

Illness Experience Without Illness: A Qualitative Study on the Lived Experience of Young Adults During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Authors : Gemma Postil, Claire Zanin, Michael Halpin, Caroline Ritter

Abstract : Illness experience research typically focuses on people that are living with a medical condition; however, the broad consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are impacting those without the virus itself, as many experienced extensive lockdowns, social isolation, and distress. Drawing on conceptual work in the illness experience literature, we argue that policy and social changes tied to COVID-19 produce biographical disruptions. In this sense, we argue that the COVID-19 pandemic produces illness experience without illness, as the pandemic comprehensively impacts health and biography. This paper draws on 30 in-depth interviews with young adults living in Prince Edward Island (PEI), which were conducted as part of a larger project to understand how young adults navigate compliance with the COVID-19 pandemic. We then inductively analyzed the interviews with a constructivist grounded theory approach. Specifically, we demonstrate that young adults living in PEI during the COVID-19 pandemic experienced biographical disruptions throughout the pandemic despite not contracting the virus. First, we detail how some participants experience biographical acceleration, with the pandemic accelerating relationships, home buying, and career planning. Second, we demonstrate biographical stagnation, wherein participants report being unable to pursue major life milestones. Lastly, we describe biographical regression, wherein participants feel they are losing ground during the pandemic and are actively falling behind their peers. These findings provide the novel application of illness experience concepts to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, contribute to work on illness experience and ambiguity, and extend Bury's conceptualization of biographical disruption. In conclusion, we demonstrate that young adults experienced the biographical disruption expected from having COVID-19 without having an illness, highlighting the depth to which the pandemic affected young adults.

Keywords : illness experience, lived experience, biographical disruption, COVID-19, young adults

Conference Title : ICMSPHHS 2022 : International Conference on Medical Sociology, Public Health and Health System

Conference Location : Helsinki, Finland

Conference Dates : July 19-20, 2022