I read David Silverman’s Forum Discussion with interest and found myself nodding in agreement throughout. As a researcher, albeit both qualitative and quantitative, I have seen the challenges that qualitative researchers have. My PhD students, my colleagues and I have all been confronted with the logistics of safely collecting data. Much of my own research centres on health professionals. The last year has meant that many of these health professionals have had no time to be part of my ongoing work, and I will have to wait until the pandemic subsides.

I imagine that each reader will resonate with at least one section of Silverman’s article. For me ‘Possible remedies’ was the section that I found uplifting and was something I wanted to respond to and expand on. In my response, let me be clear, I am not for one minute denying the deprivation, financial and social, that has become a familiar part of so many people’s lives. My response could very easily focus on many tragic personal stories that have ended in isolation, depression, despair and even suicide; but I will rely on others to write about these heart-breaking real-life events. Bad news and sensational stories always hit the headlines.

An article from the BBC in part inspired my response (BBC Worklife 2021) and opened up new directions of thought that assisted me in writing this commentary. Early on, the BBC article states that for some 10% to 15% of people, life will never go back to ‘normal’ and suffering will have to be endured. For others, the ‘normal’ will be very different. Some, although only a few, have thrived and so their ‘normal’ will be different again. From a positive psychology perspective, I want to look at the good that can come out of the pandemic at both the research level and a more global level. As I write this, I recognise that my response is one-sided – emphasising the good – but for me that is acceptable. It is not that I am denying the bad, rather that I am trying to offset some of it with good.

Importantly, new research opportunities have emerged. My colleagues in Hong Kong are investigating how end-of-life carers and workers are managing the pandemic and how they have experienced significant changes to the way they can communicate with those at the final stages of life and with other related service users. They are shedding light on how these frontline carers are managing the changes brought about by COVID-19. Specifically, they have lamented the rules that have meant they could no longer sit and hold the hand of a dying person. They also stressed the extra grief felt by families with whom they work, who could not say farewell to a loved one in the customary manner. These experiences have added to the emotional stress and anguish of end-of-life workers, including funeral directors who feel distressed because they cannot fulfil the wishes of the family.

The exploration of these researchers may lead to a renewed focus on end-of-life matters. For
example, it is evident that when traditional ways of dealing with a loved one’s end of life are denied, other ways to communicate grief and loss and obtain support must be devised. The wellbeing of the community depends on being able to go through stages of grief and move towards recovery. This topic, which is often hidden away, and sometimes deemed too difficult to research, is now seeing the light of day. One of my PhD students has had to restructure her PhD and methodology in its entirety: rather than interviewing a large number of participants – which is no longer viable or safe – she is focusing on a small number of detailed case studies and creating meticulous profiles about her participants. The data that are emerging are rich. Facing up to challenges and disasters tests our levels of resilience and focuses the mind. Over the last three decades, academics have been pressured to publish novel findings from a large number of different datasets. As Silverman says, we can slow down the data collection and review secondary data. Let us revisit previous studies and try to make links between data sets that we might not have thought about before. There is so much data out there already, let us seize the opportunity to use it and make connections between secondary data sets that will produce novel approaches.

Revisiting the way data are collected and analysed is only one of many examples of how the pandemic can enable us to rethink traditional ways of working and researching. It has been the belief for so long that face-to-face contact is a necessary prerequisite for quality discussion and information exchange. While no one would deny the value of physical contact with people, it is not in fact a necessity. For example, at my own university we have enjoyed quality online talks from academics around the world. There is more opportunity to listen to these diverse presenters than previously when the norm was for academics to visit the campus physically and give their talk. Of course, we still want the physical connection but we can also capitalise on other modalities. While we must acknowledge the hardships that are happening because of the pandemic, we must actively seek out the positive at all times.

So what positives can we find? If we review past pandemics we do see positives emerging. An article I read recently shows us how those agriculture workers who survived the Black Death found themselves able to free themselves from serfdom and obtain better pay and conditions (McDonald 2020). Following the Spanish Flu there were advances in public health and patient care. Right now we can see reductions in carbon emissions because of reduced travel. As we sit and think about how our lives have changed for the worse because of the pandemic, we should also seek to find out what might be better. In Hong Kong, the preparedness for the pandemic has been attributed to lessons learned from the SARS epidemic. Many people I have spoken to have had the opportunity to rethink their lives and are looking to change daily habits that for years they did not question. I suspect that travel will no longer be taken for granted but will be respected and cherished. For instance, academics may receive funding to go and collect data in different parts of the world. Some work collaboratively but others do not and prefer to conduct their research alone. We have recognised for at least the last 10 years that we need interdisciplinary and mixed research methods studies to answer meaningfully the questions we pose. The pandemic has meant travel is not accessible but it is also an opportunity to reach out to scholars in our areas of interest around the world and work with them rather than alone. I feel so much more can be achieved when one has academics with different perspectives working together. I admit it may be more difficult than taking the solo route, but I honestly believe from my own research experiences that more can be achieved if this path is actively pursued.

Finally, I want to reiterate the role of positive psychology and how individuals need resilience to help them through tough times. We can increase our levels of resilience, and with it comes improved psychological fitness (for further discussion, see Seligman 2011). In these challenging times, we need to draw on our strengths, and ensure that we maintain emotional and psychological fitness. This focus means we deal with the bad more constructively and think more creatively about the ways in which we collect our data. This is a core aspect of positive psychology. Being aware of what assists us to become more resilient is the first step in moving forward. It is a fact that some people manage disasters and ill fortune better than others. They have developed resilience. In Hong Kong before COVID-19, we had social unrest and violence, now
we are dealing with a pandemic. Yes, things have been bad for many but I see resilience all around me and I intend to focus on that.

References


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