1. Sociologists and social scientists in general seem mobilized to interpret the social and political impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Is sociological theory up to the challenge of understanding and explaining the phenomenon?

Is sociological theory ever up to the challenge understanding and explaining phenomena: well, probably not. This is partly recognition of the limitations of “science”, social science, and sociology, and partly a matter of working across disciplinary boundaries. In that sense, I would caution against disciplinary imperialism, and urge disciplinary humility. With COVID-19, disciplinarity is problematised, and inter- and transdisciplinarity seem especially appropriate, as foregrounded with much feminist and postcolonial scholarship, and even with our specific disciplinary sociological concerns, interests, specialisms, and expertise.

COVID-19 forces attention not just to the social and the societal, but towards sociological theories that address the macro, the global, the transnational, the transsocietal. Perhaps above all, historical, long-time span sociology that incorporates an interdisciplinary understanding of the centrality of crisis (Bergman-Rosamund, Gammeltoft-Hansen, Hamza, Hearn, Ramasar, Rydström ‘The case for Interdisciplinary Crisis Studies’ Global Discourse, 2020) is needed to understand and explain “the phenomenon”. Pandemics and plagues have obviously occurred before (and probably will do so again), so learning sociologically from historicity...
and historical processes, whether the 1918 influenza pandemic that killed between 20 and 50 million people, is necessary. But, three related differences now are: first, increased mobility, albeit for very different reasons; second, information and communication technologies; third, the massive expansion of science and medical science.

Additionally, the phenomenon of COVID-19 is so all-pervasive that it seems amenable to a diverse multi-perspectivism in sociological theory, rather than one particular theoretical position. COVID-19 seems to prompt questioning in all spheres of life and death, in both sociology and for all. The pervasiveness of the phenomenon in its form and effects ranges from, for example, agency to institutionalisation to the invisibility of power to human rights to human/animal relations and humans-within-nature, such that an open-endedness to an what I would call “total sociology” on the phenomenon might be applicable.

One issue that most sociological studies are not usually directed to biological phenomena, such as COVID-19 qua virus, although some address their social consequences across societies. Even with the strong global development of sociologies of the body, medicine, health and illness, and indeed or HIV-AIDS (from ‘safe sex’ to ‘safe sociality’), it is not usual for sociological theory to engage with the detailed knowledge of natural or medical sciences, with in-depth knowledge of such sciences. This is another spur to transdisciplinarity.

2. How can your research area contribute to examining different dimensions of the phenomenon?

Most research areas in sociology can contribute to examining dimensions of COVID-19. My own areas of interest include age, gender, sexuality, violence, ICTs, organisations, transnational processes; all of these and more are relevant, and in being affected and challenged by consequences of COVID-19.

I will take a few examples. First, age relations are a central part of social processes within COVID-19. It is hard to imagine social analysis of global and/or local occurrences of COVID-19 without discussion of age – not as a fixed individual property or as meaning ‘old age’, but as a social division and social relation that constructs (certain authoritative) adults and adult-power. There are obvious variable regulations on chronological age (65, 70, etc.) in different countries, as well as broader social processes, such as generational relations through adoption of social distancing or differential
valuation of deaths of different age groups. Having just finished the book, *Age at Work* (Hearn and Parkin, Sage, 2020), with my 83-year-old co-author, Wendy Parkin, such social issues now seem obvious, as in the “living afterlife” of the older old, and the organisation of death and post-death. We note how post-death, and its organisation, can be seen as a metaphorical virus, activated into ‘life’ by death itself. Age and age relations need to become a regular, if problematised, part of sociological analysis.

Second, feminist/gender perspectives on COVID-19 are essential, perhaps most clearly in the impact of home isolation (where people have homes) on gender relations and gender divisions of labour in health care. Key issues here are the greater burden of care, caring and carework on women, and the terrifying increases in violence against women and intimate partner violence, but also in blatantly different gender forms state power and governance, in terms of female and male national and international leadership.

This leads onto a third area, the sociology of organisations, as workplaces and other forms of organising are changed through dispersion of organisational places, locations and spaces, and the home becomes a site of knowledge-intensive organising. All these areas need to be considered through the dialectics of the local and the transnational.

3. **Is the pandemic provoking deep social, political and cultural changes? Or is it speeding up trends of change already underway? If so, is it possible to glimpse the contours of post-pandemic societies?**

This question links back with the first. It both reminds of the importance of historicity and takes us into the world of futurology and sociology of the future. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on future-orientation in sociology and thinking sociologically about the future, considering societal implications and scenarios, and their speed of change; I have become more convinced of this as I get older, even whilst historical and future orientations have been played down in some recent sociological tendencies.

While many (trans)societal crises have led to subsequent transformations, many do not do so. COVID-19 has entrenched old inequalities, such as greater impacts on poor, working-class, black, minority ethnic, migrant and refugee people, and brought further inequalities, between: those who can and those who cannot isolate; those able to move, those not; those vulnerable to the virus, those less so. Such divisions will not easily go away.
Three examples of possible wider change concern, first, how the pandemic affects the complex relations between nation(alism)s and transnation(alisation)s. Both nation-state power and transnational corporate power can simultaneously be strengthened: in the former case, surveillance apparatuses, state (ab)uses of science, and populisms may become institutionalised; in the latter, global corporations and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Profile, 2019) may overwhelm smaller businesses. These processes foster specific male-dominated social elites, with transnational dispersed centres (Hearn, Vasquez del Aguila and Hughson *Unsustainable Institutions of Men*, Routledge, 2019), and emerging forms of ‘transnational nationalism’ and ‘national(istic) transnationalism’ in worldviews and sentiments.

Second is the form, substance and contradictions of sociality, with increased Individualism, yet possible new solidarities. Less close bodily contact may go along with greater sense of communitas, and less clear-cut categorisations of/in interaction, friendship, neighbourliness, sexuality, marriage, family, organising, politics, social divisions, the very senses of the social and sociality. Privatised individualism and family-orientation, public communitas, the state, and transnational corporations can all strangely be reinforced.

Third, and linked to this is widespread embedded normalisation of digital life. The pandemic can be a means for technologization, automation and dispensability of the human. *Hikikomori is now longer a minority social form,* and online/offline blurring not be just the preserve of the younger, but now known well across generations.

4. **What work(s) of Sociology or Social Sciences can help us to comprehend and dialogue about the challenges underway?**

As already noted with regard to Question 2, I think most research areas in sociology can contribute to comprehending and dialoguing about these challenges. Feminist, de/postcolonial, historical and future-orientated sociological work is especially important, as well as that which engages across disciplines, whether conceptualised as interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, or post-disciplinary.

In terms of more specific texts and genres of texts, there are so many of use. The pandemic has drawn me back to a longstanding interest in debates on the relations of production and reproduction. In short, the frequent prioritisation, within sociology, of economy and production over
reproduction and generativity of society, in their broadest senses, needs questioning. More dialectical, indeed subtle and complex, understandings of the relations of economy, productivity, generativity and well-being are needed, as in tensions in the pandemic between human bodily safety and “productive safety” of the economy. I am reminded of how such issues figured on some agendas with various feminist texts in critical anthropology, sociology and political science in the late 1970s and early 1980s (such as O’Brien The Politics of Reproduction, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981; MacKintosh ‘Reproduction and patriarchy’, Capital and Class, 1977; Edholm, Harris and Young ‘Conceptualising women’, Critique of Anthropology, 1977). To my mind, these perspectives link to many de/postcolonial texts and debates, both before and since, from Fanon (The Wretched of the Earth, Penguin, 1961) to Mbembe (‘Necropolitics’, Public Culture, 2003). To address these kinds of complex questions necessitates transnational “North-South” research cooperation and collaboration among social scientists and beyond, not methodological nationalism. This is no place for the highly individualistic, egoistic, nationalistic and even bullying, oppressive and frankly anti-feminist behaviour of some (social and other) scientists. The work of the International Panel on Social Progress (IPSP) is one recent large-scale attempt to work across disciplines and traditions in a collaborative way, involving well over 300 social scientists. In such work, the need for handling disagreements between schools and disciplines appropriately, and for humility, respect, critical rationality, and agreement to disagree, is foregrounded (Rethinking Society for the 21st Century: Report of the International Panel on Social Progress. 3 Volumes, Cambridge University Press, 2018).

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