

Correspondence

Vanishing mediators in public health during COVID-19

ABSTRACT

Public health interventions during the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic aim to ensure that the lessons learned of the crises can prevent historical recurrences. Such interventions can mean vanishing mediators that must cater to a post-pandemic structure. Learning from large-scale political and scientific histories or advances—emancipatory projects, pandemic histories and vaccine developments—as well as individual agencies—physical activity and exercise—at the moment become crucial in rethinking and enacting utopian possibilities.

Keywords COVID-19, enacted utopia, public health, vanishing mediators

‘Will Public Health take the lead and play its part to ensure that the history of the pandemic is not lived again?’¹ is the open question posed by the recent editorial. This means that this moment is crucial in assessing the historic panoply of events leading to imminent possibilities. The current constellation of things during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic highlights preexisting inequalities and this does not come off as a celebration of diversity. The crisis we are dealing with is fundamentally threefold. Although for some it is a particular combination of ecological, pandemic and terroristic disasters,² for others it is composed of a much apparent triple crisis: ‘medical (the epidemic itself), economic (which will hit hard whatever the outcome of the epidemic), and psychological’ so that ‘the basic coordinates of the everyday lives of millions are disintegrating, and the change will affect everything, from flying to holidays to simple bodily contact.’³ As such it is the rebranding of what was normal that led to a new normal. How this gets further ‘normalized’ depends on whether present actions can be retroactively posited as an inherent agent to a futuristic substantial change. In short, it is important for current changes to actively emancipate themselves as vanishing mediators.

Vanishing mediators are agents, interventions, historic syntheses or ideologies that disappear—because they facilitate or get integrated into the logic of the new structure—the moment their functions are already done.⁴ Tracing these in public health can mean retroactively drawing the lessons of the past and present pandemics to enact a

radical futurism. For Mueller, McCollum and Schmidt’s ‘COVID-19, the Vanishing Mediator, and Postcapitalist Possibilities,’⁵ the COVID-19 crisis politics itself or COVID-19-induced-wartime socialism (CV19 socialism) is a vanishing mediator, drawing inspiration from Žižek’s explication of war communism, necessitating stabilizations of the ‘unstable capitalist state’ through socialist political economies from above and mass mobilizations of environmental restoration from below. The important point that resonates in recent grounded findings is that indigenous movements and their marginalized voices challenge colonial and capitalistic regimes through an ongoing struggle and their content and form make up as vanishing mediators.^{6,7} Indigenous dispossession and relocation prompt new ontologies⁸ and health considerations in cooperation with institutions⁹ while still learning from their practices like burial¹⁰ and ecological knowledge¹¹ during the pandemic.

Coupling this pandemic experience with previous ones can trace some insights. From persisting descendants of the 1918 influenza virus and with today’s SARS-CoV-2 genetic variants with ‘increased transmissibility and immune escape,’ it appears that these can make us initially expect possibilities of pandemic recurrences.¹² Although ongoing attempts to fight the infection are in order,¹³ probing into the structure of human immunologic defense and mRNA vaccine effects make a potential case of predicting and controlling viral transmissions, including for human immunodeficiency virus and its enduring development of a vaccine.¹⁴

In an inductive approach, individual physical fitness must be promoted through daily active regimens, which may easily be treated as vanishing interventions given their ordinariness. But the fact is that physical inactivity (PI) and sedentary behavior have been proven to negatively affect people's lives so that labeling them as 'PI pandemic' and 'sedentarism pandemic' makes sense.¹⁵ In this sense, it is important to stress the agency of vanishing mediators, which in this case may be the aggressive quotidian efforts to be done to get people active and moving. Fitness and overall healthy living during the pandemic when done consistently can be vanishing mediators that get subsumed in a post-pandemic structure. This means not just a sustainable diet¹⁶ but also increased physical activity like running and exercise.

Many intervening fronts in public health can provide agencies to gradually rethink post-pandemic utopia—a leap to possibilities outside the cycle of pandemics throughout history. Enacting this requires independent and interdependent leads. Although 'these ongoing, overlapping crises have created space to forge new solidarities with communities worldwide while facilitating utopian thinking on what a new world system might look like',⁵ small individual resistances and ordinary ways of healthy living can also be active agents of change. A post-pandemic structure requires learning from public health lessons retroactively traced—and there are more—so that the ways of life within the new one ensures that the history of dismal consequences of pandemic crises cannot be lived again.

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