

Chapter 1: Studying Sociology During a Pandemic

In December of 2019, an outbreak of COVID-19, an infectious disease caused by the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, occurred in Wuhan, China. It was officially declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020. As countries began to see their cases, many asked their citizens to make monumental changes to their lives to contain the spread of the virus. One change in particular affected everything: people were asked to stay home and self-isolate.

What followed was, in part, a massive and unprecedented sociological experiment. In Canada, non-residences—schools, workplaces, daycares, churches, gyms, restaurants, stores—all closed. [Millions lost their jobs](#) in March and April, while workers deemed “essential”—doctors and nurses, but also grocery

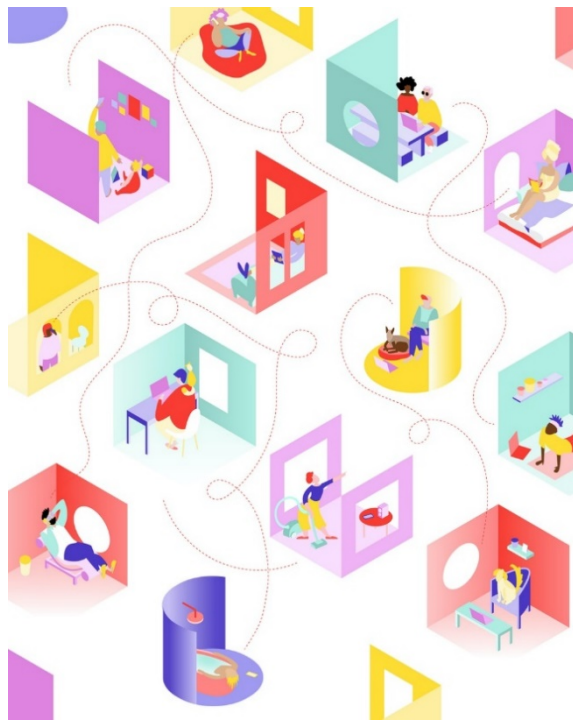


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store clerks, janitors, and delivery drivers—found themselves on the front lines of our response to the pandemic. People who could moved their work and social lives online. Many struggled to balance work with childcare and home schooling. People were forced to deal with the loss of financial stability, relationships, rites of passage, and opportunities. Some lost loved ones to the virus. These dramatic changes spurred feelings of isolation, hope, grief, anger, liberation, and fear. In the span of a few brief days, the roles of our social institutions—media, work, healthcare, family—changed. Our social interactions changed and new social patterns emerged. Because the [risk for contracting a severe case of the disease was found to increase with age](#), how seniors were treated and seen by society changed. But other social variables—gender, age, race, class, and ability—also influenced how people experienced and were affected by the pandemic.

Sociology has a major role to play in times of dramatic social changes. The pandemic caused a massive disruption to the way we lived, worked, and played. By using one of sociology’s most important instruments, the sociological imagination, we can think through the changes experienced by our society and the world, as well as each of us personally, due to the pandemic. We can also consider the unique impact the pandemic has had on marginalized groups. The effects of the pandemic will reverberate through society for years to come. Sociology provides a lens to understand, contextualize, and negotiate our changed world.

As you read the chapter, consider the following questions:

- How did your social location inform the way you viewed, experienced, and reacted to the pandemic? (You might consider your class, ethnicity, gender, age, health, work status, marital status, where you live, and who you live with.)
- Sociologists identify social patterns, then they investigate them. What is one new social pattern you observed due to the pandemic? Thinking back to the drive-through study, what hypothesis might you devise about this social pattern and how would you go about testing it?
- From March 13 to June 28, 2020, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau gave daily coronavirus press briefings to update the public on the pandemic. Apply Merton's three types of functions to these televised briefings. What might have been a manifest function, a latent function, and a possible latent dysfunction?
- Choose one sociologist or sociological approach discussed in the chapter. Based on what you have learned, describe a topic your chosen sociologist or a practitioner of your chosen sociological approach might be interested in studying related to the coronavirus and pandemic.



Additional online resources

Sociology encompasses a wide range of topics and approaches. Watch these videos and read these articles to learn about some of the topics and concerns sociologists have related to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Fraumeni, P. (2020, June 8). [*Will the pandemic change the world of work? U of T researcher Scott Schieman aims to find out.*](#) University of Toronto.
- Hayes, M. (2020, April 11). [*Solidarity and social distancing: A sociologist's perspective.*](#) NB Media Coop.
- TRT World Now. (2020, March 18). [*Coronavirus pandemic: Amy Austin Holmes, Associate Professor of Sociology.*](#)
- Willamette University. (2020, March 31). [*As a sociologist, what strikes you the most about the COVID-19 crisis?*](#) [Video].