

Viral times

Navigating COVID-19 Temporal Uncertainties in a West African Regional Medical Center

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Work in progress

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Background and rationale

- Uncertainty: an endemic feature of life in contemporary societies (Beck et *al.* 1994; Chakrabarty 2021; Dawson, 2010)
- Unprecedentedly, economy was relegated to second place behind public health (Fassin and Fourcade, 2021)
- With its unprecedented scale and effects, COVID-19 pandemic engendered an upheaval of human(ist) structures of time, in particular in health centers.
- Relying on pioneering social research on regimes of historicity (Chesneaux 1996, Hartog 2003), Dubar (2011) has identified four categories of temporal crises: i) ‘crisis of the future’; ii) ‘crisis of lived time’; iii) ‘biographical crises’ ; iv) ‘historical crises’.
- In a context of “multiple crises/ruptures” (Samuelsen and Paré Toé 2022), this paper explores how local healthcare workers deal with their daily life as well as predict, apprehend and prepare for uncertainties associated with future pandemics.

- Direct observations were carried out in the RMC wards, in-depth individual interviews conducted in March 2023 with 20 female and male HCW and archive review done in the Regional Medical Center (RMC) of Tenkodogo.



Findings and discussion

‘Hard Times’: lived experiences of COVID-19

- In a context of multifaceted crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic was an additional threat to local livelihoods, particularly for healthcare professionals.
- Accounts of experiences from the critical period of COVID-19 depict the disturbances induced in daily life and work relationships. Two informants confide:

Despite the lack of proper medical supplies and treatment at the beginning of the pandemic, healthcare workers, mainly frontline medical staff, were forced to cope with the demand for care and information. We had to manage to provide public health care day and night” (Official of the RMC, 48 years old, Tenkodogo, March 2023).

We lived through hard times...Thanks to the awareness campaigns and the reports of the first cases of illness and death that the population began to take the disease seriously and go to hospital. It is from this moment that the influx of patients increased and so did our workload. [...] This required a lot of effort and sacrifice, since we had to work a lot and reduce the time devoted to family or rest (Healthcare worker, 42 years old, Tenkodogo, March 2023).

- Rumors, suspicions, criticisms of shock-responsive’ measures as well as the political mismanagement of the pandemic (e.g. the validity of the information and statistical data provided by government) Samuelsen and Paré Toé (2022: 16).

Intersecting temporalities: negotiating time in a context of multiple crises

- Unpaid overtime : marker of “the medical oath” to care for and save lives in all circumstances
In a hospital, there is never enough time. You’re always running out of time. It was more complicated during the first hours of the Coronavirus [...] You don’t even have time for your family [...] When you go home it’s just for a few hours and you come back to the hospital (Physician, medical emergency service, 38 years old, Tenkodogo, March 2023).
- “Intensive work” and “lack of time” were mentioned as main concerns for the healthcare workers we interviewed. In their perspective, the lack of “time for yourself” or “for others,” induces permanent stress and a decrease in professional performance, a relative irregularity in the follow-up of their own children’s socialization process as well as a low involvement in sociability activities (weddings, naming ceremonies, etc.).

- Based on the typology proposed by Dubar (2011), temporal tensions and uncertainties in times of pandemic are expressive of both “crisis of the future” and “crisis of the lived time” of healthcare workers.
- Chakrabarty (2021: 327) asserts: “Much talk about post-pandemic futures is in nature nostalgic, expressing a desire to return to the ease and comfort of the pre-pandemic times”.
- In times of pandemic, perceptions and practices of time or the negotiation of temporalities is a dynamic and historical process combining systemic constraints and the subjectivation of individual actors (agency).
- Embedded in hybrid logics and practices as well as in various uncertainties, these temporalities are qualified as fluid or intersecting temporalities.

Anticipating future epidemics: a local perspective

- The emergence of new infectious diseases or new pandemics as inescapable, according to the interviewed HCW

Nowadays, with globalization, everything circulates, people and goods, and germs also circulate with the movement of people [...] Indeed, when we read documents or listen to scientists, we are not immune to new pandemics. What is important is how to deal with these new diseases, especially for low-income countries like Burkina Faso (Member of the surveillance unit, Tenkodogo, March 2023).

- Framing future epidemics: lessons from COVID-19

It is the COVID that really came to put the people, in front of the people; that is to say that we did not have the time to prepare, to make simulations on a large scale before the COVID. So really, the COVID was at the same time a test and a practice; both mixed together. So, it was really from the COVID experience that, whether it was the (...), the Ministry of Health itself really started to take things seriously (Physician, 37 years old, Tenkodogo, March 2023).

- MacGregor et al. (2020: 117) emphasize: “(...) growing appreciation of ‘behavior’ and ‘context’ presents a new set of uncertainties that must now be grappled with in responding to, but also preparing for, outbreaks”. Here lies the importance of exploring individually and collectively the safer temporal possibilities.
- Curative and preventive responses to epidemic diseases must not be vertically designed and imposed ; instead, they must adopt a participatory and horizontal perspective, rooted in cognitive and practical models of intervention communities.

Conclusion

- Risks as potentially destructive force and catalysts for global political mobilization (Beck 2001).
- Like genes or viruses that mutate frequently, responses to epidemic or pandemic diseases must be flexible and adaptable to spaces and temporalities.
- Embeddedness of temporal anticipation of pandemics