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INFORMATION STUDIES DAYS 2020

# **Preliminary investigation of individuals as information sources among two language minorities during COVID-19 pandemic in Finland**

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## Introduction

During the ongoing outbreak of coronavirus people acquire and exchange health information about COVID-19 through different communication channels. It is important to understand the role of individuals as information sources, and gain understanding on health information seeking behavior among language minorities during a pandemic.

Lalazaryan & Zare-Farashbandi (2014) described health information seeking behavior as any individual's activities that are related to seeking, obtaining, and making use of health information either regarding illnesses or treatments. In a pandemic, the health information seeking focus may change more towards securing one's own health and supporting the close ones in the same crisis (Dreisiebner, März, Mandl, 2020).

World Health Organisation (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a public health emergency of international concern (Jee, 2020; WHO, 2020). A pandemic raises feelings like fear, worry and anxiety. Mental health concerns have been raised in tow of the pandemic because of numerous reasons. One of them is the isolation millions of people have endured during the first and the ongoing second wave of COVID-19. WHO has established mental health recommendations of how individuals can care for their mental health during times of crisis. In these recommendations family and friends play a role, for instance in following ways: "keep in touch with friends and family", "establish a support network", "develop a feeling of belonging to the collective care process" (WHO, 2018).

## Aim and research questions (RQs)

The purpose of this preliminary investigation was to study how two different language minorities, Farsi- and Swedish-speaking, in Finland perceive individuals as information sources in the context of COVID-19 pandemic, which contact groups are mentioned in this capacity and which issues are communicated in these situations.

RQ1. Do the Swedish- and Farsi-speaking language minorities in Finland turn to personal contacts and individuals in health information seeking situations during the coronavirus pandemic in Finland? RQ2. Who are these individual information sources and what are the information need situations in which they especially turn to individuals?

## Methods and material

This extended abstract is a combination of two separate qualitative studies relating to COVID-19: a qualitative survey and interviews. Both studies took place between 25 March and 15 May 2020 during the Emergency Power Act. The survey was launched in Finnish, Swedish and English, yet only the Swedish language survey was chosen for analysis because of the minority language position of Swedish in Finland. The survey was open for people residing in Finland during the survey period. The survey participants (N83) comprised of 74.7% women and 24.1% men. The semi-structured interviews were conducted among 18, 50% female and 50% male, Farsi-speaking participants currently residing in Finland. The recruitment for interviews started through researcher's personal network, and snowballing among Farsi-speaking persons, who study/live/work in Finland or are in Finland as asylum seekers or under refugee status.

## Preliminary results

The interview results show that 50% (N9/N18) of the respondents name individuals as their sources of information and news. In comparison, the survey results show that 25% (N24/N83) of the respondent's mention individuals as their sources of information. The different roles of individuals are presented below (Figure 1).

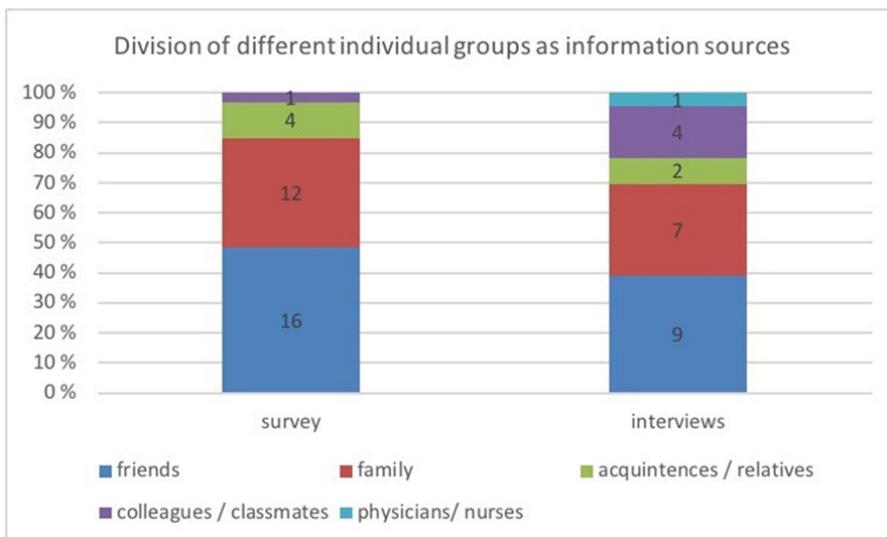


Figure 1: Division of different individual groups as information sources.

Firstly, respondents in both studies turn primarily to friends than family members. Secondly, Farsi speaking interviewees turned to individuals as information sources more frequently than the Swedish speaking survey participants. Female interview participants were 50% more active in communicating health information through individuals. The corresponding gender percentage division in survey results is 80% for female and 20% for male. However, no conclusions can be drawn based on the differences concerning gender division.

In comparison to the interview and survey participants, it is important to note that 50% of the interviewees and 80% of the survey participants preferred not to turn to individuals when seeking COVID-19 related information. Therefore, it is central to understand in which issues the participants turn to individuals of different roles. The issues which came up in the interviews and surveys are presented below (Figure 2).

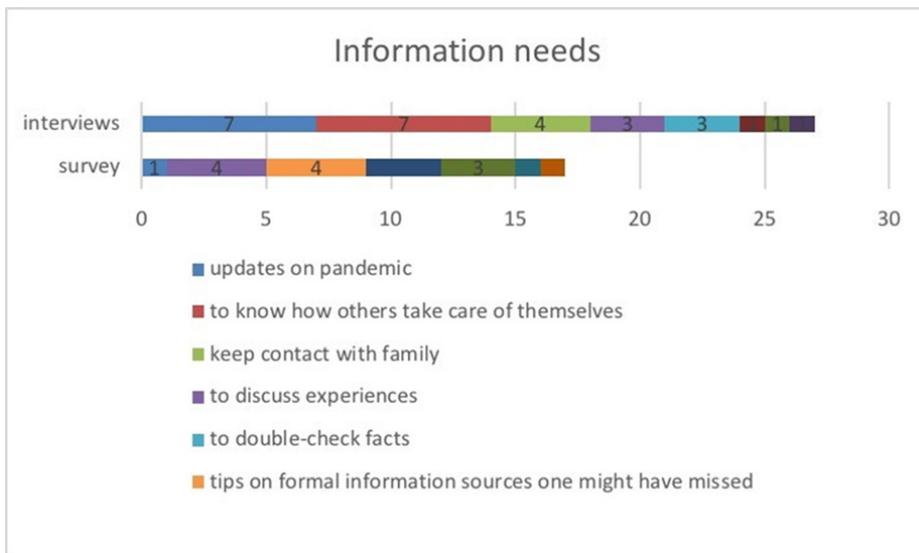


Figure 2: Information needs.

When it came to issues concerning information needs the results of these two studies differ to some degree. The survey results indicate that the purpose of using individuals as information sources relates mainly to situations where individuals can somehow add a personal view to the information the respondent have presumably acquired through other information sources. The interview results on the other hand indicate using individuals as information sources mainly to sharing reliable health information with family and friends from home countries and to discuss formal and as well as informal information acquired through other information sources. There is a more concrete purpose

of sharing information and even fact-checking compared with the survey results.

## Implications

This research provides practical implications to enhance health information sharing among residents with different language minorities in Finland. The implications could also play a significant role when health officials plan communication strategies in necessary minority languages. It is also expected that the results will provide suggestions for future studies in the field of healthcare, minority studies, and related multidisciplinary research areas.

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