required to complete courses. Students may experience feelings of isolation, increased responsibility for caring for family members, changes in family income, coping with death, and other issues caused by the pandemic. Distance education might lead students to reduced socialization and communication while prolonged isolation in homes can cause students stress, boredom, and frustration.

Aligned with the Previous Response, Another Respondent Said:
The feeling of loneliness was overwhelming, and I started fearing for my health. I was very anxious about how all this would turn out and when it would end because quarantine was constantly getting extended, and I could not return to my family. Many of my classmates and my roommate managed to leave on time, which made me feel guilty. I wanted to know what would happen with the university and didn't support us. Thankfully, they helped us a lot.

It is interesting that new forms of support and solidarity among students have been created, such as the university. According to the above participant, the fear of loneliness and the unknown led to the need for further support. The university community reportedly assisted students with both counselling and information programs and online communication and entertainment activities [1]. Thus, in the provocative climate of a global crisis with many

negatives, a support system was constructed to contribute positively to the crisis.

And the Feeling of Nostalgia Accompanied by the Wish of the Return is Reflected in the Following Statement

I was thinking several times that when all this ends, I would announce to my parents that I would give up my studies and return to Greece. I also felt that I had to be with my parents because if something happened to them, I would help as I am the only child in the family, and I could go out for the essentials without danger.

Racial inequalities have been shown to have a detrimental effect on the psychological well-being of individuals from racial minority groups. In particular, minorities are likely to have low levels of self-esteem and a lack of sense of social cohesion due to racial discrimination. Several studies have noted the experience of racial minorities in serious mental health problems, such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, depressive and anxious symptoms, and emotional problems. Racial discrimination was a significant factor in the mental health disturbance of Korean immigrants in New York. Researchers have studied resilience as a critical source of inevitable difficulty, referring to it as the ability to recover or adapt to challenges such as trauma, adversity, or personal crises caused by life events.

The Political Accusations and the Social Control An Exciting Part of the Research Was the One About the Feelings of Exclusion, Guilt, And Responsibility:

I often felt angry with the government because I wanted them to find other ways to solve the problem. I could not accept that I was deprived of my freedom that someone else was deciding for me. I could not accept that everything that was won through games for so many years was destroyed in the name of a pandemic. I began to doubt, and I became angry because the discipline they imposed on us did not lead to any solution.

Similar Answers Were Given by Other Respondents Too. The Issue Was Discussed Thoroughly During the Research and Was About the Way Governments Addressed the Pandemic. One More Respondent Said:

My social life was utterly disrupted because even the person I was living with, my roommate, and would talk to left. From the moment the university eventually closed I could not have any contact with the people I began to develop a friendship with, and we only talked during our online classes. So my contacts were limited to chatting via telephone or social media with my friends from Greece and my family, something that I cannot hide that in the beginning made me feel relieved from this social isolation.

It is worth commenting about the non-verbal reaction of most of the respondents. The participants' body movemeparticipants' body movements during the interviews showed nervousness, which was explicitly observed on their feet and bewilderment of the hands.

Individuals, families, and entire communities are expected to place responsibilities on the government under challenging circumstances of natural disasters or even personal accidents. In such unexpected circumstances like the Covid-19 pandemic, the responsibility is transferred from the government to the citizens in terms of individual responsibility and from the citizens to the state in forecasting and construction of infrastructure. From the data that emerged in this research, there is more need for the population to express feelings of anger, fear, and frustration than being aggressive to the state/institutions. The reaction to the imposition of measures is expressed as a denial of the situation that no one wanted to have ever happened.

The Return

The Third Part of the Results is Related to the Meaning of Return. One of the Participants Stated:

After the quarantine, I managed to return to Greece and reconnect with my family and friends. I cannot even describe how I felt, the freedom and relief were indescribable, and everything else belonged to the past. I finally saw my friends and together we had a great summer. After the end of the holidays, I returned to Cyprus and the universities started to operate normally. However, I have to confess that I still worry if there will truly start a second wave of pandemic and where I will be if it does. I

understand it was hard for everyone and personally, through this experience, I would like to keep the positive outcomes it created and not the negative ones, as I believe that I managed to cope like a mature adult, and now I am sure about myself and more robust. I understood which things matter, and I have to appreciate them. Nostalgia, a Greek word, characterizes Greek students perhaps a little more. In difficult times they expressed the need to return to their roots, to their homeland, close to their family. The culture of their place has inflicted on them during difficulties to seek solidarity and teamwork. They were looking forward to returning home to feel safe, which was confirmed as soon as the restrictions were lifted. The trip was the students ardent desire, and it was difficult for them to wait. However, as they say, they have been trained in self-discipline, patience and they feel more mature and strong

Conclusion

This study highlighted the students' experience who were excluded abroad during the first Covid-19 lockdown. The participants had five or more stress symptoms and lived a change in their previous functionality. Students reported depressive mood, for most of the day, almost every day, a gain of weight in a month, and an increase of appetite almost every day. They also talked about insomnia, fatigue, and lack of energy. After in-depth discussions with all the participants, the research team members realized how a social phenomenon affects mental health. The everyday life of the students changed entirely and the feelings of uncertainty and insecurity overwhelmed them during the period of the pandemic crisis. They felt like being prisoners and excluded from their social environment. Even though they understood that it was crucial to follow the government instructions and stay home, they still experienced a challenging period. It is worth saying that they showed full respect to the legislation and they had a mature attitude to the situation, something not very expected from teenagers.

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