

Interdisciplinary studies in social sciences – unmasking truths whilst nurturing new possibilities, a preface

Dr Fotini Diamantidaki¹

Dr Margarita Kefalaki²

Covid - 19 has undeniable brought challenges for everyone involved around the world, which has led to extremes, but also towards innovation opportunities. Human nature shrivels under pressure, but also finds ways to adapt and recreate a new normal. The term of the ‘new normal’ was initially used to caution the belief of economists that industrial economies would revert to normal after the recession (El-Erian, 2010, cited in Cahapay, 2020). This phrase has since been used a lot and in different contexts and in general terms means that something which was previously not typical became typical (Cahapay, 2020). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people’s social wellbeing has a lot to do with the way they communicate, that now happens in most cases remotely (Nguyen *et al.*, 2020).

Our starting point with this issue is to observe communication traditionally speaking, within cultural contexts about certain nation-cultures that possibly many will contest. Peter Broeder in his article ‘*Informed Communication in High Context and Low Context Cultures*’, discusses the highly contested distinction of High and Low Culture to determine whether this characterisation affects some facets of culture-specific communication styles, that is, preferences in the use of context and information for constructing meaning in communication. A large-scale study with data collected from 774 participants, representing three ethnically identified cultural groups—Dutch, Greek, and Japanese—the subjects completed an online survey where they reflected on the way in which they think they communicate. The results reveal some clear differences between the cultural groups in their reported communication style. The Dutch used relatively more non-verbal communication; the Greeks used more hand gestures, and the Japanese were more indirect in their communication. A cultural divergence emerged, in that, the Greeks living in the Netherlands reported higher levels of non-verbal communication, were more indirect, and used more metaphors than did the Greeks living in Greece.

Whilst the first article discusses some of the communication styles in certain communities, we wonder whether the way we communicate is entirely altered or ‘masked’ as a result of the

¹ Lecturer in Education UCL Institute of Education University of London UK. Email: f.diamantidaki@ucl.ac.uk

² President, Communication Institute of Greece (COMinG) & Adjunct Professor, Hellenic Open University, Greece. Email: mke@coming.gr

pandemic and whether we are all still communicating in the same way, using gestures with verbal and nonverbal cues, regardless of which community, national or hybrid identity we think we belong to. An element, that in our opinion has significantly impacted on the way we communicate is the use of masks in our daily lives. What does the mask add to our communication possibilities and whether it destroys them remains to be seen, as we hopefully start to emerge from a global pandemic. Do we create new ways of communication and add or remove meaning to our social existences, as a result of wearing the masks, or do we, as human beings are forced to recreate a new masked reality and identity, an extension of ourselves with masks on?

Margarita Kefalaki in her article '*Masks as part of our Novel Identity: Creation of Meaning within a Time of Global Pandemic*' argues that masks have become a personal and social identity tool. She suggests that the mask is now part of our face, covering its lower part, hiding our facial expressions. The paper examines the place and use of masks as markers of personal and social identities and an interpretation of social responsibility. It presents the symbolic meaning of masks as an anthropological artifact, the dilemma of individual liberty challenged by social responsibility and the way we can create meaning through adaptation to a new "masked reality". The article adapts the social identity theory (SIT) that presupposes that one part of the self-concept is defined by our belonging to social groups (Trepte, 2006).

Speaking of the need to belong to a group and be recognised, one could argue how far one individual would go to indeed be favoured and recognised. Jürgen Rudolph and co-authors, in their article '*Anti-facemaskism—Politicisation of Face Masks during COVID-19 in the Context of Trump's Plutocratic Populism*' discuss Donald Trump's Presidency and argue it may be best remembered because of its populist, anti-scientific, and denialist approach towards the pandemic. After providing a brief literature review that focuses on the academic literature on face masks, the article shows that Trump's absurd responses to the pandemic were not unique amongst populists worldwide. Based on a qualitative analysis of Trump's numerous false and misleading statements about COVID-19, the article aims to reconstruct Trump's coronavirus and facemask responses that contributed to the U.S. having the highest coronavirus death toll worldwide. The article concludes by highlighting the importance of teaching critical thinking and the careful evaluation of the trustworthiness of sources to avoid falling for fake news and populist propaganda.

Teaching critical thinking is indeed key, to avoid falling for fake news and populist propaganda, that prevails in today's new world. However, not all is lost. Moving forward, there are good examples of critical thinking which successfully demonstrate how even very practical subjects can adapt to a 'new normal'. M. A. Gunasekara Thathsara D. Maddumapatabandi and Kelum A. A. Gamage add an element of hope and creativity with their article '*Remote Lab Activities in a Digital Age: Insights into Current Practices and Future Potentials*'. They demonstrate successfully how current practices in laboratories change and adapt to a remote environment as a result.

Laboratories and practical workshops are a crucial element in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subject streams in higher education, where the COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented challenge in conducting such activities

face-to-face. Many universities in the western world are now experimenting with various platforms to conduct laboratory activities remotely, in conjunction with online delivery of teaching. It demands significant adjustment to traditional face-to-face laboratory activities, where this paper investigates the practices universities currently adapted and potential future technologies available for remote delivery of laboratories. This paper also identifies the areas for enhancement of students' remote laboratory experience, and a survey was also conducted to identify students' perception of laboratory activities during online and hybrid delivery of teaching. The research study explored current practices of remote lab delivery and also provide an insight into the future potentials of remote lab activities in a digital age.

In the spirit of innovation and applied critical thinking Orr Levental & Hadas Brodie Schroeder discuss a project '*From the sports field to the classroom: The social role of an elite sports team in the periphery*'. In their study they argue that sports teams can play an essential role in conveying educational and societal values to teenage high school students. More specifically, they examined the ability of a successful local soccer team to motivate high school students to improve their academic achievements and behavior. This research used interviews and focus groups with educators from two peripheral towns, one Arab and one Jewish. The texts were qualitatively open coded and constructed into major themes. They found that soccer teams with an educational and societal agenda and solid cooperation with the local schools, would influence students to improve their academic achievements and behavior.

We finish off our suite of interdisciplinary articles for this issue, with a classic yet diachronic message from Susan Kelly Archer & David Esser, that the most important factor linked to success is personal motivation related to learning. Isn't this something that we can all relate to? In their article, '*Organizational Design of Secondary Aviation / Aerospace / Engineering Career Education Programs*', they aimed to identify and evaluate the underlying organizational factors of successful secondary aviation/aerospace/engineering career education programs, through application of measures traditionally associated with organizational theory. Analysis methods included factor analysis, structural equation modelling, and a review of study participants' comments to identify emerging themes for triangulation with the statistical analysis results. Participants in the study comprised aviation/aerospace/engineering career education stakeholders. Hypothesis testing results indeed suggested that the most important factor in predicting success for an aviation/aerospace/engineering program is personal motivation related to learning. Though other underlying factors, including leadership/collaborative environment, organizational accountability, and resource availability were clearly related to perceived program success, these relationships appeared to be indirect. The paired qualitative analysis of participant comments generated themes that transcended survey item topics. Personal motivation was the most commonly recurring theme in comments, supporting the hypothesis testing result indicating its predictive strength for an organization's success.

Finally, the book review presented by Jürgen Rudolph of Peter Fleming's most recent book, *Dark academia. How universities die* (2021), captures many of the challenges of the

neoliberalist era we all live in. Truths are indeed unmasked about the transformed nature of Universities and its academics, and the ongoing pressures faced within universities walls.

References

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