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A Sociology of Viral Pandemics

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Introduction

Sociology provides a framework for addressing the biosocial implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Social science in general, specifically sociology, examines the social implications of disease on social interaction, social structures, and society as a whole [1]. Our social order is a complex system of interrelated parts. Changes in the health and well-being of a population can have a significant impact on the normal function of society.

Viral disease has both anticipated and unanticipated consequences for society. It is inevitable that viral disease will spread through out large populations of people. This is particularly the case with respect to densely populated urban centers. The spread of disease is facilitated by our modes and frequency of social contact. The importance of wearing a mask and "physical distancing" are the key factors in addressing the spread of viral disease in a given population.

All pandemics are boundless and extend their scope across political boundaries. The epicenters of viral spread encompass towns, cities, counties, states, and nations. As a global phenomenon, pandemics necessitate the cooperation between political entities across varied jurisdictions. This becomes a significant barrier to efficiently and effectively addressing social issues like the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Conservatives tend to examine the problem as an individual responsibility. That is, agencies of the government have little to no role in addressing pandemics and their varied consequences [4, 5]. Liberals conversely assume that governments must take a central role with regard to providing policy and resources aimed at addressing social problems. These varied interests often over shadow the pressing needs of the current crisis.

A World Under Siege

Today we are facing a formidable foe around the world. The escalating spread and the increasing cases of Covin-19 have impacted our social institutions like never before. The emergence of this biological catastrophe has disrupted access to vital resources. Our society is composed of economic, educational, political, religious, and the family. Physical distancing, mistakenly referred to as "social distancing," is affecting our entire social order.

Our social ties have been fragile at best threatening to dissolve these bonds to the point of extinction for decades. Telecommunications and social media have devalued face-to-face interaction throughout our society. With the onslaught of Covin-19, we are now being literally plummeted into a virtual world at the speed of light. The news media informs us in real-time and around the clock regarding the need to avoid contact with others. States and municipalities have taken measures to restrict their residents from leaving their homes. We are a world under siege.

The only safe place we are told is within the confines of our own homes. The present reality provides both opportunities as well as threats to our health, security, and sanity. The threats to our health are real. We cannot afford to ignore the warnings from the leading epidemiologists who specialize in the study of the spread of disease.

This pandemic has the potential of shutting down our vital systems for an indefinite period of time. The loss of work and income is beginning to be felt by millions of Americans. The lack of medical staff, facilities, and supplies is a threat to the testing and treatment of the symptoms of the Coronavirus. Not that there did not already exist a health crisis affecting millions prior to the pandemic. Healthcare continues to be treated more as a right than a privilege.

Our educational systems are now closing their doors across the country. We have not only uncovered the obvious loss of daily instruction but latent functions of U.S. education. This is particularly the case with respect to the loss of daily meals for America's children. We have been made abundantly aware that many children rely upon the public school system for the only meals they will receive a day. This is both enlightening and disheartening to realize that we have so many hungry children in a nation of such great wealth.

Centers of worship have closed their doors in adherence to recommendations regarding public gatherings. This occurrence takes place as weekly worship attendance has consistently declined over the years. Worship provides a basis for our moral and ethical behavior in society. Emile Durkheim, the French sociologist claimed that religion is the "glue" that holds society together. History has shown the vital function centers of worship fulfill in society.

Despite the threats posed by the dreaded Coronavirus, we are afforded a number of opportunities as well. We have a unique opportunity to distinguish between our wants and our necessities. We are able to recognize the intent of our dependence upon modern technology. We are forced to focus our attention on the most fundamental institution of society the family. We have an opportunity to rediscover the importance of social interaction in its absence. We are able to unmask the economic and political constraints in addressing our most pressing societal needs. Finally, but most importantly we can appreciate our common struggle for survival and happiness like never before. Let's learn that we are stronger together but we are weak when we are divided. As we brace ourselves for a long and hard fight ahead, we can also reflect upon the opportunities the crisis affords us.

Why Disproportionately So Many Fatalities in the U.S.?

There are numerous theories regarding the rise in Covin-29 cases and deaths around the world. And there is little consensus regarding the rapid spread of the disease. Public officials from the president to state and local governments are being held accountable for the increasing cases of the deadly Covin-19 virus. There is pressure to reopen the country post-haste. There are numerous protests around the country to reopen public facilities. Yet the cases and fatalities to the Coronavirus continue to rise in most areas around the country. There is also a reasonable fear of a resurgence of the disease in the Fall of this year, 2020. No one is certain why the U.S. is so disproportionately impacted by the Covin-19 pandemic. As we seek answers, we should consider the role of our attitudes on the rate of Covin-19 cases and deaths in the U.S.

There is no question that the U.S. has more than its share of both Covin-19 cases and deaths. The United States is only 4.2 percent of the world's population but accounts for nearly 30 percent of the deaths to the Covin-19 pandemic. Similarly, the U.S. accounts for 32 percent of the cases of the disease. This reality begs the question of why such a disproportionately large number of cases in the U.S.? This given that the U.S. is a relatively small population in the context of the world.

Comparisons are complex. Globally we observe varied political, economic, and cultural systems. For this reason, we should proceed with some caution when attempting to compare the context of the United States with other nations. We do not want to be guilty of creating an "ecological fallacy" in comparing "apples with oranges." However, we might consider the "American mindset" versus that of the world with respect to healthcare. Most countries consider healthcare a right, while many "Americans" consider healthcare an individual responsibility. Further, it is believed that the U.S. government should have little to no role in providing a standard of care for all of its citizens. American individualism is rooted in the "Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," espoused by Max Weber, the German sociologist. This value system though merited has its failings when it comes to national crises, such as the one we face today. The present Covin-19 pandemic is unprecedented in the history of the United States. There are now more deaths than during the Vietnam Crisis. Today, the unemployment rate is teetering on the scale of the Great Depression. Due to American Individualism, we struggle to find a balance between our belief in self-reliance and the importance of our collective response to a national catastrophe.

Americans have difficulty forming a collective consciousness. On the one hand, we wrestle with the world-view that we are all the same. We also, all have the same opportunities. And that we all have the individual responsibility to provide for the needs of ourselves and our families. There is no question this is the case on a microscale. However, when there are problems and issues that impact significant proportions of our population, it is important to conceptualize the complex factors that hold our society together. This lack of social awareness inhibits our social institutions from responding to problems, like Covin-19, that affect our society as a whole.

The push to reopen economic centers, recreational areas, and public transportation systems is rooted in our "spirit of independence." We cherish the freedom to go and come where and when we please without reservation. However, today our individual choices, like never before, have consequences for our families, communities, and ultimately our society as a whole. There is a history of an "American Mentality." Originally, the men of the wild frontier were daring and courageous. They were hunters and tamers of the forests and wildernesses of the Americas. The frontier became colonies then gave rise to the bloody Revolutionary War with the British. The Civil War of the 1860s and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s erupted, fueled by the American Spirit.

What we must consider is not only want we are fighting against but what we are fighting for. If we do not beat this pandemic there will be no economy or freedom left to enjoy. We are at a critical moment of having "all-hands-on-deck" to collectively beat the current crisis. This will require knowledge of the disease, effective policy guidelines, and a public commitment to the greater good. The scale and complexity of the problem call for government at all levels, business leaders, healthcare professionals, research scientists, and everyday citizens to work together. This too will pass. The question is, will it be sooner or later? It is up to us.

Physical Distancing versus "Social Distancing"

The present health crisis, known as Covin-19, is fraught with varying levels of complexity. The physical, mental, and social spheres are all intertwined in our everyday lives. In a time of crisis and uncertainty, it is important to add clarity to our lives. Once we are able to make sense of this complex experience, we will be able to maintain some semblance of stability, certainty, and normalcy.

We have been encouraged by healthcare experts and mandated by state and local officials to exercise "social distancing." The use of this term in the present context can be misunderstood. For example, there is the Bogardus Social Distance Scale [2]. This term refers to our acceptance of those who are of different backgrounds than our own. It is my fear that there may be a tendency to take social distancing to an extreme. There presently exists a phobia regarding those who are different from ourselves in some way. There is a stigma associated with people who are disabled, ill, or unhealthy in some way. For this reason, we may take extreme measures to avoid any interaction with those we suspect to be infected with the Covin-19 virus. While being responsible in our behavior we should avoid anxiety and categorically avoid all interactions with others.

In response to the present crisis, the advice we are given is to avoid physical contact. But not to cease all "social" interactions. The intent is not to distance ourselves socially but physically. Avoiding physical proximity from others does not require that we distance ourselves emotionally and with respect to our relationships. Physical contact is only one aspect of social interaction. Social interaction is a complex of emotional attachment, awareness, and communication with others as well.

We cannot afford to allow the Covin-19 pandemic to prevent us from maintaining our vital relationships and interactions with one another while maintaining a safe distance. It is certainly possible to accomplish both. Physical distancing is a very practical precaution we all should adhere to. However, we should not over react and take extreme measures concerning our communications and social interactions.

Social distancing takes place on a continuum between a safe physical distance and an extreme distance, having some face-to-face interactions to avoiding all face-to-face interactions entirely, and total isolation. The most extreme measures are only warranted for those who either display symptoms of the virus or have been positively tested for Covin-19.

We should not ignore the advice of healthcare experts regarding their recommended safeguards. However, we should not overreact at the expense of maintaining a reasonable degree of normalcy in our everyday interactions. The recommendation to distance ourselves from others did not begin nor will it end with the Coronavirus. Our interconnectedness has deteriorated due to the process of social distancing for several decades. We no longer place a high value on face-to-face communications, we do not share meal times together, and most of our interactions are now outside of the home. A number of factors have led to the loss of our vital social bonds.

We can attribute the weakening of our social bonds to the advancement of telecommunications. The first mobile phone invented

in 1973, nearly half a century ago, began a pattern of "pseudo communication." Nowadays, there is no question that our communications have been reduced to bits of information, often without a single complete sentence. In the beginning, one could only hear another's voice. With the emergence of platforms like FaceTime, Skype, and Snapchat a visual dimension was added. The introduction of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr have led to the domination of social media as the primary mode of social interaction today.

Despite the need for physical distancing, we should maintain our vital relationships and modes of communication. Physical distancing is what we are more appropriately advised to observe [6]. At the same time, we can appreciate the importance of social interactions that do not require physical contact while maintaining a safe distance at the present moment.

The Complexity of Overcoming a Global Pandemic

The most significant barrier to addressing the COVID-19 pandemic is the necessity of our collective responsibility. It is apparent that our population is more interested in our individual rights than our collective responsibility. Socially transmitted disease is particularly a challenge that requires a collective effort to prevent the spread of the disease through wearing a mask and observing a safe physical distance.

The development of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines has provided the most significant promise in overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic [3]. However, the manufacturing, distribution, and administration of the vaccine are fraught with challenges. New strains of the disease have also entered the U.S. population. Though predictable, it is a continuous battle in keeping up with these viral mutations.

Pandemics are complex biosocial phenomena. For this reason, there is a need for collective action in addressing the varied consequences of viral disease in human populations. Given the nature of the disease, it is important to rely upon the collective expertise of experts in infectious disease, policymakers, social scientists, and public cooperation.

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