Post-Pandemic Trauma and the Research as an Intrusion

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Abstract: The pandemic, especially the lockdown period, has strongly affected all the subdivisions of the performing arts' sector, specifically the independent creators. In the context of a doctoral research focused on the impact the years 2020-2021 had on present day's theatre praxes and aesthetics, ethical aspects are challenged by the need to gather information in order to outline the specificities of that time. Are endeavours such as searching-researching, documenting, and analysing useful or intrusive, professionally "traumatising" for the interviewed people, when performed only a couple of years after the actual event? How should these interviews be conducted? How can one know what the limits of ethics in this type of research are, if the only aspect required in order to determine this is the conversation, the possible ethics infringement itself? How ethical is it for the Act of Research if one avoids its completion for the sake of protecting the research object? Moreover, as the case study is a series of discussions whose analysis is included in a PhD thesis, one must raise the question of the supervisor's role in this context - what should they do in this case, should they advise, help build the framework for this activity or should they keep their distance? The present paper aims to gather possible answers to these questions addressing the ethical issues of possibly intrusive research methods, as well as advance solutions for the issue represented by the purpose of doctoral advisory figures in relation to sensitive approaches in the development of an academic endeavour.

Keywords: ethics, interview, research, supervisor, lockdown.

1. Introduction

From the entirety of academic ethics concepts, one must highlight the idea of ethical research, intrusive behaviour occurring frequently during the information assembly phase. Due to this aspect, and in the light of recent pandemic-related events, this paper will be centred around the possible ethical "misbehaviours" and their respective solutions when interviewing people (practitioners and theoreticians alike) regarding

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difficult recent events. Furthermore, the supervisor's involvement in such processes and research praxes will also be subject to analysis. One will use, as a case-study, an interview the author is conducting as part of her PhD research.

This previously-mentioned interview is structured on multiple categories – socio-professional and personal context, The Experiment, possible new aesthetics, and what can be retrieved from the media-theatrical experiments of the 2020 lockdown. One notices, thus, that the questions cover a broad range of topics, reason for which the subjects (the interviewees) might perceive this inquiry as being intrusive, forcing the borders of their personal and professional intimacy and challenging the limits of an ethical endeavour. Clearly, the possible ethical implications of this type of research method do not pass as a novelty in the academic spheres, and are, as a result, (at least) subconsciously taken into account, as Paul Oliver states and, later on, details, "We do not usually select our research participants in isolation from all our other thoughts about the research project."[2]. These categories are developed in order to allow not only employed creators, but also independent artists to enrich the information basis for the PhD research, as their work from the lockdown and post-lockdown pandemic period was rarely funded by any governmental institution and, moreover, most of the independent creators struggled with technical unemployment and the financial issues caused by it. By incorporating both perspectives, the research will display a broader image of the socio-artistic context of the years 2020 and 2021.

There is, consequently, a series of unavoidable questions regarding the proposed topic, but the most fervent one, serving as a basis for developing further answers, relates to the general ethical aspects of the intended approach. *Are endeavours such as searching-researching, documenting, and analysing useful or intrusive, professionally "traumatising" for the interviewed people, when performed only a couple of years after the actual event?* A short answer would be *both*. One cannot indulge in such research without taking the risk of (even just slight) intrusion, but no pandemic-related aspect can only be looked at from a singular perspective, and, thus, all endeavours of this kind have to be perceived in close relation to their context[3] (i.e. the interviewed person's

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[2] Paul Oliver (2010), *The Student's Guide to Research Ethics*, 2nd edition, McGraw-Hill/Open University Press, UK/New York, p. 26.
[3] Julian Baggini, Peter S. Fosl (2007), *The Ethics Toolkit: A Compendium of Ethical Concepts and Methods*, Blackwell Publishing, p. 42. "Everything else is good or bad in relation to these [*pleasure or happiness* or *pain and unhappiness*]." As the research that serves as a case study is not related to any of the previously mentioned dichotomies, one can, therefore, accurately place it in the middle-ground and report its aspects based on the contextualised input and answers.

perception on the years 2020-2021). Regardless of the subject's perspective, however, one aspect is certain - endeavours of this kind are useful, offering a bird's-eye view of past challenging events and, this way, enabling communities within the world of art and from more distant professional spheres to understand the impact of the pandemic on the development of theatre. The substantial does not, however, lie in the first half of this question, but rather in the closing sentence – *when performed only a couple of years after the actual event*. The analysed phenomena are still to become history, and, even if this paper's author's PhD thesis is only in its incipient stages, the following years may still not contribute significantly to the improvement of objective approaches in this regard. Therefore, one returns to the significance of the context in such research activities – *who* is interviewed, but also *how*.

In comparison to other research methodologies, however, interviewing emphasises different basic questions as its cornerstone – there is, without a doubt, a *why*, a base-reason for which the researcher, the PhD student in this case, chose a specific topic and a specific subject, and this aspect is not known to the interviewee in the incipient stages[4]. This way, it is necessary to highlight the importance of the *how*, rather than the *why*, the manner of conducting the conversation having to encompass more than the channels for obtaining the information needed, but also the elements that balance the discrepancy between the two parties of the interview, and, implicitly, reduce any possible ethics infringements. This leads one to the following major question of this paper.

How should these interviews be conducted? seems to only accept one answer option, and that is *carefully*, balancing between elegantly and diplomatically demanding the answers to the questions and constantly adapting the process, so that the interviewed person never feels the need to disengage. One can place this approach method under the concept of "inclusion", which, although not understood here in its broader sense, automatically implies a carefully designed path towards obtaining information. However, as Franziska Felder notes in *The Ethics of Inclusive Education: Presenting a New Theoretical Framework*, "Good intentions are a fine *medium* and *prerequisite* for implementing inclusion, but they do not automatically resolve the question of what, exactly, the *goal* of

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[4] "Moreover, there is generally an imbalance between those requesting information and those providing it. The former know what information they seek, how they intend to use it, and with whom they intend to share it. The latter often do not.", Peter Markie (2022), *Confidentiality and Professional Practice*, in *Academic Ethics Today. Problems, Policies, and Prospects for University Life*, edited by Stephen M. Cahn, foreword by Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, Rowman & Littlefield, London, p. 53.

inclusion encompasses."[5]. Therefore, as vital as overall care for the interviewees is in this context, the *justification*, as the Felder notes later on, is just as crucial for any ethical research endeavour in any given field of study or practice.

Inclusion becomes, now, synonymous with the totality of measures taken against any potential breach in the ethics code of the methodology chosen by the PhD student. This varies greatly, depending on each researcher's individual conceptions on Ethics, and also on the outcome of each researcher-subject interaction. "Breaches of research integrity" and cases of "research misconduct"[6] include cases of result/response alteration, in the name of preserving the initial outcome as desired, even in the detriment of its accuracy. Although certain answers or certain people's answers can come from points of view antagonistic to the one initially issued by the interviewer or be opposite to the desired outcome of the eventual data analysis, they hold value in themselves, as tokens of the impact the analysed period of time had on the respondents. For this reason, in this given case-study, when the interview is taken less than five years after the beginning of the pandemic, and remembering difficult aspects might still prove itself to be challenging for many, the concept of *inclusion* can (and should) be formulated in action as displaying understanding for possible rejections, regardless of their reason, untruthful involvement promises or overly-succinct answers. These, too, are answers capable of retrieving the ethos of those times and of opening new paths for future research endeavours.

These being given, *how can one know what the limits of ethics in this type of research are, if the only aspect required in order to determine this is the conversation, the possible ethics infringement itself?* The risk taken here is more than visible, on both sides of the interview. On the one hand, the researcher needs to complete their work and provide an encompassing (hopefully, *all-encompassing*) result. They are, ergo, professionally obliged to further their endeavour, even if it leads to contexts where only the person-subject can have a definitive word in what concerns advancing with the interviewing process. On the other hand, the subject, having the "switch" in their hands, can draw the line at any given moment. The only issue here is, thus, related to the way in which the power is given to the subject, so that the researcher can be sure the process will not face an end due to minimal inconveniences on the side of the interviewee, but rather

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[5] Franziska Felder (2022), *The Ethics of Inclusive Education: Presenting a New Theoretical Framework*, Routledge, London, New York, p. 17.
[6] Rachel Brooks, Kitty te Riele, Meg Maguire (2014), *Ethics and Education Research*, Sage, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, p. 120.

only in the case of major lines being crossed. Giving this power, however, can be an ambitious stake, the completion of the research depending on the quantity and quality of the answers received. One can create the context in which they ask for involvement from the subject in such a manner that the interviewee feels they have the situation under their control and also have the capacity to direct the conversation away from the sensitive topics - here, the researcher has to be able to filter the details in order to retrieve the necessary information. Additionally, as quality is derived from quantity, the interviewer can attempt to converse with multiple professional entities, in hopes that the number of people who accept to take part will be sufficient to provide a satisfactory sample for their given context.

Arboreally, from the idea detailed in the previous paragraph, one can develop the question of ethical aspects within the limits of the relation between the researcher and their work. *How ethical is it, then, for the Act of Research if one avoids its completion for the sake of protecting the research object?* Here one must highlight, once more, the quantity-related aspects, as the number of participants can actually impact, although the term used here seems drastic, the necessity (or lack thereof) of certain answers. In other words, if one subject refuses to answer, the research as a whole will only suffer minimally. If the group to which the subjects belong, however, is small (and this is the case of the performing arts sector, even if observed on a European, multi-national level), one must return to the question of ethical behaviour towards the Act of Research itself. What can one do, in this case, what options is a researcher presented with? Apart from giving up altogether, one can analyse the context and return to complete the process later on, or… they can infringe the ethics and proceed with the research at all costs. In these circumstances, it is only up to the researcher to act according to their personal values, according to what their main purpose is, at that moment. One must not disconsider the importance (and value, for that matter) of personal ethics, ethics about oneself and the activities one indulges in[7].

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[7] Helen Kara (2018), *Research Ethics in the Real World*, Policy Press, Bristol, p. 77. "Think about the research you propose. Does it present physical risks to the researcher(s)? Or emotional, mental or spiritual risks? Are there relational risks, such as the potential for being discriminated against, bullied or harassed? If you can answer 'yes' to any of these questions, think first about whether you can redesign the research to avoid those risks without losing quality." This also applies to professional risks, which, one believes, arise when the researcher is faced with having to choose between two distinctive types of ethics (rooted however, in the same concept) – should they exhibit ethical behaviour towards the subject or towards themselves, given the case they can only choose one option?

On a different level of the research, one is faced with the issue of the supervisor, who, although directly involved in the process, cannot play the part of the researcher themselves, their roles being adjacent, tangent, with areas of concurrence, but never overlapping in a great proportion. *What should they do in this case, then? Should they advise, help build the framework for this activity or should they keep their distance?* This bifaceted aspect has to be analysed by addressing the need for balance, as key in the plenary development of the researcher-now-still-student. In their paper titled *The Role of the Supervisor on Developing PhD Students' Skills*, Amjad Almusaed and Asaad Almssad clearly present the role of the supervisor, placing it in the point of concurrency between distant and objective observation and involvement and even intervention[8]. This is, though translating, the manner in which the PhD student should approach their interview subjects: the same way a supervisor guides their student and imposes certain limits, "borders" of the research, but, at the same time, provides protection against these so-called *hazardous* situations, the student-researcher must give their subject the feeling they receive something in return for their answers. Paul Oliver argues, however, that this is not frequently the case, as "many people enjoy being interviewed" and, thus, their gain in this situation is minimised by the circumstantial preferences, the subjects seeing this "as an opportunity to gain an insight into themselves and their own value positions"[9].

Furthermore, just as in the case of the supervisor-student relation, the researcher can display *product* or *process orientation*[10], similitude that can lead to a specific approach of the interview. From this parallel, one can deduce that the dynamics between the professor and the PhD candidate can unconsciously influence the techniques and methodologies used by the latter, and, implicitly, the ethical aspects of the endeavour to obtain information for the thesis. One must, however, point out the fact that these "ways to follow"[11] should not be indiscriminately appropriated, directly translated from the academic team's type of cooperation into the

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[8] "The supervisor's responsibility is to enforce safe study process practices and procedures; he must take immediate steps to correct a failure situation. Everything must be clear and systematic. If a hazard is identified, the supervisor must act." – Amjad Almusaed, Asaad Almssad (2020), *The Role of the Supervisor on Developing PhD Students' Skills*, in Thripp, Richard & Organization, Istes. (2022). Proceedings of International Conference on Humanities, Social and Education Sciences 2020, ISTES Organization, Washington, DC,, p. 7.

[9] Paul Oliver, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-57.

[10] Ahmed A. Wadee, Moyra Keane, Ton Dietz, Driekie Hay (2010), *Effective PhD supervision mentorship and coaching*, Rozenberg Publishers, Amsterdam, p. 72.

[11] Oleg Bazaluk (2023), *Discursive Thinking Through of Education: Learning from Those Who Transform the Universe*, Routledge, London, New York, p. 12.

interviewer-interviewee interaction, but rather filtered through necessity, context, and the personality idiosyncrasies of both the researcher and the subject.

2. Conclusions

As conclusions to the present paper, one should highlight the multifaceted approach on both the side of the PhD student and on the side of the supervisor. Both entities of the doctoral research process go through several steps (the question series, respectively the analysis of the necessary approach to the student-supervisor relation) in order to establish or maintain the ethical background of the process of acquiring information for research. This intrinsic diversity of the steps towards the goal not only creates a solid framework for the further development of the research-"product", but also configures a psychologically safe environment for the respondents, thus allowing for future professional collaborations, regardless of whether their purpose is research- or practice-related.

(traducere în limba engleză de Teodora Medeleanu)

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