How do Cubans perceive Covid-19?

By: Vladia Rubio / CubaSí
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- *“You cannot avoid bad luck.”*
- *“Don´t overreact and don´t wash your hand too much. In the end, you are not going to fall ill of Covid-19, your mind will.”*
- *“That’s for weak men, I am protected.”*
- *“If it is written in my fate I am going to get infected, that is the way it is going to be no matter how much I take care of myself.”*

These four phrases have been heard by me in different context of daily life. Some of them voiced out by people of different ages, educational attainment, race, gender, and religion.

Perhaps other fellow citizens have heard similar phrases. The thing is that, this pandemic, and particularly this new outbreak ravaging us all, is a common topic everywhere. Some people believe they are invincible.

But instead of collecting a group of phrases showing a low risk perception —resulting sometimes in painful infections or even death— these lines aim to share, hand in hand with social studies, how Covid-19 is perceived here in Cuba.

The most recent edition, Nº.25/2021, of the ***Revista Alternativas Cubanas en Psicología*** (Cuban Alternative in Psychology Journal), led by renowned Cuban psychologist Manuel Calviño, includes the results of a very interesting research on this subject.

To get a closer look on how people face this pandemic in their daily routines — psychologically speaking— a group of PhD in Educations shared their knowledge. And these experts are: Isaac Irán Cabrera Ruiz and Miguel Ángel Toledo Méndez, from the University of Medical Sciences in Villa Clara, Dr. Addys Pérez Fernández, child

psychiatrist and head of the Group of Child Psychiatry in Villa Clara, who present the following and interesting consideration in the preface of their joint study:

“What is wrong? Once again, it becomes evident the role of the subjective factor among the multiple mediations, which reproduce our social reality. The efficient government’s management is not enough; or the invaluable contributions of the biopharmaceutical industry, or the maturity and wisdom achieved by our health personnel.”

To select the population sample to study, they searched for a socio-structural representation that included 62 individuals from 7 different provinces, who responded to a questionnaire last August.

The processing of the results brought about the fact that Covid-19 is socially perceived *“as a pandemic disease provoked by a virus causing death, which instills emotional conditions of fear and danger, which lead to the necessity of promoting protective behaviors like the use of face masks and self-protection.”*

The disease is tied to a high infection rate, with high impact on shortage, social distancing, hygiene, protection and responsibility; which must be also paired with isolation and quarantine.

“It is a disease perceived as a tragedy, triggering the upset of uncertainty, sadness, loneliness, and anxiety,” they concluded.

The causes attributed to the epidemiological situation are linked to the breaches in protective measures, the underestimation of the risk of falling ill, the management of different phases, processes, and measures as well as the risks on social life settings.

So far, these are the expected results on the basis of the abundant data released on the new coronavirus.

But, shockingly, the research reveals that *“there is little to none perception of risk to falling ill from Covid-19 in subjects. Therefore, 79% assessed the risk as a less likely options, which developed a feeling of invulnerability and underestimation of the risk to get sick, which is linked to the attributed causes.”*

The studies confirm that a low-probability perception of getting sick due to the implementation of the measures oriented, which underestimates the risks on social life settings (21%), the characteristics of the disease and the epidemiological situation (20%).

People actually perceive in their life routines more protective behavior than those generating risks, confirm the research. This can be a positive sign and be the result of the constant calls to social discipline, but it would result in more loose behaviors anchored by this trust.

The surveys revealed that risk behaviors were tied, essentially, to patterns of non-compliance with the protective measures in general, and especially, the use of face masks, which are paired with situations like that of leaving the house or waiting in queues.

In addition to this, misbehavior in workplaces and others such as staying in crowded places, visiting and welcoming people, or not washing properly your hand, or putting into practice social and physical distancing are other factors that increase risk.

In the study regarding the confrontation to Covid-19, experiences of psychological upsets in everyday life were detected. These will be expressed through the uncertainty of buying staple items, clinical-psychological manifestations, concern about our health, and at a lesser degree, mourning over death.

Long-distance Love

Subjectivities, in times of pandemic, are related to the breakdown of interpersonal relations as social contact decreases and essentially, confinement is accepted as a new way of life.

According to the analysis, the most important effects in social subjectivity are precisely that of not leaving the house, shortage and lack of supplies., anxiety and not having contact with the family.

Before the worsening of the epidemiological situation, the ties are tangible through support and social interaction.

Related to these behaviors, the survey respondents pointed out aspects such as finding and preserving relationships, highlighted by 22% as well as cyber-links, highlighted by 53%.

To keep interpersonal relations alive, the research confirms what was obvious to many: people turn to the Internet as a way to connect with people, which not only has resulted in a rise of hours spent surfing the web, but also in the entry of new users to the cyberspace.

“Social networks becomes the perfect space to work, to meet people and spend our leisure time gaming or doing challenges. The couple is among the links that this new routine demands, as well as finding strategies to spend more time together, and even meeting new people and begin love relationships.”

Clocks in times of Pandemic

The approach on how Cubans face the epidemiological situation from their subjectivity, includes the way time is seen by them, which *“is the main reconsideration of the subjects before the lockdown.”*

The research reflects, regarding the use of time, that school activities are among the most affected as well as those related to entertainment. So it is being experienced as *“a waste of time.”*

According to the survey, routines are reshuffled basically around the time spent with the family and the enjoyment of the leisure time from the perspective of staying at home. However, there are other alternatives such as the implementation of projects and household activities, working, and studying.

It is important to highlight that the survey respondents link family time to *“being together and sharing with a quality time of enjoyment, at home, watching together the TV…”*

Reassessing our time with family as something very important is actually positive. As it is seen as a time recovered from previous postponements.

According to the analysis of responses, the spare time is usually used to rest and sleep; carry out and undertake challenges, and achieve your goals, watch TV, or think about the future.

Survey respondents claim that *“this is a time we all needed.”* Consequently, it was also used to add in our everyday life, the completion of projects such as the culmination of thesis, learn how to cook, sewing, working out, or the remodeling, construction and arrangement of our home. It is the perfect time to finish up whatever remained to be done.

In relation to the use of time to working or studying, the respondents mentioned teleworking and the possibility to learn new knowledge.

Reshuffling our Lives

This research, with a qualitative, constructive, and interpretative approach, ratifies that *“life is reshuffled around caring for our health, changing our lifestyle and hygiene habits, avoiding contagion, and staying informed, acknowledging the mobilization of the society and the government to stop the pandemic, which creates an emotional condition of safety as an alternative to upsets.”*

Even when routines are reshuffled, especially regarding the time we spend with our family, and the enjoyment of our leisure time, taking into account our reality of staying safe at home, one of the results of this attempt from the scientific perspective is to raise awareness about *“the illusion of invulnerability, of having control,”* which several people still have even when *“they carry out actions that reduce their chances of getting sick.”*

And this unfounded feeling of invincibility it is not any singularity of the inhabitants of this island. Such distorted perception, stated the authors, has been found in other studies carried out in France, Italy, United Kingdom, and Switzerland.

There, near half of the survey respondents believed it was less likely they get sick comparing to the others; that is to say, the rest of the population.

The experts label this perception as *“illusional optimism”* even though there is a risk perception. They believe the threat is there for other individuals but not them because they comply with the protective measures.

The study is basically an approach to the subject, whose results are a reflect of a particular timing and object of study. Nonetheless, it does indicate the tendencies in the field of subjectivity of Cubans and as the authors say *“…If medical sciences and isolation help to overcome the action of the virus and to solve the sanitary effects of Covid-19, then the psychology must help to manage the social behavior of the population, deal with the trauma and the effects of the pandemic.”*

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