A sociology of the Covid-19 pandemic:

A commentary and research agenda for sociologists

**Abstract**

During the early part of 2020, there has been an abundance of critically important research on Covid-19 from medical, epidemiological and virological disciplines. There is now an urgent need for sociologists to engage theoretically and empirically on the social impact of issues related to Covid-19. As we have moved further into 2020, governments around the world have imposed different types of restrictions on social life, in order to quell the spread of Covid-19 and ‘flatten the curve’. These have included imposing various degrees of social isolation and restrictions on things like social gatherings, travel, sport and leisure activities, and going to work/school/university. This commentary explores the ways in which different branches of social theory can shed light on the implications of Covid-19 restrictions for social life ‘as we know it’. The broad fields of social theory in the commentary cover concepts such as risk, trust, fear, uncertainty and happiness. The process of developing the social theory driven research agenda contained within this commentary took a rather unusual route – it started by re-reading Jean-Paul Sartre’s ideas on existentialism, which led to me painting a visual sociology of Covid-19 (an image of my painting is provided), and ultimately to this piece.

**Keywords**[Covid-19](https://journals.sagepub.com/keyword/Covid-19), [fear](https://journals.sagepub.com/keyword/Fear), [social theory](https://journals.sagepub.com/keyword/Social+Theory), [sociology](https://journals.sagepub.com/keyword/Sociology), [risk](https://journals.sagepub.com/keyword/Risk), [trust](https://journals.sagepub.com/keyword/Trust), [uncertainty](https://journals.sagepub.com/keyword/Uncertainty)

My commentary focuses on the relevance of social theory for understanding the social impacts of Covid-19 and sits alongside a number of other articles in the *Journal of Sociology* which focus on particular sociological themes. *~~It is certainly not meant to be exhaustive or cover all areas of social theory – it’s simply my thoughts on what I think are key areas worthy of sociological research. As you’ll read below, my approach to this commentary (and the painting within it) was new/unusual to me – it represents a rather visceral or gut feeling as opposed to a planned, rational and academically argued piece. I apologise for the important areas that I do not cover.~~*

I woke up on Good Friday 2020 and finished re-reading Jean-Paul Sartre’s book *Existentialism and Humanism* ([Sartre, 1973](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)) (I needed to keep up theoretically with a PhD student who is thinking of using some of Sartre’s ideas in her research). After finishing the book, I was reminded about Sartre’s example of art as a form of existentialism. To cut a long story short, Sartre argues that existentialism is founded on the key idea that *existence comes before essence* – humans exist first and then create meaning afterwards, in an ongoing project (he rejects the idea that ‘human nature’ exists as a precursor to how humans then construct themselves and their behaviours). In trying to make this idea easier to understand, he uses the example of Picasso who, Sartre suggests, didn’t start out with the artistic outcome in mind (the essence – what the painting would be), he worked at his paintings until they, in Picasso’s view, were finished – existence came before essence. Irrespective of the validity of such claims, I was drawn to dust off my easel and paints and set out to make sense of Covid-19 (subletting the broad ideas of existentialism from Sartre). I wasn’t sure what I’d paint exactly, but knew it would be something about Covid-19, trying to intertwine sociological musings I’ve been having since this all began (please note – I have no formal training in painting and lay no claims at all to be ‘able’ to paint – but I do enjoy playing with ideas and seeing if/how I can get them onto canvas). Other than to try to make some sociological sense of how Covid-19 was impacting society, and in my view, could impact current and future generations, I was not sure what I would paint. What I ended up with (in my head at least) had some relatively insightful sociological commentary, both about what’s happening and also about a future research agenda for sociologists (maybe it’s time again for sociologists to be at the forefront of research in public health?). [Figure 1](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682) is a photographic image of my painting (best viewed in colour and landscape).

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                        figure
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**Figure 1.** Painting of a sociological analysis and research agenda for Covid-19.

In a slight counter to Sartre’s suggestion that existence comes before essence, I have been thinking about key sociological concepts since the emergence of Covid-19, which obviously impacted what I would paint. The key concepts floating in my head as I started to put paint to canvas were: risk ([Adam et al., 2000](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Beck, 1992](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682), [2009](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Crawford, 2004](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Douglas, 1992](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Luhmann, 2017](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Lupton, 2016](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)), fear ([Bauman, 2006](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Slovic et al., 1990](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)), panic ([Falkof, 2020](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Hier, 2019](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)), crisis ([Berlant, 2011](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Habermas, 1975](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Walby, 2015](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)) and trust ([Luhmann, 1979](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682), [1988](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Ward, 2017](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682), [2018a](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682), [2018b](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)). These meta-concepts became the large-print words on the painting. This obviously set the scene for a rather dystopian analysis. However, during the process of playing with paints and ideas, a further set of sociological concepts emerged: simulacra ([Baudrillard, 1994](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)), agency–structure, blame/judgement/stigma, globalisation/glocalisation ([Beck et al., 1994](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Giddens, 1990](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Roudometof, 2016](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)), uncertainty, liquid modernity ([Bauman, 2000](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)), individualisation ([Bauman, 2001](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)) and the potential future weakening of social bonds (through fear of other humans as ‘carriers of risk’). What emerged through the process of painting was a series of statements (the smaller print words on the painting), which I realised were similar to a sociological research agenda. This commentary will work through my suggestions for a social theory driven research agenda, while also trying to make explicit the ‘essence’ of the painting as it relates to a sociological analysis of Covid-19. While the following research themes are written as discrete areas, there is obvious overlap and opportunity for transdisciplinary, multi-method and bricolage-theory approaches.

‘Karl Marx’s gravediggers . . . health vs wealth during Covid-19’

The research theme is located at the top of the painting and sits directly underneath the upturned ‘trust’. There seem to be two major strands here – one examines the nature and logic of government policies in terms of their focus on health and/or wealth of their nation/state, and the other examines the impact of policy on the pandemic (flattening the curve, mortality, etc.) and also public trust in government and ideas about how governments may respond differently in future pandemics to maintain public trust. In terms of the political economy of Covid-19, key questions could focus on how different governments have dealt with issues of health vs wealth (physical distancing and closing places where crowds congregate help to reduce the spread of the virus but have an economic impact through closed business, reduced spending, increased unemployment, etc.) and what are the long-term impacts of different government responses in terms of the pandemic and economic crisis? Marx’s analysis of tensions between governments looking after the health or the wealth of their populations ([Doyal and Pennell, 1979](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [McKinlay, 1975](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Navarro, 2002](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)) seems to be writ large in responses to Covid-19, but analyses of government responses and their impacts on things like mortality/morbidity rates, health service use/collapse, economic crisis/bounce back will be required in order to provide evidence for future pandemic responses.

‘Risk society . . . one ring to rule them all’ and ‘Prophet Morrissey . . . panic on the streets of London’

This research area should focus on the continued significance of ‘risk society’ ([Beck, 1992](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682), [2005](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682), [2009](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Beck et al., 1994](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)), or even ‘digital risk society’ ([Lupton, 2016](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)), as a way of understanding social structure and social change – how does a global pandemic (i.e. where ‘risk’ is theoretically democratic and non-discerning – the virus can affect anyone, anywhere – but potentially impacts certain groups more than others due to different living conditions and material circumstances – slums in India, refugee camps, high-density living, precarious employment, etc.) lead to a re-shaping of ideas around ‘risk society’? Does Beck’s notion of ‘eschatological ecofatalism’ (individuals ‘pulling the shutters down’ in order to no longer think about Covid-19) make sense during and after Covid-19? Beck postulates that catastrophes could lead to situations whereby ‘the foundations of freedom and democracy are in danger of being undermined’ ([2009](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682): 14) – different governments have introduced different types of controls and ‘emergency measures’ to try to ‘flatten the curve’ of the pandemic – the social, political and ethical impacts of such measures on freedom and democracy will be an ongoing area of sociological research, since some measures may continue long term and others may become part of the ‘new normal’. Research is also required to explore the underpinning reasons for panic buying and if/how that was sustained and what impact it has in vulnerable groups unable to stockpile. On a theoretical level, what are the links between risk, catastrophe and panic in relation to Covid-19?

‘Individualism . . . the death of society?’, ‘“Others” as risks . . . fear and loathing on planet earth’ and ‘Glocalisation . . . no longer is it “their” problem’

This theme could include the current and future impact of physical distancing and social isolation on social bonds, trust and solidarity – the ways in which the current and future restrictions impact social interactions. Does the idea of physical distancing cement notions of other humans as carriers of risk, and thus in need of distancing in the future? Does the communicable nature of viruses and the focus on physical distancing lead to fear/loathing of the ‘other’? Will the post-Covid-19 world be more individualistic as a result of the fear of the ‘other’ (the coloured dots on the continents are meant to symbolise both individuals but also the merging of individuals within groups)? Is this a temporary way of ‘othering’ based on panic and perceived heightened threats? Do we ‘other’ everyone apart from those we live with? A linked area of research could focus on what/who are the ‘symbols of risk’ and do they feed into judgement, blame and stigma? In addition, trust is specifically positioned upside down in the painting, since there is a research-worthy, yet unresolved question about the impact of Covid-19 on public trust in institutions/individuals such as science/scientists, governments/politicians, media/journalists, and indeed on other humans (friends, neighbours, work colleagues and strangers in the street). Previous research on public trust in institutions and individuals across a number of countries in Asia could serve as ‘pre-Covid-19’ data ([Ward et al., 2014](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682), [2016](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)), against which new data could be collected to assess the impact of the Covid-19 period. In terms of ‘glocalisation’ ([Roudometof, 2016](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)) and the metaphorical ‘shrinking of the world’ (everyone is theoretically at risk of Covid-19), how does/has Covid-19 changed public perceptions in ‘developed countries’ of ‘problems’ that may previously have been thought about as ‘developing country problems’? Previous viruses within recent memory such as SARS and Avian Flu did not reach pandemic status and predominantly impacted countries in Asia, and therefore to a large extent, did not adversely impact most people in ‘developed countries’ ([Hellsten and Nerlich, 2010](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Nerlich and Halliday, 2007](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)). Within this context, in what ways is Covid-19 similar to and/or different from SARS, Ebola and avian flu? In the painting, the clusters of red dots across the ocean represent the originating virus, which spread to the various land masses where they create new clusters. While there is further spread of the virus between land masses (indicated by the red lines), the point to take from this is my attempt to not locate the ‘cause’ of the virus within any particular land mass, since there is a potential for racism and xenophobia – an area in which sociological research is needed. Related to this, has Covid-19 changed public perceptions of immigration, since early testing data (in Australia at least) focused primarily on people travelling from overseas, resulting in restrictions on international travel and most inter-state travel (indeed, advice not to travel between towns/cities or between urban/rural areas)? Are ‘immigrants’ seen as harbingers of risk, and if so, are different risk assessments made between different ‘types’ of immigrants (from particular countries, economic/humanitarian, etc.)?

‘Simulacra . . . the new normal’ and ‘Hey Siri . . . when will it all end’

This research theme could focus on the staging and framing of ‘causes’ and ‘solutions’ to Covid-19 – Baudrillard’s idea on simulacra ([Baudrillard, 1994](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)) seems to have particular use for Covid-19 (the outline of my painting is meant to be an iPad), whereby different forms of media (news, ‘fake news’, social media), screens (pictures of mass graves, ventilators, queues at unemployment centres), graphics (e.g. logarithmic graphs, various statistics) and new ways of viewing the world/risks impact what we know about Covid-19 (see for example the Johns Hopkins University Covid-19 Dashboard).[1](javascript:popRef('fn1-1440783320939682')) Research is needed on how different forms of media impact public perceptions of both Covid-19 and other future health risks (possibly more longer term risks like diabetes or breast cancer) more broadly. Indeed, there may be a distinction between how different population groups respond to ‘short horizons’ (acute illness, getting Covid-19) and ‘longer horizons’ (potential chronic conditions in older age) ([Warin et al., 2015](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)). Furthermore, previous epidemics, such as avian flu and threats of pandemic influenza have led researchers to explore the media-driven messages portrayed to the public through newspapers ([Hellsten and Nerlich, 2010](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Koteyko et al., 2008](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Nerlich and Halliday, 2007](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Nerlich and Koteyko, 2012](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Stephenson and Jamieson, 2009](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)). Similar studies are needed for Covid-19, in addition to studies on social media and other online platforms. Contemporary approaches such as netnography ([Kozinets, 2020](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)) and digital sociology ([Lunnay et al., 2015](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Lupton, 2018a](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682), [2018b](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Redshaw, 2020](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Selwyn, 2019](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)) are likely to be very instructive to researchers following this path, in addition to research with journalists and others in the media to understand their motivations and intentions ([Henderson et al., 2014](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682), [2017](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Wilson et al., 2014](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682), [2015](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)).

‘Where’s the map . . . we are all lost’ and ‘Liquid fear . . . it’s everywhere’

There is a relatively long history of sociological theory on notions of ‘uncertainty’, including concepts such as a ‘culture of anxiety’ ([Crawford, 2004](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)), ‘era of insecurity’ ([Bauman, 1999](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)), ‘ontological insecurity’ ([Giddens, 1990](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)) and ‘existential anxiety’ ([Giddens, 1991](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)). In the context of Covid-19, how relevant are these concepts? How do different social groups respond to the liquid fear, panic and uncertainty brought during the Covid-19 pandemic? Given the ‘invisibility’ of the virus, research exploring the utility of Bauman’s ideas of ‘liquid fear’ would be worthwhile, whereby fear may seep into our lives or be waiting just around the corner, heightening levels of uncertainty (about whether a person is already infected, will become infected, will pass an infection onwards through to uncertainty about ‘when will this end’, when can we ‘get back to normal’ – indeed what the ‘new normal’ will look like). We can also link ideas of fear and uncertainty to Beck’s ideas on risk, since he argued that in a risk society fear is the prevailing subjectivity, linked via uncertainty to what he called the ‘horror of ambiguity’ ([Beck, 2009](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682): 5).

‘Everything is f\*cked . . . hope in the new world order’

The particular research theme takes its name from the sequel to the rather splendid book *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F\*ck* ([Manson, 2016](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682), [2019](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)). While at first glance, it seems rather Doomsday, it’s actually about how we might exist in a rather difficult world, yet take what positives we can and have hope. In many ways, it builds on some psycho-social notions of resilience ([Bartley, 2006](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Carter, 2010](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Johnson, 2010](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Tsourtos et al., 2015](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Ungar, 2004](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Ward et al., 2011](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)) and mirrors the saying ‘when life gives you lemons, make lemonade’. Key questions may include how more positive emotions such as hope, compassion, kindness and empathy figure in the current and post-Covid-19 world order. Research exploring case studies of a less dystopian future are required – why/how do more positive outcomes occur, in what social groups do they occur, and can we transfer them more broadly? What part does individual and/or community resilience play in the emergence of hope, and is this socially structured? Given the relatively recent emergence of a ‘sociology of happiness’ ([Cieslik, 2015](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Huta and Waterman, 2013](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682); [Turner, 2018](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)), research could explore how happiness might be enabled during and post-Covid-19. I am not necessarily suggesting utopian futures involving rainbows with pots of gold under them, since we need to heed [Lauren Berlant’s (2011)](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682) concept of ‘cruel optimism’ and [Sara Ahmed’s (2010)](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682) important question about whether ‘happiness’ can/ought necessarily to be an end goal, or whether the ‘promise of happiness’ creates what she terms ‘unhappiness archives’ for some groups in society. Nevertheless, exploring the ‘riddle of happiness’ ([Cieslik, 2017](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783320939682)) during and post-Covid-19 will be an important area of research.

Concluding comments

My hopes for this commentary are rather modest. I simply hope to play a part in working out how sociologists can work together in the context of Covid-19 to undertake useful and transferable theoretically informed research. My initial stab at research areas may generate interest for some people (sociologists or not) and may look drab to others. My ‘painting’ may seem like something one of my children created at primary school, but the process of working on it (from existence to essence) helped me to sort through my thoughts and come up with what I hope is at least a starting point, akin to a working document. I certainly do not want to come across like an ivory-tower, pompous professor who ‘professes’ to be able to be a wordsmith and an artist. . .. I’m simply trying to be part of the early stages of sociological conversations in relation to the biggest (and potentially most disastrous and scariest) global event of our times. I hope that, through collegial and concerted effort by sociologists across the globe, we can learn about how best to prepare for pandemics in the future and what Covid-19 can teach us about ourselves, human interaction and social systems for an ethical, sustainable and equitable existence. I now hand it over to you . . .

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Notes

1.The Johns Hopkins University Covid-19 Dashboard is available at: <https://gisanddata.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6>

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