




The Impact of Covid-19 on Academic Practice: A Dilemma-Driven Self-Study Inquiry at an Institution of Higher Learning

Tholani Tshuma^a

a. Mathematics & Natural Sciences
Department, Walter Sisulu University,
Mthatha, South Africa

Email: ttshuma@wsu.ac.za

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ABSTRACT

This inquiry was a dilemma-driven, object-inquiry self-study. The study followed visual methodologies in unpacking the impact of Covid-19 on the practices of a practitioner at a rural university. During the Covid-19 pandemic, I was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with my daily practice as an academic because I struggled to locate my footing in what has been dubbed the 'new normal' about online student teaching and assessment. In my bid to investigate the dissatisfactions I faced due to Covid-19, I followed the self-study methodology, which entailed my engagement in reflexivity cycles, and feedback from critical friends. My critical friends played a crucial validation role during my data collection, analysis, and drawing of conclusions from multiple data forms that included journal entries and discussions with others. The collected data was thematically and analyzed from deductive to inductive perspective through the process of coding. This inquiry established that the outbreak of Covid-19 led to dilemmas of practice that stemmed from my being deskilled, techno and Covid-phobic; poor individual adaptability; inadequate TPKC; and the shortcomings of working as an isolated silo. It emerged that these dilemmas of practice escalated into professional traumas through working in isolated silos in virtual platforms. Thus, through making our challenges of practice public, we tend to benefit from the pool of probing expertise of others. Whilst the advent of Covid-19 posed unwelcome professional traumas, it was through the probing power of 'the second voice' that the over-shadowed professional growth opportunities in this pandemic induced 'new normal' was unveiled.

KEYWORDS

Self-study; professional growth; dilemmas; Covid-19; professional traumas.

INTRODUCTION

Empirical evidence supports that as one's job experience increases, one's on-the-job knowledge also becomes enriched (e.g. Schmidt, et al., 1986; Huie, et al., 2020). Over the years, I had become progressively satisfied with my daily practice as a university lecturer and research academic. I used to get a standing ovation from my students after a live lecture session as they showed appreciation by clapping their hands. At the end of each academic year, I would also hand out evaluation tools for the students to evaluate my practice anonymously. The positive students' comments by the majority of my students helped me to consolidate those good practices that maximized learning. Over the years, the number of negative comments from students' anonymous evaluations of my teaching decreased to a minimum. Furthermore, during research workshops for upcoming fellow researchers, supervisors, and post-graduate students organized by the university, I also got positive feedback on my live presentations as one of the keynote facilitators. After the advent of Covid-19, the job knowing that I had accumulated over the years, seeming changed.

In today's fast-paced changing work environment, the competency of a worker to adjust successfully to a changing work context or the 'individual adaptability' is crucial for one to remain functional in a given workspace (van Dam, 2005). In my work situation, after the advent of Covid-19, I could see that something was wrong but had no idea what it was and why. The students were a) not motivated to attend my classes, b) displayed poor attendance, c) performed poorly in given tests and examinations, and d) their class participation dropped to being mere passive recipients during the course of my online lecturing. In a bid to enhance my 'individual adaptability' (van Dam, 2005) during the Covid-19 era, I envisaged the need to identify the dissatisfactions and problematic issues I was encountering in my practice. Thus, to help me probe issues beyond my limitations and biases, I sought to engage in cycles of reflexivity, discussions with, and feedback from critical friends (Samaras, 2011). The purpose of this investigation was therefore to identify and understand those shortcomings that led to my dissatisfactions in my practice using the methodology of self-study through the technique of object inquiry (Samaras, 2011). Two research questions guided this inquiry: a) What are the dilemmas of practice that I face due to Covid-19 at an institution of higher learning? b) How has the advent of Covid-19 impacted my practice as a practitioner at an institution of higher learning?

Reviewed Literature and the Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

Whilst the world has experienced many global pandemics such as the H1 N1 and Spanish flu, COVID-19 has broken all known records because of its highly contagious and deadly nature (Ali, 2020; Sahu, 2020). The disease was declared a global pandemic in March 2020 by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) after it was detected in China in 2019 and quickly crossed multiple national boundaries. Globally, as of 7 March 2022, 6 021 743 people had died from Covid-19 and 446 825 709 people have been infected. As part of the global space, South Africa

has its growing statistics: 99 543 people have died from the pandemic from 3 684 319 infections as of 7 March 2022 (Worldometer, 2022).

Covid-19, because of its highly contagious nature, has imposed various adjustments to our day-in and day-out life experiences (Agrawal, 2021). For instance, public gatherings and face-to-face meetings are occasionally banned around the world (Agrawal, 2021). Furthermore, sporadic institutions of learning and business premises closures by governments around the globe in an attempt to curtail the rapid spread of the disease have been alluded to by various scholars (e.g. Drane, Vernon, & O'Shea, 2020; Mandikiana, 2020; Sibanda & Mathwasa, 2021).

The World Bank (2020) also raised the alarm that the Covid-19 pandemic had led to massive educational systems disruptions at the global level because 1.6 billion students around the world have been negatively affected. Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has negatively affected the normal operations and functioning of over 94% of the world's institutions of learning worldwide (UNICEF, 2021). In their quest to ensure continuity in the daily life operations that entailed public gatherings, many countries globally adopted online means of engagement in everyday life and educational institutions (Dube et al., 2022; Etane et al., 2020). Most institutions of learning across the world have resorted to the use of virtual platforms for administrative work and teaching. This has been dubbed the 'new normal' way of doing things because Covid-19 is here to stay (Emanuel et al., 2022). Thus, in educational setups, *'COVID-19 forced to transform the face-to-face mode of teaching to virtual in educational institutions around the globe that not only impact institutional stakeholder but also posed a threat to entire humanity because all parties related to education had to change their activities'* (Hosen, et al., 2022). Furthermore, whilst some scholars argue that real change takes place in a deep crisis (e.g. Schleicher, 2012), questions arise about how prepared are we and to what extent can we easily adapt to this inevitable 'new normal' as institutions and individuals.

Theoretical/ conceptual framework for this investigation

Given the complexity and uniqueness of each social sciences research (Abd-El-Khalick & Akerson, 2007), I could not locate a single existing theoretical framework for use in this inquiry. Thus, I had to use a framework that is *'home-grown'* or conceptual framework (*personal integration of concepts*) instead of one that is already there or *'off-the-shelf'* (Antonenko, 2014) to overcome this complexity. I subscribe to the notion of a conceptual framework:

"...as a visual representation of the structure of the study and its alignment with the relevant theoretical foundations. According to this view, a conceptual framework is a figure, typically presented as a concept map that summarizes all key information presented in the literature review of the study" (Antoneko, 2014, p. 3).

The different constructs that constitute the conceptual framework for this investigation are discussed next and diagrammatically represented in Figure 1 below.

Critical friends

Self-studies are not individual ventures but include critical friends (Samaras, 2011). Critical friends are trusted peers who appreciate the value of the self-study inquiry not only to

themselves, but also to the individual self-study scholar and the knowledge base for practice (Shuck & Russell, 2006). In this inquiry, to bring divergent views, my critical friends were drawn from different faculties (i.e. library services, Languages, Medicine, Anthropology, Political Studies, Consumer Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Educational sciences). These critical friends played a crucial validation role in this practitioner inquiry.

Practitioner inquiries

According to Samaras (2011), teacher inquiry, action research, reflective practice, a self-study constitute what is termed '*practitioner inquiries*'. In this inquiry, my understanding of these earlier teacher research works (discussed next) shaped the self-study research methodology I followed.

Teacher inquiry

A paradigm shift in the way research on teachers has been done is evident in the research landscape, with teachers being placed as inactive subjects in the 1970s (Borko et. al, 1979), to include the teachers' voice by involving them in the research about their practice (Clark & Yinger, 1979). Thus, by involving the teachers in the research about their practice, "*... teacher research gained new standing because of its potential to lessen the divide between theory and practice, on the one hand, and contribute needed insider perspective to the knowledge base about teaching and learning*" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2004 p. 603). This inquiry drew insights from the teacher inquiry methodology as it sets aside the use of external 'experts,' to investigate concerns arising from my practice, but it called for me to investigate dissatisfactions arising from my practice.

Reflective practice

Loughran and Northfield (1998, p. 15) point out that '*... reflection is a personal process of thinking, refining, reframing and developing actions*'. The reflective practice goes beyond mere reflection because practitioners investigate their practice through reflexivity to the extent that reflection takes center stage in steering the direction of professional practice (Ciriello, et al., 1992). This self-study drew insights from reflective practice in that cognitive practices such as metacognition or thinking about thinking (Flavell, 1979) were crucial in generating insights for understanding my practice.

Action research

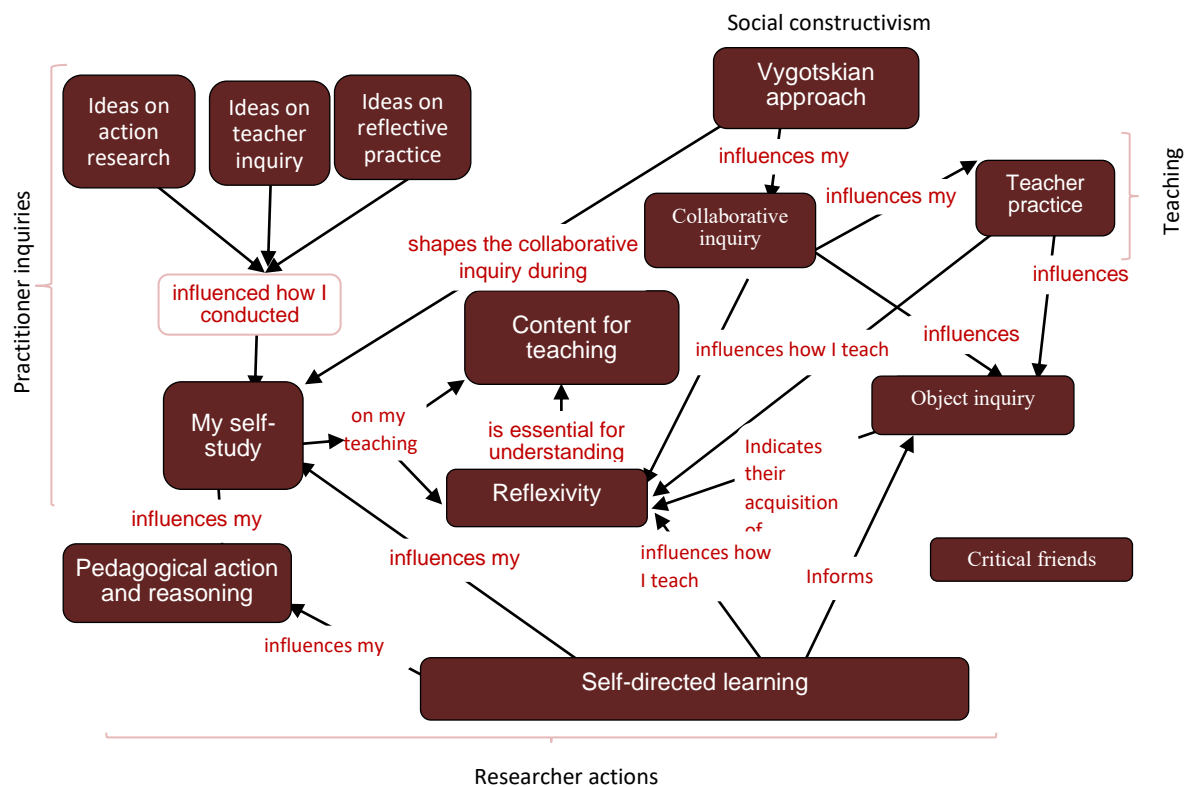
Action research is a practitioner inquiry that aims to solve problems in workplaces (Samaras, 2011) because it is a '*... disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the 'actor' in improving and/or refining his or her actions*' (Sagor, 2000, p. 7).

Action research is different from self-study in that it does not place any particular focus on the change of the 'self' but it rather emphasizes changes in workplace problems (Samaras, 2011). Furthermore, whilst action research aims at solving work-related problems through continuous cycles of actions and evaluations, a self-study does not necessarily focus on providing solutions to general work problems, but to generate insights to '*... understand and improve teachers' work*

as professionals, impact students' learning, inform education and school programs, influence policy decisions, and reform education" (Samaras, 2011p. 11). However, this self-study drew insights from the action research approach in that the practitioner (me in this instance) is the researcher on my practice as opposed to having external experts investigating my dissatisfactions.

Figure 1

A conceptual framework for the study



Self-study

Self-study scholars do not seem to agree on a precise definition of what self-study entails. Samaras (2011, p. 9), brings this to light: '*... we as a community of self-study scholars have struggled to capture a definition of self-study although there has been more agreement about why self-study is important and what it entails (i.e. its characteristics and methodological components)*'. Given this complexity, I will briefly discuss what self-study entails in my quest to bring about a clearer view of this self-study.

Samaras (2011), points out that a self-study entails the following aspects:

"Personal situated inquiry": A self-study is a personal situated inquiry as it arises directly from the practitioners' experiences in their works' spaces (Samaras, 2011). Thus, the '*... self is intimately involved and entangled in the inquiry*' (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2011, p. 346). This inquiry was a personal situated inquiry as it arose from dissatisfactions I experienced in my practice.

"Critical collaborative inquiry": Collaboration occurs when practitioners get engrossed mutually together as researchers on issues related to their practice (Kaser & Halbert, 2014). The collaborative inquiry becomes critical when it brings about new insights as researchers reflect on their practices in the context of critical feedback from each other (Samaras, 2011). This study was a critical collaborative inquiry as it involved the researcher opening up for feedback from critical friends.

"Improved learning": By engaging in self-studies, practitioners not only improve their professional knowledge (Glennie & Cosier, 1994), but the new professional knowledge generated enhances student learning, informs and shapes the body of wide teacher education and also influences policy-making (Samaras, 2011). This is because publicizing self-study research proceedings and outcomes helps in critiquing individual teacher research by other scholars, which in turn validates and builds on research-based practices (Samaras, 2011).

"A transparent and systematic research process": Samaras (2011, p. 11), points out that a self-study "*... is a transparent and systematic research process requiring an open, honest, and clear description of the spiral of questioning, framing, a revisiting of data, and reframing of a researcher's interpretations*". Thus, as the self-study unfolds, there are no hidden secrets because researchers open up their thinking and views for scrutiny and critique by others (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2011), in their self-directed learning.

Self-directed learning

This self-study, because it emanated from my inner drive to address professional dissatisfactions arising from my daily practice during Covid-19, has aspects of what other scholars term 'self-directed learning' (e.g. Knowles, 1975). Self-directed learning is a process:

... in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes (Knowles, 1975, p. 18).

The rationale for engaging in this self-study is that empirical evidence shows that people who take the initiative to learn (*proactive learners*) learn better and even more things than those who sit passively and wait to be taught by others (*reactive learners*). Furthermore, because proactive people enter into learning spaces with greater motivation and with a sense of purpose, they '*tend to retain and make use of what they learn better and longer than do the reactive learners.*' (Knowles, 1975, p. 14). This explains the rationale for my investigating my practice in the collaborative company of others, rather than waiting for 'experts' to do that for me and then to keep me updated with the problematic issues with my practice.

Social constructivism (ZPTD)

Self-studies are based on Vygotsky's social constructivism of knowledge (Samaras, 2011). The sociocultural perspective is rooted in the premise that social interactions are crucial for cognitive growth and effective learning. This is due to the idea that every individual's "*... cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (inter-psychological) and then inside ... (intra-psychological)*" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57). Thus, because every individual is prone to learning as an active participant in the company of the informed others (Vygotsky, 1978), this inquiry was conducted in the company of others. The role of the informed others was "*... to provide the setting, pose challenges and offer the support that will encourage.... construction*" of new knowledge (Davis, et al., 1990, p. 3) about issues related to dissatisfactions in my practice. Furthermore, the role of others was to help me learn beyond my zone of proximal teacher development [ZPTD] because during professional learning about teaching, one can learn even more with the help of others (e.g. when engaging in object inquiry research activities) compared to when one is learning as a sole individual (Warford, 2011).

Object inquiry

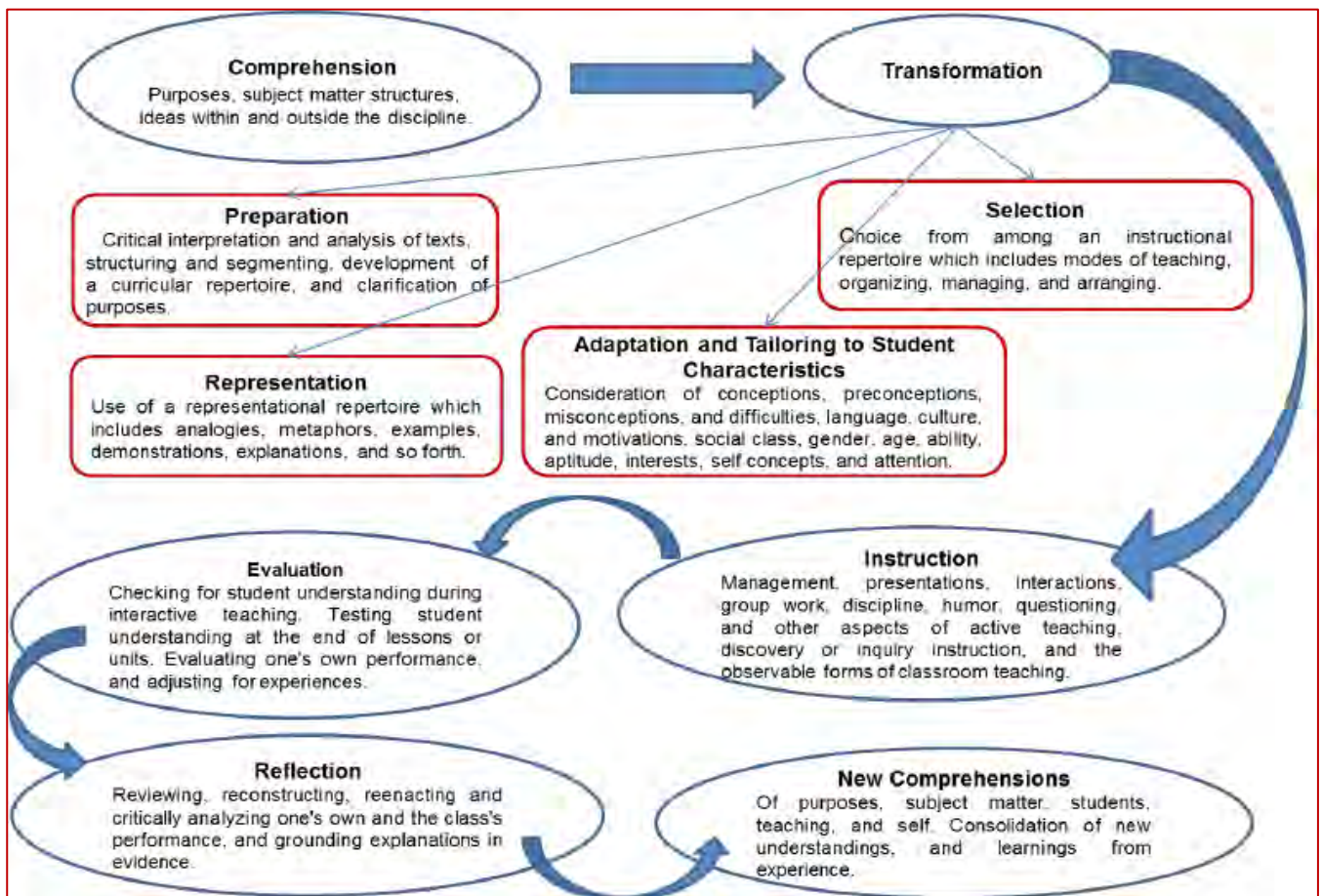
This inquiry is based on a research technique termed object inquiry in self-study settings. Object inquiry is referred to when self-study scholars use visual representations or real objects to generate narratives for deductive and inductive analysis (Tidwell & Jónsdóttir, 2020). In this inquiry, images of the coronavirus were used as a basis for generating pedagogical reasoning text data.

Pedagogical action and reasoning

Pedagogical action and reasoning entail teachers' use of their professional knowledge to inform their practice (Shulman, 1987). I used Shulman's (1987) model of pedagogical reasoning and action cycles that include (see Figure 2 below) my understanding of content for teaching (*comprehension*), and converting that content for teaching into different representations that are teachable and easy for students' comprehension in virtual settings (*transformation*); effective teaching of that content online (*instruction*); evaluating the effectiveness of my teaching and my student's learning progress through an online assessment and the anonymous student evaluation of my teaching (*evaluation*); reflections on the weaknesses and strengths of my teaching in the context of feedback from others (*reflection*); and picking up new professional learning from insights that arose from engaging critical friends [*new comprehensions*] (Shulman, 1987).

Figure 2

A Model of Pedagogical Reasoning and Action. Adapted from Shulman, 1987, p. 15 and Salazar, 2005



METHODOLOGY

This inquiry was a dilemma-driven self-study. I followed the self-study methodology to investigate the dissatisfactions I faced during my practice after the outbreak of Covid-19. In this inquiry, I was the central focus of this investigation because it is a self-study. My critical friends played a crucial validation role. Multiple forms of data that included journal entries of my thoughts, fears, concerns, and reflections; discussion notes with my critical friends, and collected feedback comments from my students. The collected data was thematically analysed from the deductive to inductive approach. The self-study methodology followed involved the steps outlined below.

Use of visual methodologies

Object inquiry or visual methodologies involves the use of images such as sculpture, film, photography, video, drawing, painting, artwork, collage, advertising, cartoon, and graffiti, to invoke deep reflections on a given phenomenon through the process of photo-elicitation (Glaw *et al.*, 2017).

In this inquiry, Covid-19 images (Figure 3 below) were used as photo-elicitation tools for reflections. We chose these images in another group where we are working on another

reflexivity research project. The rationale for choosing these images was that they portray the coronavirus and its effects on our daily lives.

Figure 3

Visual Images used for reflections. Source: Google images



Journal entries

Journal entries involved capturing of all my thoughts, fears, experiences, observations, and reflections on my practice before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. I happen to be a self-study scholar who has been engaging in reflexivity involving making journal entries even before the Covid-19 pandemic, and thus after the outbreak of this disease, I found those journal entries useful for this inquiry as they provided a plane for comparing my practice before and after Covid-19. The advantage of journaling is that it helped me create a permanent record of an 'audit trail' (Samaras, 2011, p. 164) that helped in upholding the rigor of this study. Furthermore, I found journaling throughout the entire study as a powerful means of sharing my experiences and thoughts with critical friends for probing me to think beyond my personal bias. Provided below is an example of a journal entry I had made before the Covid-19 pandemic, a critique by a critical friend, and my response:

Journal Entry 18 November 2018: *My daily practice makes me feel confident because I consider myself to have fully mastered how to pull all the strings in my practice as a teacher educator. I can provide a live lecture session with great ease based on how I would have taught the topic in previous years. For me, each lecture is just a slightly modified repeat of what I have been doing a year in and year out.*

Critique (John): *How did you master your practice? What are the pieces of evidence? What do you mean by pulling all the strings?*

My response: *I have mastered how to do my practice over years of experience teaching. The piece of evidence to support this is that I no longer spend a lot of time preparing what to do for each day. Everything had become just like a simple routine. By pulling the strings, I mean executing my daily duties that involve preparing PowerPoint for lectures, delivering live lectures, and setting and conducting face-to-face tests and examinations in the lecture hall.*

Engagement in reflexivity

I engaged in reflexivity in two phases: before and after the outbreak of Covid-19. This involved 11 steps as depicted in Figure 4 below.

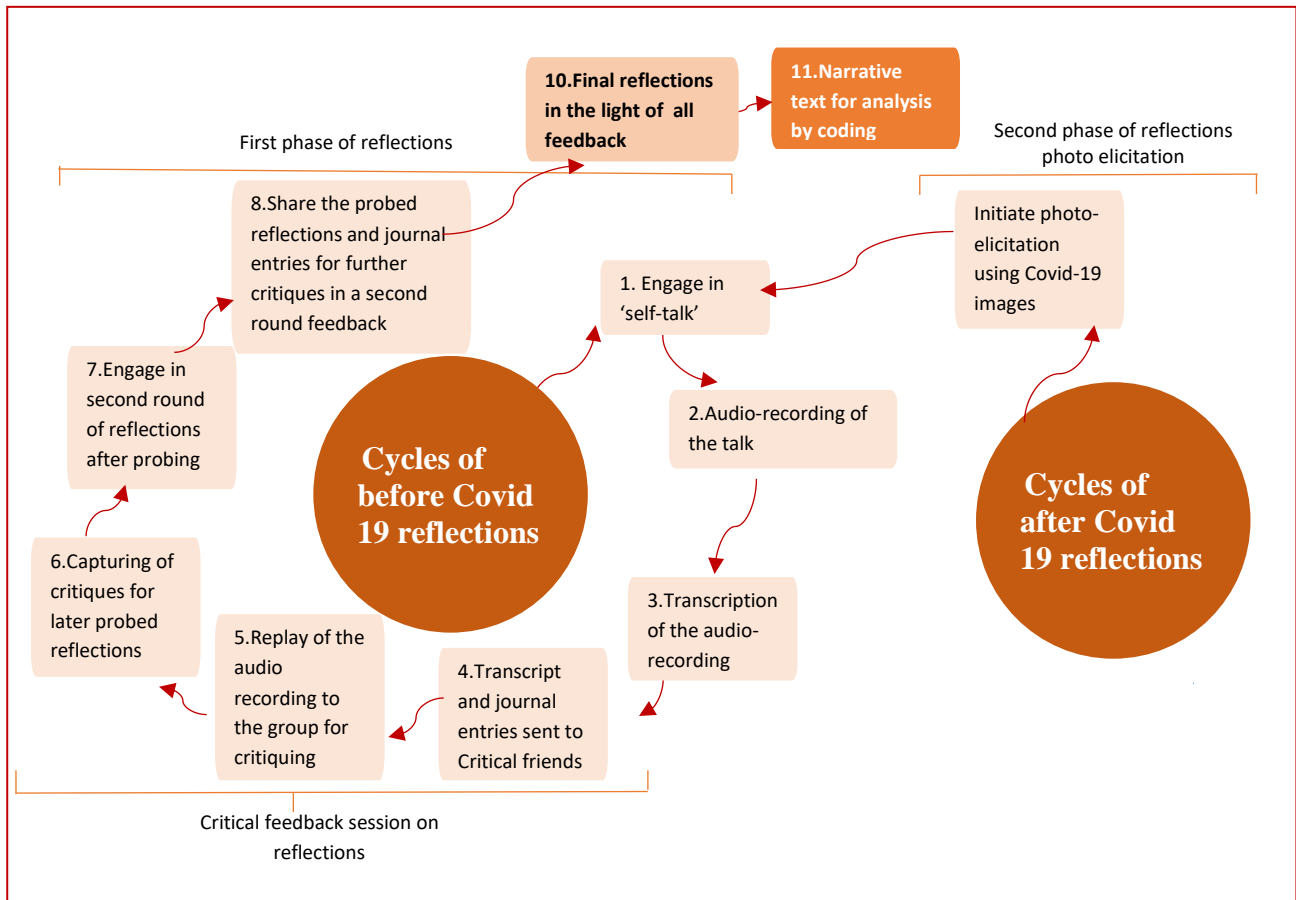
Reflections before Covid-19: The first phase entailed two steps: a) journal entries on my daily practice and b) my engagement in a 'self-talk' in a timed episode of reflections which involved saying out any details that came into my mind in terms of how I used to work before the Covid-19 era. What I said was audio-recorded and then transcribed. The journal entries and transcriptions were then given to my six critical friends to go through them before an online session where I replayed the audio recordings from which I had extracted the transcripts. The rationale for handing over the transcripts and the journal entries before sharing the audio was to give my critical friends ample time to go through and probe my reflections and journal entries at their own convenient time.

During the critical feedback sessions, the critical friends probed my initial reflections as they posed critical comments for me to rethink and deepen issues I had not engaged in detail. The critiques were captured for later re-engagement within a second round of reflections under the subheading 'probed reflections' as depicted in Figure 4.

In the second round of reflections, I responded to all the critiques raised by my critical friends in the initial feedback session. I then requested a second feedback session where I repeated the same procedure outlined above as depicted on the right side of Figure 4. I also captured any further questions rising from the second round of critical feedback from critical friends. After the feedback session, I then engaged in the final session of reflections where I generated a narrative text for coding as depicted in Figure 4.

Reflections after Covid-19: The second phase of reflections involved the researcher viewing the Covid-19 images for 5 minutes to initiate the process of photo-elicitation. This was followed by a moment of engaging in 'self-talk' where I spelled out issues that came into my mind about the impact of Covid-19 on my practice. I then audio-recorded all ideas. As was done in the first phase outlined above, these were also transcribed and both the transcript and the journal entries after the outbreak of Covid-19 were sent to critical friends.

Figure 4
Reflexivity phases engaged in this investigation



In the last phase of the reflexivity process, I generated a narrative text on my challenges, fears, and concerns as discussed below.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section answers research question 1:

1) What are the dilemmas of practice that I face due to Covid-19 at an institution of higher learning?

Narrative

Below is a tabulated narrative that captures an understanding of different issues and dissatisfactions before and after the advent of Covid-19. The narrative also illustrates the coding that I did as part of the data analysis.

Table 1

Different issues and dissatisfactions experienced by the researcher before and after the advent of Covid-19

My reflection	Issue/Dissatisfaction
My traditional practice before the advent of Covid-19 made me feel confident and satisfied with how I worked because	Issue: Learning from years of job experience

I had mastered how to do my practice over years of practice and experience	
After years of on-the-job experience, I no longer spent a lot of time preparing what to do for each day which involved e.g. preparing PowerPoint for lectures, delivering live lectures, setting and conducting tests and examinations in the lecture hall	Issue: improved teaching and assessment due to the experience
My traditional practice before the advent of Covid-19 made me feel confident and satisfied with how I worked because I had mastered how to do my practice over years of practice and experience	Issue: Learning from years of job experience.
The students' anonymous evaluation of my teaching showed that the majority of them enjoyed and understood what I was teaching	Issue: the power of positive feedback from others).
The accumulated experience made me become an expert in my practice as I could also assist other novice lecturers.	Issue: developed expertise over years
I did not wish for any major change in the way I was doing things because the many years of experience had made me create a comfort zone from which I could work without any unnecessary sweat	Dissatisfaction: resistance to change.
Furthermore, I was enjoying and looking forward to each day at work	Issue: user-friendly work environment
I had no fears, concerns, or stress about any health issues then	Issue: user-friendly work environment-health
Socially, as colleagues, we would mingle without any health fears	Issue: user-friendly work environment-social
I needed not to worry if my temperature was increasing, symptoms of sore throat, or even challenges with breathing. I also did not receive any news that one of my colleagues who was well is now e.g. in the ICU unit in hospital fighting for survival	Issue: user-friendly work environment-no fears
For instance: a) I felt challenged by the way I struggled to master how to do my daily practice when I started my career as a lecturer ;	Dissatisfaction: Re-learning online lecturing and assessments
b) I struggled with how to lay out my content for online teaching for student understanding;	Dissatisfaction: inability to prepare power point for online teaching/lack of TPCK ¹
c) I feel afraid and somehow intimidated by the online;	Dissatisfaction: fear to try out new things online
and also faced difficulties with how to teach the content	Dissatisfaction: lack of expertise to lecture online
in virtual platforms for student understanding;	Dissatisfaction: inability to represent content for student to understand online

¹ TPCK is defined in this inquiry as the teachers' understanding of how technology can be infused with pedagogy and content for enhanced student learning (Mishra & Koehler, 2008)

d) I disliked to re-learn how to do my daily routine which I had become accustomed to over many years of practice because of the inevitable change posed by the Covid-19	Dissatisfaction: refusal to adapt to Covid-19-induced change
shifted me from being an expert to a novice practitioner;	Dissatisfaction: becoming a novice practitioner
e) I felt a lot of work pressure from the imposed and inevitable new daily planning and thorough preparation to keep that image I had set for myself in terms of my performance as an academic before students;	Dissatisfaction: challenges with adjusting to change
f) I had challenges in sifting the content I had to teach so that it is ready for online teaching purposes;	Dissatisfaction: inability to prepare for online lectures
h) Lecturing faceless students whom I could not see was very lonely and depressing for me	(Dissatisfaction: challenges with lecturing to faceless students/computer
because I am used to seeing students' smile back as I teach them and that used to be a powerful motivating factor for me;	Dissatisfaction: finding online lecturing a lonely journey)
g) Working at home alone in front of my computer without seeking or sharing ideas on how to best adjust to the new virtual platform with my colleagues made me struggle with many issues in my practice;	Dissatisfaction: disadvantages of working alone
h) The anonymous evaluation of my teaching by my students showed dissatisfaction with how I delivered content online as the majority of them said they struggled to understand my teaching and I had no idea how to address that;	Dissatisfaction: Poor performance due to forced change
i) I found the use of Microsoft 365 for online teaching and Moodle for conducting online student assessment difficult to use despite the training sessions provided;	Dissatisfaction: lack of expertise in virtual platforms
j) I struggled to internalise and implement what I was getting from the training sessions due to limited time	Dissatisfaction: limited time to internalise new work practices.
The struggle to internalize and practice what I was being trained to do was quite emotional for me as it caused frustrations on my part;	Dissatisfaction: inability to cope with the new work demands
In addition, k), I struggle to teach online so that all my students (including the shy ones) can engage with each other and me in an interactive way.	Dissatisfaction: lack of student engaging online teaching skills
Furthermore, each time I go to work, I am grabbed with fear,	Dissatisfaction: fear of the contagious pandemic
for there is a 50% chance that I may die during the course of my practice the way some of my colleagues have passed on	Dissatisfaction: fear of the contagious pandemic
My practice is not only devoid of enjoyment but fear after each face-to-face meeting or interaction at work because I have to monitor my health for any Covid-19 symptoms thereafter	Dissatisfaction: fear of the contagious pandemic

This has made my work very emotional and stressful.	Dissatisfaction: work-related stress professional traumas
When I remember my colleagues who have passed on, I am filled with fear to say I could be next in line	Dissatisfaction: fear of the contagious pandemic
However, despite these setbacks, the allocation of resources for online usage	Issue: access to resources
and the multiple training opportunities which were inevitable after the outbreak of Covid-19 offered me powerful platforms to be exposed to the use of virtual platforms for teaching and assessment	Issue: Access to multiple training sessions.

Issues and dissatisfactions

As evident in the narrative, I teased out **9** issues and **21** dissatisfactions that were emerging from my practice before and after the Covid-19 outbreak.

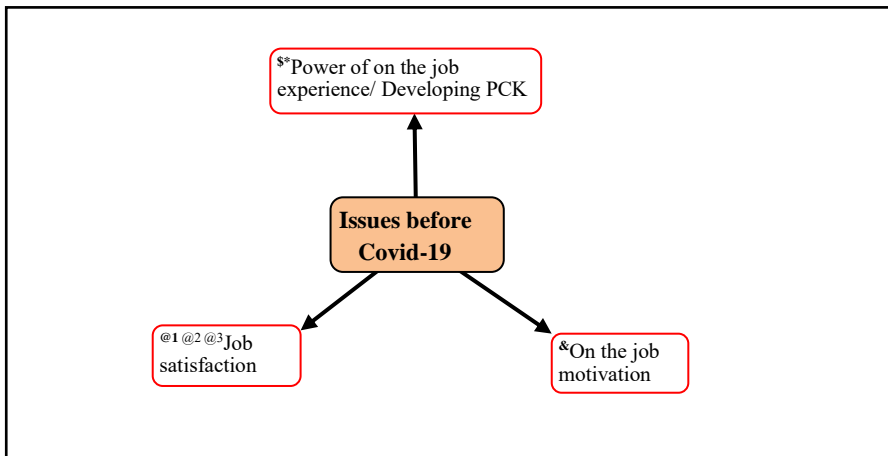
Arising issues before Covid-19

- Learning from years of on job experience*^{\$}
- improved teaching and assessment due on the job experience*^{\$}
- power of positive feedback from others[&]
- developed expertise over years*^{\$}
- user-friendly work environment-health^{@1}
- user-friendly work environment-social ^{@2}
- user-friendly work environment-no fears^{@3}

I further interrogated these seven issues for themes that ran through all of them by placing the same character at the end of each of them to code for the common theme under which they fell. Three themes, some of which overlap (represented by *^{@&\$}) emerged from this analysis of the seven issues (see Figure 6).

Figure 5

Positive Issues arising from my practice before the outbreak of Covid-19



The three themes that emerged before Covid-19 (see Figure 6) highlight the power of on-the-job experience' in the development of one's PCK for lecturing different modules. This corroborates findings elsewhere that as one's job experience increases one's on-the-job knowledge also improves (Huie, et al., 2020). The on-the-job experience enabled me to lecture in ways that enhanced students' positive views about my lecturing and the positive feedback I received from them contributed to my job satisfaction. This probably explains (as evident in my narrative reflections) why *'I did not wish for any major change in the way I was doing things because the many years of experience had made me create a comfort zone from which I could work without any unnecessary sweat'*. Thus, based on the comment, I was experiencing some job satisfactions before Covid-19.

Dissatisfactions and issues after Covid-19

Below are the 2 issues and 21 dissatisfactions/challenges that I teased from the above Covid-19 induced narrative.

Arising issues and dissatisfactions after the outbreak of Covid-19

Issues

- access to resources^{@1}
- Access to multiple training sessions^{@2}

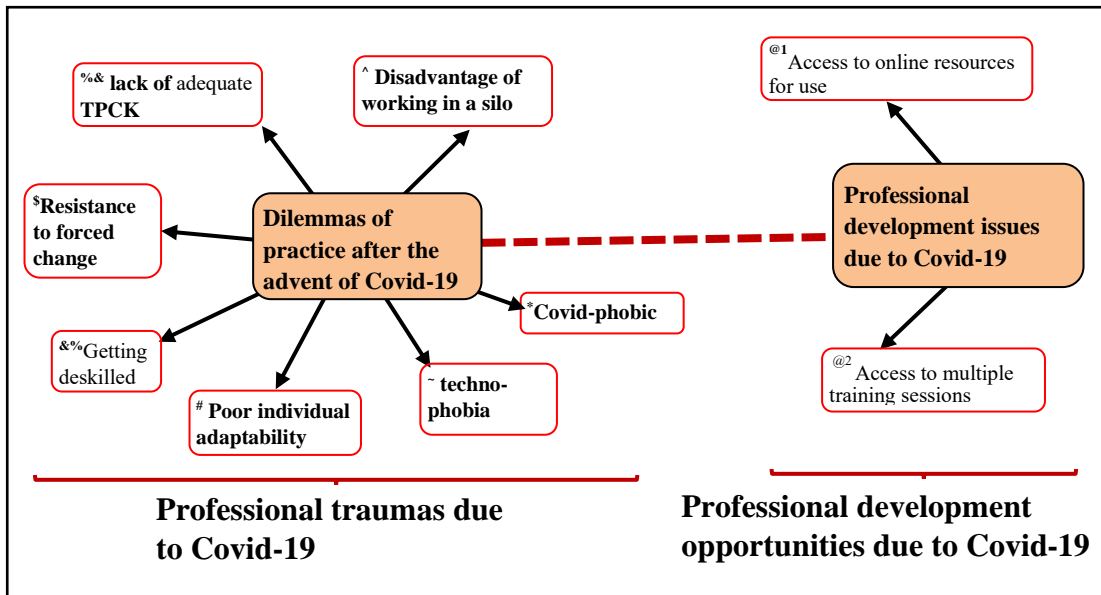
Dissatisfactions

- struggling with online teaching and assessments[%]
- Re-learning lecturing and doing assessments^{&%}
- inability to prepare power point for online teaching^{&%}
- fear to try out new things online[~]
- lack of expertise to lecture online[%]
- inability to represent content for student understanding online^{%&}
- reluctance to adapt to Covid-19-induced change^{\$}
- becoming a novice practitioner[&]
- challenges with adjusting to change^{\$}
- inability to prepare for online lectures^{%/}
- challenges with lecturing to faceless students/computer[#]
- finding lecturing online a lonely journey[#]
- disadvantages of working alone[^]
- Poor performance due to forced change[&]
- lack of expertise in virtual platforms[%]
- limited time to internalise new work practices[#]
- inability to cope with the new work demands[#]
- lack of student-engaging teaching skills online^{%&}
- fear of the contagious pandemic^{*}
- work-related stress^{*}

I also interrogated these issues and dissatisfaction following the same procedure outlined in the previous section for themes that ran across them by placing the same character at the end of each of them. Seven themes or what I termed dilemmas² of practice, represented by (@&%~\$#*) emerged from this analysis of the 21 dissatisfactions/challenges (see Figure 6 below).

Figure 6

Covid-19 induced professional developments opportunities and traumas



This inquiry revealed that after the advent of Covid-19, what I had earlier thought of as mere dissatisfactions, were seven dilemmas from my practice (see Figure 6 above). My dilemmas of practice stemmed from fear of the unknown when faced with the use of virtual platforms (technophobic), the experience of getting deskilled, poor individual adaptability, fear of the deadly virus (Covid-phobic), resistance to forced change, lack of technological pedagogical knowledge (TPKC) and the shortcomings arising from working as an individual silo.

2) How has the advent of Covid-19 impacted my practice as a practitioner at an institution of higher learning?

When probed by a critical friend about my take when using online platforms for student lecturing and assessments, the response I gave: *I feel afraid and somehow intimidated by the virtual platforms* is indicative of fears of the unknown when using virtual platforms (technophobic). This was probably due to the responsibility entrusted on my shoulders to carry out all my mandated duties as expected in what the institution had seemingly embraced as the 'new normal' way of doing things as posed by the outbreak of Covid-19 (Emanuel et al., 2022). As an individual, due to what van Dam (2005) terms lack of appropriate individual adaptability

² The word dilemma, as used in this inquiry, does not mean involve the everyday English meaning of it, but centers around the dissatisfactions I was facing in my practice.

or competency to adjust to a changing work environment or lack, I was still struggling to find my footing in virtual platforms. As part of my poor individual adaptability, I found lecturing to the 'computer' very lonely and depressing as evident in one of my reflections: *Lecturing to faceless students whom I cannot see is very lonely and depressing for me*. Furthermore, my reflections: *my practice is not only devoid of enjoyment but fears after each face-to-face meeting or interaction at work because I have to monitor my health for any Covid-19 symptoms thereafter* is evidence of deep-seated fear of the pandemic (what I termed Covid-phobic). When a critical friend probed if the fears I carried to work made me feel like quitting, my response: *Because the Covid issue is everywhere and not at my workplace only, quitting is not going to help my situation* is probably a gradual acceptance and realisation of the 'new normal' that Covid-19 is here to stay (Emanuel, et. al., 2022).

Whilst some scholars argue that positive change takes place in deep unavoidable crises (e.g. Schleicher, 2012), in my practice, the Covid-19-induced change turned out to be negative as I struggled to cope with the new virtual workspaces because I became deskilled in terms of content delivery and conducting assessments. This is evident in my reflections: *the anonymous evaluation of my teaching by my students showed dissatisfaction with how I delivered content online as the majority of them said they struggled to understand my teaching and I had no idea how to address that*. This is an indication that I had become a novice practitioner compared to what I used to be, e.g. when teaching face to face before Covid-19. This is because before Covid-19, from my reflections: *the students' anonymous evaluation of my teaching showed that the majority of them enjoyed and understood what I was teaching*, there is evidence that my students did not struggle to grasp what I was teaching. After Covid-19, my students struggled to understand what I teach. This is probably because I lacked adequate TPCK for effective online teaching as evident in my response and reflections after one critical friend probed me on my virtual platform usage: *I found the use of Microsoft 365 for online teaching and Moodle for conducting online student assessment difficult to use despite the training sessions provided*. Elsewhere, empirical evidence supports that the teacher's knowledge of how to infuse technology, pedagogy, and content (TPCK) is crucial for enhanced student learning (Mishra & Koehler, 2008).

Evidence of resistance to forced change also emerged in this inquiry. The Covid-19 induced changes in the way I worked, deskilled me, and thus, this probably explains why I experience some denial that led to my resistance to the imposed change as evident in my reflections: *I dislike to re-learn how to do my daily routine which I had become accustomed to over many years of practice* Heathfield (2021) points out that refusal to adopt to changes can bring about personal conflict when one does what one is not comfortable to do. My conflict worsened because I was working mainly from home alone and did not have easy access to colleagues for consultations and sharing of experiences and ideas (what I have termed working in a silo). Working as a silo resulted in my dilemmas escalating into what I have termed professional traumas because whilst I knew what should be done, I had no expertise to do it

despite the training sessions provided. I was professionally pressured or traumatised because there was limited time to internalise and implement the ideas I got from the training sessions.

Whilst this study unveiled that Covid-19 posed dilemmas of practice that culminated in my professional traumas, the outbreak of the pandemic also offered room for unlimited professional development opportunities. As evident in my reflections, after one critical friend quiz:

Rose: *Any positives in all the negatives you say about the pandemic?*

My response *The allocation of resources for online usage and the multiple training opportunities, which were inevitable after the outbreak of Covid-19 offered me powerful platforms to be exposed to the use of virtual platforms for teaching and assessment, is indicative of the professional growth opportunities, which may not have been offered to me without the world having experienced the pandemic. Thus due to a wide range of workshops on the use of virtual platforms and the resources allocation for online usage (e.g. 24-hour internet data connectivity Wi-Fi) that were unavoidable in response to the 'new normal,' I had unlimited chances for professional growth both in the organized workshops and at any time as an individual.*

Furthermore, in relation to my individual adaptability (van Dam, 2005), I had to make a concerted effort to adapt to the new normal in my bid to remain relevant to the demands of an institution. This probably corroborates the findings by Schleicher (2012), who postulates that real changes, (in my case within me) take place in the wake of a deep crisis.

CONCLUSION

As practitioners, for us to understand that the challenges we face in our practice are not mere incidental difficulties that we can easily overcome, there is a need to interrogate them beyond our capabilities and biases. In this inquiry, it was only after my engagement in cycles of reflexivity, discussions with, and feedback from others (critical friends) that I came to realize that I was not only facing dilemmas of practice but professional traumas.

Furthermore, unplanned changes such as those caused by the outbreak of a deadly and contagious pandemic tend to unsettle our everyday and professional lives. This inquiry established that the outbreak of Covid-19 led to dilemmas of practice. These dilemmas stemmed from fear of the unknown when faced with the usage of virtual platforms (technophobic); getting deskilled due to new work demands; lack of competency and will to adapt to a new changing situation (resistance to forced change and poor individual adaptability; fear of being infected by the deadly virus (Covid-phobic); lack of expertise to use online platforms for lecturing and student assessment or poor TPKC; and the shortcomings arising from working as an isolated silo. Such dilemmas of practice, because I handled them as a sole individual working from home without immediate consultation and help from colleagues, led to stressful and traumatic experiences when teaching and assessing students in virtual platforms (professional traumas). Thus, as practitioners, we tend to fall into the trap of working in isolated

silos even though we could be facing the same dilemmas of practice in times of forced change, e.g. after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. This inquiry established the need and advantages of opening up our silos so that we make public our challenges of practice so that we benefit from the pool of probing expertise of others. Based on the conventional wisdom that a problem known and shared is a problem half-solved, knowing dilemmas of practice is one-step towards coming up with steps to addressing and solving them as evident this inquiry.

Furthermore, as practitioners, seeing positives in seemingly all negatives is a unique insight that could easily come from making our work-related worries, concerns, fears, and emotions open for others to critique. It is through others that a 'second voice' (Tshuma, 2021) probes us into seeing issues beyond the limitations of our capabilities and experiences, which is crucial for self-directed professional growth. In this inquiry, whilst the negative impact of Covid-19 seemingly overshadowed the possibility of me discerning anything positive from the pandemic, the probe from others revealed the pandemic also offered me room for unlimited professional enrichment opportunities due to a wide range of workshops and resources allocation that was unavoidable in response to the 'new normal.'

Whilst this inquiry sheds insights on the impact of Covid-19 on academic practice in a typical developing country, to get a holistic picture of the impact of contagious pandemics on academic practice, future studies may extend such investigations to developed countries.

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