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Commentary

Fast-track Sociology? Reflections on Research During a Pandemic¹

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ABSTRACT

When the coronavirus spread globally in early 2020, many governments issued national lockdowns of schools, institutions, and businesses. As the epidemic turned into a pandemic, the health crisis also became a societal crisis, and many universities and research foundations issued COVID-19 grants to study the societal implications of the crisis.¹ In this article, we discuss sociological research during the corona crisis and ask the questions: What role did sociology play in the pandemic – and how did the pandemic affect sociology? We argue that trends of a fast-track sociology can be observed, which has implications for methods, theory, analysis, and societal impact. Fast-track sociology is often faster, more interdisciplinary and dialogue-based, disseminates more preliminary results, and has potential of more societal impact. However, it also contains challenges if it is not interlinked with more critical and slower research processes, which are core to the sociological profession.

KEYWORDS

Corona crisis / COVID-19 / fast-track sociology / impact / methodology / sociology

Introduction

Since the turn of the century, for about 20 years now, we have experienced and lived through a series of global crises, which had an effect on society. International terror and wars; the financial crisis; the climate crisis; the biodiversity crisis; and most recently the global pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the inflation crisis. The various crises highlighted or called on different scientific disciplines for answers, depending on the character of the crisis. They have also fostered new concepts such as the ‘crisis society’ (Rasmussen 2021), ‘the epidemic society’ (Jensen & Schultz 2021), or the ‘COVID society’ (Lupton 2022; Lupton & Willis 2021). The corona crisis was first and foremost a health crisis involving many social and behavioral aspects that also evolved into an economic crisis. Interestingly, sociology seems to play an important part in the analyses of the corona crisis.

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For many sociologists who decided to study the corona crisis – with or without emergency funding from COVID-19 grants – the situation facilitated new ways of doing research, not least due to the speed involved when designing and studying a rapidly evolving social event. Sociology is a profession with a strong focus on method; designing and evaluating empirical studies, critical discussions of validity, triangulation of a broad scope of methods, and reflections on methodology and strategies of analysis. However, this thoroughness and critical rigor takes time and slows down the research process. Accordingly, many sociologists had to re-orientate their research design during the corona crisis and develop a form of *fast-track sociology*.

This has inspired us to raise the following two-way question: What role did sociology play in the pandemic – and how did the pandemic affect sociology? We can identify at least four different points of reflection in relation to these questions, which we present below. Before our final remarks, we discuss these reflections in relation to the particular topic of work-life sociology.

Reflection 1: Fast-track sociology and methods

Many of us who studied the corona crisis from various angles from March 2020 to the summer of 2021 were confronted with the fact that we were studying an ongoing and unfinished process. The study of a moving target led us to introduce new methods. This included, for instance, government surveys of citizens (Pedersen & Roepstorff 2021), longitudinal qualitative interviews, and video interviews of managers via Zoom (Navrbjerg & Minbaeva 2020). It also led us to revitalize old methods – for instance participant observation among societal majorities and various forms of street corner sociology (Liebst et al. 2021) – or to combine methods in new ways via triangulation or stair-case models (Bredgaard et al. 2021; Carlsen et al. 2021; Fersch 2021). Especially within the social sciences and sociology, we find examples of methodological innovation and interdisciplinary research during the corona crisis (Deflem 2022). One example of a timely methodological reaction was the crowdsourced and freely accessible online document *Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic*, initiated and edited by the sociologist Deborah Lupton. The list contained short descriptions of relevant methods, pros and cons of each method, and references to scientific articles that explained and validated each method (Lupton 2021). Although the list is now closed, the inspiration to expand one's methodological toolbox is intact. In sum, we believe that the corona crisis has sparked methodological innovation and methodological pluralism. It will be interesting to follow, if these trends in sociology and social science will persist over time and perhaps even be reinforced during future crises.

Reflection 2: Fast-track sociology and impact

The general picture is that sociologists played a larger role for government during the corona crisis compared to previous crises, for instance, the financial crisis. They supported governments in monitoring and evaluating behavior and trust among citizens, they participated in various expert groups, and they commented on compliance to restrictions in various media.

First, preliminary findings were presented and disseminated to a larger extent than previously. Sociologists played a role in evaluating government agencies' decisions simultaneously with their implementation – instead of after their implementation (Liebst et al. 2021; Lindegaard & Liebst 2020; Pedersen & Roepstorff 2021). The need for rapid research response to COVID-19 was evident in the area of biomedicine as the disease evolved into a pandemic (Henderson et al. 2022). However, rapid response grants for research on the effect of the pandemic within the social sciences were also awarded. Among them was sociological research projects in the United States via the Social Science Research Council in 2020. Similar grant schemes were initiated in other countries including the Nordic countries. State, corporate, and philanthropic actors granted funds to research projects that could start up within a short time frame in order to analyze the contemporary challenges [i.e., in Denmark, the Velux Foundations (2020) rewarded 13 out of a field of 127 application with a grant].

During the first half year of 2020, *Acta Sociologica*, the Journal of the Nordic Sociological Association (NSA), invited commentaries addressing the sociological significance of the pandemic in the Nordic countries and beyond (NSA 2020). Also, the *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, which publishes many social science analyses of working life in the Nordics, issued a call for papers for a special issue on Nordic Working Life and Social Dialogue in Times of Crisis in 2021. The European Sociological Association's (ESA) magazine 'The European Sociologist' was fast to send out a call for response papers on the COVID-19 situation. Based on a large number of contributions, they chose to publish two consecutive issues dedicated to *Pandemic (Im)possibilities* (ESA 2020, 2021). The International Sociological Association (ISA) made a homepage dedicated to articles and resources from national sociological associations (isa-sociology.org). The British Sociological Association (BSA) curated a homepage named *COVID-19 and Sociology Opportunities & Resources*, with links to international and interdisciplinary networks and initiatives (BSA 2023). The American Sociological Association (ASA) posted a list of sociologists, with expertise in research on the public attitudes towards vaccines and COVID-19, so that the media could take contact (asanet.org, 2020). In addition, individual sociological scholars wrote opinion pieces, commentaries, or blog posts on various subjects related to the crisis (i.e., Lupton 2020).

The call for an interdisciplinary and indeed sociological approach to analyzing the societal effects was evident from the beginning of the crisis. The responses from the sociological milieus were rather fast and vast. However, now is the time to look back and evaluate this strategy, and to what degree the sociological voices had an impact when it comes to policy making. It will be an important task for sociologists and other social scientists in the coming years to analyze and reflect on their impact during the corona crisis and their experiences with a rapid research response.

Reflection 3: Fast-track sociology and theory

For some sociologists, it seemed difficult to use old theories on the completely new reality of the global pandemic. Instead, they tried to develop new theories – or link new theories with old ones. However, other sociologists used the corona crisis as a case that confirmed or rejected existing theories or hypotheses (Jensen & Schultz 2020; Rasmussen 2021).

A prominent reaction was to reengage with theories bordering to philosophy and political science, such as Foucauldian thoughts and theories of *biopolitics* (i.e., Lupton 2020; Ristić & Marinković, 2022; Weinfurter 2023) in which also the scholarly work of Agamben was re-evaluated (i.e., Delanty 2020). However, there was a back catalogue of relevant theories that proved pertinent as well. Relevant themes such as surveillance, trust, and maybe most to the point *risk society*, were brought to life again and used in analyses of the contemporary societal reactions (Lupton 2022; Nygren & Olofsson 2020). The American intellectual magazine *Foreign Policy* posted an article in their section *The Big Think* referring to the sociologist Ulrich Beck as the most important intellectual for the pandemic and its aftermath, it was titled: *The Sociologist Who Could Save Us From Coronavirus* (Tooze 2020). It is a rare event that a sociologist has such a prominent headline. Others called for the use of Practice Theory in understanding the human impact based on people's new routines and behavior during the pandemic. The German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz argued that COVID-19 highlighted and enhanced already existing problems in the late modern society, such as inequality (Reckwitz 2021).

From the crisis, we cannot deduce that there is a single sociology of COVID-19 (Matthewman & Huppatz 2020). The situation has highlighted and magnified the importance of already existing methods and theories (Lupton 2022). Nevertheless, we urge that sociologists seize the moment and make room for reflection on a theoretical level. The pandemic society highlights old behavioral patterns and embedded institutional reactions, yet new tendencies will also be more apparent during this period. A lasting effect based on the present crisis could be the critical test of existing theories and even fast-track development of new theories as well.

Reflection 4: Fast-track sociology and analysis

Whereas case selection seemed less problematic during the corona crisis (to many it was an extreme case or the 'perfect' exogenous shock to a system), the demarcation of the case caused more trouble. As mentioned earlier, the corona crisis in many ways was a moving target and raised many questions with regards to demarcation. When is the COVID-19 crisis no longer a crisis? When did the first lockdown end and the second begin? And what type of data is valid and replicable under such conditions? These questions led to hard choices in the strategy of analysis – focusing on parts of the crisis, certain time periods, comparison of phases, etc. (Larsen et al. 2020; Navrbjerg & Minbaeva 2020). In line with this, many sociologists who make use of survey data experienced challenges. The main questions are to what extent the new ways of organizing life (i.e., due to the risk of getting ill, staying at home due to lock-downs, and social distancing in general) has had an effect on the answers? The fact that the COVID-19 crisis has been followed by a situation with global instability in terms of military and political tensions, and economic pressures, seems to make these questions even harder to answer.

Major questions are linked to well-being. In the period of time up until the COVID-19 crisis, some European countries experienced that mental health conditions represented an important burden among young people (Castelpietra et al. 2022). In Denmark, a trend of a deteriorating mental health among young people seems to have worsened during the COVID-19-crisis (Rosendahl et al. 2021). However, what is the effect of specific

situations such as lockdowns on an already existing trend, is there a causality, and how should we interpret the effect of the COVID-19 crisis more generally?

Reflections on work-life sociology during and after the pandemic

In 2020, when the COVID-19 lockdowns came into effect, our work life changed dramatically on a structural level (Larsen & Ilsøe 2021) as well as on an individual level and in between colleagues and managers at the workplace (Andersen & Elmholt 2021). Some groups were affected by social distancing at work, while others were working online from their home. For many, this meant a complete rearrangement of their work duties, as the normal understanding of time and space changed. Work stations popped up in the kitchens and bedrooms. For some, the situation presented new social duties such as home schooling. The workforce in the front line such as health workers, care workers, and other welfare employees were even more directly affected. Although the effects of the lockdowns played out differently according to the various implementation of restrictions by the political systems across the Nordics and across countries in the Western world (Christensen et al. 2022), the changes of our working life were often larger and more rapid than seen before.

A report on the European experiences from Eurofound concludes that: ‘The post-pandemic recovery is an opportunity to bring about real change in gender norms, behaviours, and policy innovation’ (Eurofound 2022). This presents sociologists studying our working life with the tasks of reflecting on the effects of the crisis on empirical, methodological, and theoretical levels.

In short, will the unexpected experiment with working conditions during the lockdowns present lasting effects or will we see a return to the same path as before? On a more radical note, there also seems to be new sociologically interesting tendencies based on a renewed interest in the *why* we work and in how people justify their involvement in the existing system (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005). Will the post-pandemic society revive earlier forms of critique of the spirit of capitalism? Most explicit is the exit strategy, where employees choose to quit their jobs, which was characterized as The Great Resignation by Anthony Klotz a year into the pandemic (Cohen 2021). In relation to this trend came discussions on so-called Quiet Quitting, where workers do not go above and beyond their job description (Harter 2022). According to the increasingly influential sociologist Hartmut Rosa, the society of acceleration can lead to alienation (Rosa 2013) and already before the pandemic, according to Rosa, we were living in a time period marked by a lack of experience of resonance – also in our working life (Rosa 2019). In line with the sociological interest in modernity, it will be interesting to observe what will become the leading norms (Sonne 2020) and mechanisms (Delanty 2021) of the post-pandemic working life.

Final remarks

In sum, we argue that it is time for the international sociological milieu to evaluate what role sociology played in the pandemic – and how the pandemic affected sociology in the long term. This also goes for related disciplines within social sciences. The experiences



raise interesting questions (Lupton & Willis 2021) and spark important debates. The development of a *fast-track sociology* during the pandemic offers new opportunities for sociology as a profession. Increased speed, new methods and relevance to government might facilitate a larger influence of sociology on society and inform future government decisions. However, these new opportunities might also hold important challenges (Zettler et al. 2021). Methodological reflection, critique and carefulness is core to the sociological profession, and fast-track sociology needs to stay in dialogue with these slower research processes to remain relevant, robust, and influential as a profession (Frandsen & Laage-Thomsen 2020).

COVID-19 gave us distance – social distance. Nevertheless, the crisis seems to bring social scientists together on a different level. Setting our differences aside, today, we meet under one common theme, in ways that seem to combine these otherwise different perspectives. The COVID-19 situation called for interdisciplinary analyses in general and sociologically inspired analyses in particular. In a way this interdisciplinarity was forced by the circumstances. And the question that arises is will it last? What will the effect on research and theory be in the long run?

And in addition, will sociologists be more active in policymaking? There is a tradition for public sociology and policy-sociology (Burawoy 2005). Still, it is too early to judge whether the pandemic will propel a rise in sociologists who venture into public debate, commissions, and policy making, or if the experience with fast-track sociology will have the opposite effect. It will be interesting to follow developments after the crisis and the integration between fast-track sociology and before-crisis sociology, which seems pivotal to both preserve the strength of the profession and utilize the new opportunities for impact.

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Note

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