

How can sociology help us understand the causes and/or consequences of the global pandemic?

“Modern society has become a risk society in the sense that it is increasingly occupied with debating, preventing and managing risks that it itself has produced.” In his book *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, German modernist sociologist, Ulrich Beck argues that we now live in a ‘risk society’– one that deals with risks that spiral out of human control or caused by humans themselves and are not confined to national boundaries. Hence, the on-going COVID-19 pandemic can be described as one of the many negative outcomes of the risk society. The rapid and relentless escalation is said to be due to the increase in travel and the general population’s lack of compliance to the regulations in place to prevent the spread; this allowed the virus to transcend borders and soon became a global health crisis. The growth of globalisation resulted in the effortless move from continent to continent, allowing the virus to infiltrate the whole world. Countries like the UK and USA, examples of individualist countries, tended to reject rules and ignore attempts by public health authorities to flatten the curve. Undoubtedly, the pandemic has affected every single one of our lives, however, the extent of damage incurred varies per social class, age, gender, ethnicity, identity, and region. While the majority claim that the pandemic has only disrupted the natural flow of society through issues such as amplified hostility towards East Asian communities and unequal access to healthcare facilities, others would say that the pandemic may have been beneficial to humanity through building an interconnected society and increasing awareness of healthcare inequalities worldwide.

Sinophobia– the term for prejudice towards Chinese people and culture– is not a COVID-specific problem but it does account for the way all East and Southeast Asians, even those with the slightest East Asian appearance, have been targeted. Discrimination towards ethnic minorities had always been a societal issue, however, hate crimes towards East and Southeast Asian people had been on the rise all over the world ever since the WHO declared the Coronavirus a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). With the initial news coverage of the virus being heavily associated with China, the stigma towards East and Southeast Asian communities had significantly risen. Although many news agencies and politicians had avoided the use of stigmatising language while referring to it, there were still instances where people in power played a huge part in fuelling prejudice. For example, America’s 45th president, Donald Trump's persistence in talking of the “Chinese virus.” UK police data suggests a rise of 300% in hate crimes towards East (specifically Chinese) and Southeast Asians in the first quarter of 2020 in comparison to the same period in 2018 and 2019. East and Southeast Asians– and even people with similar features– were subjected to attacks and beatings, threats, racist abuse, and discrimination that appeared to be linked to the pandemic. Some instances include two women attacking Chinese students in Australia, punching, and kicking one, yelling “Go back to China” and “you fucking immigrants.” Two men attacked a Chinese American in Spain and thrashed him to the point where he fell into a

coma for two days. Since then, many individuals lived in fear of the ongoing hate crimes and they were often reluctant when leaving their homes, anxious about getting harassed in public. This, in turn, brought on many mental health concerns like anxiety, depression, and the severe psychological effects that victims of hate crimes often develop, like PTSD. Hate crimes towards social groups have only created more animosity within humanity as opposed to cohesion and harmony– with hate crimes towards East and Southeast Asians on the rise, individuals may no longer see society as a safe place to function in and would most likely turn to anti-social behaviour, which Functionalist Durkheim would call anomie.

Albeit the pandemic has led to deepened antagonism between different societal communities, it can be debated that, in theory, the pandemic has actually built stronger bonds in the wider community, creating a more interconnected society. Through these unprecedented times, individuals have come to realise the importance of community and unity after being away from civilisation for months during quarantine. While many may be critical of the overused, rose-tinted statement, *“We are all in this together”*– calling it another advertising strategy used by news outlets and celebrities to appear more appealing to audiences– others may agree with it. No two people have had the same experience of the Coronavirus with the way it’s made drastic and, in most cases, adverse lifestyle changes for all of us but in a world full of losses, increased community spirit brought around the much-needed compassion and sensitivity towards others. It is argued that one of the main features of postmodernity is the importance of the new media– the huge expansion in media technology over the course of the past 20-30 years has resulted in a massive and unprecedented increase in the number of people using the media. This is especially true since the pandemic had left a third of the world’s population stuck within the same four walls for months on end with only the internet and social media to depend on as a source of entertainment. Although its value in the world of activism is highly disputed, the rise of online activism is one of the successful outcomes of increased social media usage. A study by Deen Freelon and his colleagues at the University of North Carolina suggest that it is just as effective as physical collective protests– he states that *“One of the biggest misconceptions is that it doesn't do anything.”* Taking into account the most recent large scale online movements like #StopAsianHate and #BlackLivesMatter in support for marginalised communities who were subjected to white supremacist and systemic cruelty, online activism portrays its effectivity as individuals had taken a stand to end social injustices. Hence, as a study by Saud, Mashud and Ida (2020) from Airlangga University states, *“the usage of social media platforms is perceived as useful for sharing information, learning, increase awareness, and stay connected with the rest of the world.”* Social media has always been a convenient medium that brought people together through networking applications, like Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp, however, the pandemic had only increased the need for communal support, thus building stronger bonds within the wider society.

While people are connected through the conception that all of society are in the same boat, the fact that healthcare has been inaccessible to a large percentage of the population highlights the healthcare inequalities which have been brought to light. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), inequality in healthcare is defined as “*avoidable inequalities in health between groups of people within countries and between countries.*” The COVID-19 pandemic compromised the health of millions of individuals worldwide and has significantly affected vulnerable groups of society. One of the most overlooked groups who have been affected by the pandemic are people with a disability. Best (2005) notes that disability is “*the inability to fully take part in activities that the majority take for granted such as washing or dressing oneself, walking, driving and so on.*” Hence, people with disabilities largely tend to require healthcare facilities more than most people– this includes both typical needs and needs linked to the disability– so consequently, they are more at risk to the impact of low quality or inaccessible healthcare amenities than others. In terms of the pandemic, some people with disabilities might not be able to carry out preventative measures in their own homes which may include but are not limited to personal hygiene and recurrent cleaning of surfaces and homes– one reason why it can be problematic may be due to physical impairments. Others may also not be able to properly socially distance themselves or self-isolate if they require the assistance of another person in everyday tasks. Sociologists mention that the negative stereotypes held by able-bodied individuals act as cultural barriers which add to the lack of accessibility to healthcare facilities– Aiden and McCarthy (2014) reported that two thirds of British people feel uncomfortable talking to people with disabilities. The societal stigma towards people with a disability has consequently led to healthcare inequalities– one example of a group that is usually left are people who have auditory impairments. The practice of wearing masks is a difficult one to work around since there is no way to lip-read when someone is wearing one. The use of sign language is affected as well since it isn’t merely dependent on the hand signs but facial movements and expressions which limits the amount of communication a person with an auditory impairment can participate in. While this is just one example, it is clear that people with disabilities are already stigmatised in society but the pandemic has furthered their oppression.

Nonetheless, as people with disabilities are still persistently fighting their battle for civil rights, people are slowly but surely starting to take the concerns of people with disabilities into consideration. Many countries around the world have acts responsible for ensuring equality for people with disabilities. For example, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 which was the first UK legislation which warranted the security of people with disabilities against several forms of discrimination. In terms of the pandemic, a statement from the United Nations titled, “Disability-inclusive response to COVID-19 – Towards a better future for all”, states “*COVID-19 response and recovery should be disability-inclusive, protect the rights and needs of persons with disabilities and place them at the centre of all our efforts, as envisaged in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.*” Many governments around the world have understood how the pandemic may have brought upon difficult and uncomfortable obstacles for people with disabilities to face and hence, have put forth laws that would accommodate for the needs of the

community. The United Nations had outlined focal points that member states can follow through with, one of which being to prioritise the testing of people with disabilities exhibiting COVID symptoms. One example of protocols enforced for inclusivity is the United Arab Emirates' 'Rest Assured' initiative which intends to support people with disabilities and those around them through informing community members about a wide-range of responses to their demands for security and comfort during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the programmes enforced through this initiative is the launching of a national program to test people with disabilities in their homes— as of mid-April 2020, the UAE had conducted 650,000 COVID-19 tests of people with disabilities. Another area of focus that member states have been making is guaranteeing that all communication in regard to COVID-19 associated procedures are accessible to people with disabilities, through various mechanisms like sign language, captioning, and easy to read formats. This is presented in countries like Paraguay and Panama which have set up systems to ensure that the appropriate information is made available in a myriad of accessible means. Although many could argue about the lack of accessibility towards healthcare facilities and information for people with a disability, multiple governments across the globe have taken precautions to ensure that no one is left behind during these times of hardship.

In conclusion, COVID-19 has proven to be one of the most devastating outcomes of postmodern society, from the clash of social groups to the disparity of access to equal rights and to the many other factors which we've all gone through and will continue to experience until we get to the point where we can confidently declare the end of this pandemic. However, Beck said it best: *"The theory of metamorphosis goes beyond theory of world risk society: it is not about the negative side effects of goods but about the positive side effects of bads."* Community spirit has been recognised as society attempts to overcome the hurdles that we are now forced to overcome due to the pandemic. As much as people have grown to resent the statement, "We are all in this together", there is no other way to express the universal nature of this health crisis. We've all been through the lockdowns, we've all experienced the initial moral panic and above all, we've all experienced loss; whether it was the loss of a loved one, of youth, of opportunities, or of time, we've all lost something during these trying times. The reality is that there wasn't a single person whose life wasn't turned upside down and that in itself is a huge indicator that we are all, in fact, in this troubling situation together.

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