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IBEROAMERICAN COLLABORATION IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN HEALTH: COLLABORATION OR ISOLATION?

The slogan of the VIII Iberoamerican Congress of Qualitative Health Research (VIII CIICS) could not have been more appropriate: "On the paths of qualitative research in health: Iberoamerican identity and collaboration strengthening" (Florianópolis - SC, Brazil, September 4-7, 2018). Both the events that took place at previous congresses and the events taking place at the international level make the issue of identity and collaboration of great significance and impossible to evaluate a few years ago. Three data are sufficient to account for such importance.

Collaboration or isolation? It is one of the fundamental issues undermining politics and economy at the international level. In a world of increasingly globalized capital but with many barriers to the workers' mobility, the new position of the US government has become the prototype of an isolationist model that contrasts sharply with the history of the Americas. According to the feeling of a significant part of the Latin American population, the construction of absurd and unnecessary walls generates additional suffering for those who decide to migrate in search of a better future for their families. It is only a matter of remembering the traditional openness of borders that characterized most Latin American countries for the millions of European migrants who arrived during the 19th and 20th centuries because of economic crises, famine or political repression throughout the continent, and also, the Iberoamerican countries that are now opening their borders to the Venezuelan diaspora.

In the political-economic front, there have been several attempts to integrate Latin American countries to work together on internal problems regarding the same region or face shared challenges. However, most initiatives have not advanced much and have become sub-regional useful projects to some countries or sectors involved but have served little to strengthen the regional participation. Among other projects, it is possible to include the Pacific Alliance, the Southern Common Market (Mercosur), UNASUR, the Andean Community of Nations (CAN), the Caribbean Community (CC) and the Central American Integration System (SICA). In the concerning case, these agencies have developed proposals in the field of science and technology among the countries involved, but their results were low or null for the region as a whole.

A different issue occurs at the specific level of qualitative health research conferences held in Iberoamerica. Therefore, the seven previous meetings involved the cooperation of academics from Latin-American countries and the Iberian Peninsula. The selection and rotation of the host cities reflect their nature and regional identity: Guadalajara, Mexico (2003), Madrid, Spain (2005), San Juan, Puerto Rico (2008), Fortaleza, Brazil (2010), Lisbon, Portugal, Medellín, Colombia (2014) and Barcelona, Spain (2016). Besides, it is worth highlighting two positions that guided the congresses organizers' theme: on one side, there are those who propose greater cooperation with the Anglo-Saxon countries' academics, while others promote the focus on human resources of the region itself. It is worth remembering that the first congress was held in parallel with the VI Qualitative Health Research Conference and they were organized together with the International Institute for Qualitative Methodology of the University of Alberta, Canada. And even though most of the congresses have promoted the strengthening of Ibero-American collaboration, the dilemma between both positions is still a debate subject.

It is in this context that the organizers of the VIII CIICS planned the Ibero-American identity and collaboration at the ICS as the central event axis. It is significant to keep in mind the relevant data before analyzing challenges and perspectives. Five years ago, one of us (FJMM) stated in an Editorial of this magazine that cooperation among Latin American academics¹ consisted of a set of incipient initiatives focused on the publication of joint works and organization of congresses. Then, there were some challenges to face to strengthen the joint work at the regional level. Among them, it was mentioned the traditional prioritization generally given to the cooperation with scholars from the Anglo-Saxon world instead of working with the Latin-American scholars, along with various forms of organization and evaluation of the research practice. Also, the lack of regulatory frameworks or regional support to which language barriers have been added, the distance between countries and difficulties of funding research groups or academic networks.

The situation has not changed regarding the Editorial report. Although five years is a short time to modify a set of circumstances that took decades or centuries to develop, we must also think that these five years of stagnation are a “symptom” of global and regional policies or their absence.

Thus, it is possible to verify the existence of specific advances. Among others, it is worth visualizing the incipient research networks that conduct qualitative studies on particular health topics and involve academics from Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay.² Another breakthrough is evidenced by the growing number of publications, usually essays, in which scholars from two or more countries in the region participate. They deal with theoretical, methodological or ethical aspects of qualitative research.

Another modality is the organization of academic events that do not necessarily coincide with the mentioned congresses. It is worth noting the so-called ADISP (*A day in Spanish and Portuguese*) that is part of the International Congress of Qualitative Research³ as well as the emergence of other Ibero-American congresses of qualitative research. Also, it is worth remembering the courses conducted in qualitative research that include academics from different countries such as the qualitative research courses whose objective was training professors from the health area of the University of the Republic, involving the participation of Mexican and Uruguayan professors.

Very little could be added to the challenges mentioned above, but due to limited space, it seems necessary to suggest some perspectives. In the current context, Latin America and the Iberian Peninsula countries are at a critical moment to strengthen or disrupt research collaboration to meet the enormous challenges of the 21st century. Aiming at finding answers to the challenges of an interdependent world, but with a growing concentration of resources in the hands of the few, it is worth believing that the integration of researchers from several countries who study shared topics can offer new ways of thinking, speaking and doing practices that inclusively promote health and sustain universal health systems throughout the region. It is worth believing that our strength lies in our integration and we must intensify the cooperation in this interdependent world. That is why we must share and engage.

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