

The experience of epistemic uncertainty among asylum seekers living in the EVAM centers during the pandemic - A qualitative study

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Introduction

The pandemic had the ability to bring **epistemic uncertainty** to its paroxysm. The “uncertainty of these times” became a **leitmotif** in official communications as in mass media¹. The latter were overflowed with information concerning the virus, thus spreading what the WHO named “an **infodemic**”².

Drawing on a **anthropological approach** and a **syndemics**³ approach, the study aimed to explore the relationship asylum seekers (AS) had to the circulation of knowledge during the pandemic and the way it affected and transformed their pre-existing socio-economical vulnerability^{4,5}.

Methodology

- 13 semi-directed interviews of asylum seekers living in EVAM centres
- Mostly in French or English, 1 in Spanish and 4 with the assistance of a translator
- Conducted from spring till the end of summer 2021
- The theme of “uncertainty” emerged from an inductive reading of the data
- Development of analytical categories and coding of the data with MAXQDA

How was epistemic uncertainty experienced by asylum seekers living in EVAM centres in the Canton de Vaud ?

Epistemic uncertainty

- Unpredictability of the pandemic and the virus itself had the ability to generate **anxiety** amongst AS
- Some AS come to the realization that institutions like science or medicine are also in a state of epistemic uncertainty during the pandemic, What is experienced as **unsettling**

Infodemic

- Experienced as **overwhelming** for AS
- Mixed with the anxiety generated, AS had the tendency to **avoid getting informed** about the pandemic
- They **develop ways to be informed through other channels** and find sources which they considered safer

Syndemic

- “ [...] **syndemics approach recognizes that diseases in a population occur neither independent of social and ecological conditions, nor in isolation from other diseases.**”⁶
- The management of the pandemic sometimes didn't take into account the **specific needs of AS**

Structural vulnerability

- AS were biologically more at risk to get infected and to suffer negative outcomes from an infection⁷
- They also suffered from financial, food and social insecurity during the pandemic⁸
- **The main concern we identified was the “lost” of years of training due to the pandemic**

Conclusion

Asylum seekers living in the EVAM centres during the pandemic were confronting epistemic uncertainty the crisis brought upon. It made them sometimes uncomfortable, anxious and unsure. Seeking for answers, they were able to develop **strategies**, allowing them to move forward, like relying on **experiential knowledge** or making decisions despite epistemic uncertainty for “**the greater good**” - like getting vaccinated. They also identified the impact of the pandemic on their mental health and sometimes deplored the lack of mental support in these times. Which illustrates what we could learn from them for future health policies.

unisanté

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