








The impact of the coronavirus crisis on European societies. What have we learnt and where do we go from here? – Introduction to the COVID volume

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ABSTRACT

The coronavirus pandemic, which first impacted European societies in early 2020, has created a twofold crisis by combining a health threat with economic turmoil. While the crisis has affected all European societies very significantly, its impact varies across countries, social groups, and societal domains. In an effort to provide a first overview of the effect of the coronavirus crisis, in this editorial we discuss contributions of 58 papers published as part of this special issue. These early research papers illustrate the varied impact of the pandemic on various areas of social life. The first group of studies in this special issue analyzes the effect of the pandemic on social inequalities with respect to gender, ethnic otherness, education, and work. A second stream of research focuses on the psychological consequences of the pandemic, especially with respect to wellbeing and resilience. Thirdly, the crisis is discussed on a societal level, in regard to welfare states, social policies, and approaches to crisis governance. In a fourth line of inquiry, several studies have analyzed the impact of the pandemic on social solidarity and cohesion. A fifth strand of research is devoted to examining the role of culture and lifestyles. This review ends with a discussion of areas for future research trajectories.

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1. The pandemic crisis

The detrimental consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic affect the lives of people in Europe and across the globe. In many European societies, the existential health threat of the virus has resulted in large scale government interventions, often limiting basic social and political rights. The combination of these developments has created an economic shock, likely to surpass that of the financial crisis of the last decade. The complex nature of the current crisis – combining a health threat with an economic shock and with a reshuffling of social practices and expectations in various domains – puts European societies under severe stress. In coping with the challenge, many states have issued far-reaching lockdown measures and closed their borders. Because of these events, social integration, and cohesion, within and across European countries, have been threatened. While we write, in the fall of 2020, as the second wave of rising infections is still ongoing, it is all too clear that the crisis resulted in considerable loss of lives, a variety of health impairments, psychological, social, and economic consequences across the world, and also amongst European societies. As we discuss below, women, migrants, older people, caregivers, and the homeless seem particularly hard hit as the crisis exacerbates existing inequalities. The impact of the crisis on growing inequalities and sinking standards of living is still difficult to fully gauge at present, and yet, substantial research has begun to analyze these issues.

While the crisis has mobilized individuals, professional groups, and nations towards acts of mutual help and solidarity, it has also increased existing societal divides. In particular, the crisis emphasizes material differences, as well as national and ethnic tensions as borders are being closed, and migrants are being further discriminated against. Even intergenerational relations between the elderly and the young are subject to critical scrutiny and judgmental attitudes with young people often being accused of carelessly spreading the disease whereas the elderly are sometimes blamed as the cause for lockdowns. Political battles are being fought over who is supposed to benefit from government interventions. Moreover, the limits of democratic freedoms are being contentiously debated, especially the extent of curtailments on social and political rights during the extensive lockdowns, the closure of borders, and the limits put on the right of free assembly and protest. Even protective devices such as the wearing of face masks have become politicized. In terms of the broader socio-economic context, the economic crisis emerging from the global pandemic and the lockdowns seems likely to be greater than the financial crisis of 2008.

Sociology is particularly geared towards a complex view of societal processes and this is especially relevant here given the multifaceted nature of the current crisis, its extended timeframe, and the threats that it can be seen to be posing to the social integration and cohesion of our societies. Apart from the broader perspective on the ‘coronavirus crisis’, sociological studies address specific consequences in domains such as health, work, consumption, family, education, social contacts, political participation and overall life satisfaction. In this introduction to the special issue, we want to provide an overview of the 58 studies included on these topics and we also aim to answer two interrelated questions: First, what have we learned about the impact of the coronavirus crisis on European societies? The many papers in this issue provide early evidence of the impact that the pandemic has had and continues to have on many aspects of social life in Europe. Second, based on existing research, what are the research areas, questions and issues that seem to need further attention as we move forward? In this way, the special issue brings together an early wave of substantial sociological insight into the impact of the major crisis of the young twenty-first century and provides key evidence of its effects on European societies as well as wide-ranging opportunities for further research. We believe that this special issue allows to make sense of key aspects of the crisis within European societies and to capture the scope and depth not only from sociological perspectives, but also of pertinent socio-political and cultural aspects related to the impact of the pandemic.

2. The powerful response to *European Societies* special issue call for papers and the central themes of research during the earlier stages of the pandemic

The *European Societies*’ call for contributions to a special issue triggered a powerful response. We received an impressive number of 162 submissions, mostly from Europe, but also from other continents. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that most submissions came from Italy, which was the first European country to be forcefully hit. Additionally, other highly prolific submitting countries included Germany and Poland. Most studies resulted from teamwork.

Over a third of the submitted manuscripts made it through the review process. The most frequent topics of the submissions are captured by the word cloud presented in [Figure 1](#). They include:



Figure 1. Word cloud illustrating the word frequency based on titles, abstracts and keywords of papers included in this special issue. Source: own illustration.

- (1) Social inequalities
- (2) Psychological consequences
- (3) Governance and the welfare state
- (4) Solidarity and cohesion
- (5) Culture and lifestyles

Despite this impressive variety, some themes received remarkably little attention such as the social conditions of the elderly, the anti-lockdown protests or the situation of first responders. We shall return to them in the final discussion section, where we turn to those problems and the social categories which appeared to have been understudied, at least thus far, from what we could surmise based on the sample of submissions for this issue.

3. What have we learnt? A review of new findings on the impact of the coronavirus crisis on European societies

In an effort to answer this question, we first begin with a review of the articles and discuss their main findings. For further details on the theory, methods, and results, readers are invited to turn to the full papers which are cited in the below discussions.

3.1. Social inequalities

Social inequalities appeared as the a central theme. The clearest impact of the crisis is perceived in the exacerbation and deepening of existing patterns of social inequalities in many respects. The papers looked at inequalities based on gender, migration and otherness, education and labor market position.

3.1.1. Gender inequalities

Gender has attracted much attention from scholars during the current pandemic. This is reflected in the impressive number of submitted articles dealing with differences in men's and women's participation in the labor market, their life satisfaction, and especially the intensification of domestic and childrearing activities under the constraints of the lockdown measures imposed by almost all governments as a way of controlling the spread of the virus. One of the areas of scrutiny regarding gender inequalities in this special issue was the pandemic's impact on the gendered contribution to unpaid activities. A comparative study based on online surveys conducted during the pandemic in both Germany and Italy (Kulic *et al.* 2020) showed that economic circumstances during the pandemic led to changes in income contributions by household partners. Likewise, this reshaped the roles of the partners within the household leading to more intensive domestic work by those partners who experienced a loss of income as an effect of the pandemic's economic shock (in general, this being women). As a result, women witnessed a return to more traditional domestic and childcare duties. Fodor *et al.* (2020) draw similar conclusions for Hungary: they examined the gendered division of childcare duties and found that despite a greater contribution by men, the gender gap further increased due to an even larger rise in female contribution, predominantly amongst the higher educated. Overall, partnership satisfaction and relationship quality also seem to have been severely threatened by the pandemic with the reduction being even greater among childless couples, implying an increase in conflict compared to the pre-pandemic period (Schmid *et al.* 2020).

When asked about their personal experience during the pandemic, German men and women reported dissimilar areas of primary concern. Czymara *et al.* (2020) report that the psychological burden during the pandemic is gendered, with women worrying more about family and childcare and men being mostly preoccupied with paid work. Thus, these authors suggest that physically demanding domestic work is

compounded by a mental (over)load since women tend to be more concerned about chores and childcare. Reduced well-being for various groups was further reported in Germany: mothers – more so than fathers – and childless people, in particular, reported lower levels of satisfaction with family in the aftermath of the pandemic (Möhring *et al.* 2020). Work satisfaction among mothers declined more, compared to fathers, according to another study from Germany (Hipp and Bünning 2020). Moreover, social isolation in the aftermath of the pandemic seems to have entailed greater cutbacks in life satisfaction and subjective well-being among women than among men (Ohlbrecht and Jellen 2020).

Likewise, empirical evidence from different European countries indicated larger labor market vulnerabilities for women due to the pandemic, compared to men. A cross-cultural study based on data from the U.S.A., Germany, and Singapore examined consequences of the pandemic for unemployment, underemployment, transitions to working from home, and for gender-role attitudes. The study indicated that compared to men, women were more likely to work from home, reduce their working hours, and become unemployed in the aftermath of the pandemic, and that this was mainly due to their pre-pandemic labor market precariousness (Reichelt *et al.* 2020).

Several studies discussed the increased gender inequality and the return to more traditional gender roles in the household due to the pandemic. The impact on gender roles is ultimately reflected in future (behavioral) fertility changes (Voicu and Bădoi 2020). Empirical evidence not only supplies an accurate map of altered working conditions due to the pandemic and related care urgencies but also provides new insights in terms of understanding the relevance of the close link between unequal division of care and domestic work within families and gender inequality inside the labor market. For example, an empirical study carried out in Germany by Zoch *et al.* (2020) highlights the absolute importance of adequate family policies, particularly in the field of institutional childcare.

Women also seem to have faced greater challenges in academia relative to their male counterparts, particularly in terms of greater precariousness and the lowered prospects for career advancement as a consequence of intensive domestic and caretaking activities hindering their opportunities to publish. Minello *et al.* (2020) show that academic mothers fear for the progress of their careers in a context where such progress is highly dependent on research outcomes and publications. Indeed, precarity was a major issue linked to the pandemic and – while it did not emerge

during the pandemic – it was exacerbated by it as also discussed for the wider academic sector in one of the papers of this special issue (Kinikoglu and Can 2020).

Growing inequality and the challenges encountered by women, including those of higher educational resources, where one would generally expect a more equal distribution of household tasks, led some governments to introduce policies targeting those gender inequalities. One of the studies conducted a comparative analysis of employment and social policies across Europe from a gendered perspective by illustrating types of governmental support on the basis of evidence from Germany, Italy, Norway, and the UK. It shows various social welfare arrangements emerging in different countries characterized by different welfare state models and underpinned by divergent gender logics (Cook and Grimshaw 2020).

3.1.2. *Ethnicity and otherness*

Several studies addressed the consequences of the pandemic for ethnic inequalities. For instance, with respect to the social conditions of migrants and minorities, the well-being of foreign born men living in the UK was identified to be significantly worse during the pandemic (Shen and Bartram 2020). Moreover, migrants with Asian, American, Turkish or former Yugoslavian backgrounds revealed larger health-risk concerns than natives in Germany, while financial risks only appeared to rise for migrants from Turkish or former Yugoslavian backgrounds (Soiné *et al.* 2020). During this period, discrimination became an issue for Chinese migrants and their descendants in France (Wang *et al.* 2020a), as well as in the UK and Russia (Murji and Picker 2020). In a study of discrimination in the Belgian renting market, Verhaeghe and Ghekiere (2020) used a field-experiment approach to analyze invitations to apartment viewings of people from different ethnic groups. Compared to the pre-pandemic era, invitations to look at an apartment decreased for all groups, yet, invitations decreased more for people of Maghreb descent than for Belgians. Based on interviews with refugees in Germany before and during the lockdown, Falkenhain *et al.* (2020) asked whether the coronavirus crisis increased vulnerability and led to setbacks in refugee integration. They conclude that the crisis led to a higher level of perceived uncertainty in everyday working life and limited advice-seeking for career development and life plans.

3.1.3. Educational inequalities

In almost all European societies, teachers and students had to quickly adapt to remote learning during extensive lockdowns and school closures. Many lacked proper equipment, skills and support. With regard to educational inequalities, the papers in this special issue showed that there are social inequalities in home schooling efforts for high school students in Germany (Dietrich *et al.* 2020). Moreover, education was found to be a strong predictor of COVID-19 related health behavior – physical and social distancing, increased hygiene, and face mask wearing – at least in Germany (Hoening and Wenz 2020). Learning during the pandemic became a particular challenge for migrant children. Adjustment to new daily routines and changing learning habits triggered a complex process of redefinition of social practices by migrant children living in Poland (Popyk 2020). In many situations, schoolchildren reported that homework and remote learning was more tedious. In particular for children with migratory background, the isolation within their homes during the lockdown was more acutely perceived as a loss since it hampered the process of integration in their host country (Popyk 2020).

3.1.4. Labor market inequalities

The coronavirus crisis is inflicting severe consequences for both economic and health risks in the workplace. Based on Oesch's (2006) social class framework, Holst *et al.* (2020) use a large convenience sample of almost 10,000 employees to study the concrete horizontal and vertical social gradients of economic and health risks. Members of lower social classes generally reported higher perceived levels of both risks. Moreover, those whose work included interpersonal interactions, especially those from classes with an interpersonal work culture, reported higher levels of health risk, while professionals reported higher levels of economic risk. Thus, preexisting class inequalities were amplified by the coronavirus crisis (Holst *et al.* 2020).

Traditional and conventional work have not been the only focus of scrutiny in the papers in this special issue, 'gig' work and sex work featured as well. Platform labor, i.e. digitally mediated service work, had already known significant expansion before the coronavirus outbreak, but it seems to have become further intensified during the pandemic and the lockdowns. The subjective experiences of Polish food delivery workers (Glovo couriers) during the lockdown suggest that this occupation remained a lucrative and satisfying activity given that the number of orders for food delivery increased as a consequence of

restaurant closure. This situation could therefore be utilized by gig workers like Glovo couriers as an opportunity to improve the value and prestige of this type of work and to empower workers through eliciting more targeted policy regulations (Polkowska 2020). With respect to sex work, a study by Azam *et al.* (2020) documented the impact of the crisis for prostitution markets. Using online data on prostitution in Belgium and the Netherlands, they found a severe downturn in formal prostitution work, suggesting a significant substitution toward less visible forms of sex work after the lockdown (Azam *et al.* 2020).

The national quarantine was further found to have powerful effects on reframing everyday life for Italians that needed to reconcile space and time boundaries which almost collapsed during the extended periods of home confinement, especially regarding the limits between work and family environments. Based on 60 in-depth interviews, Risi *et al.* (2020) documented the reframing of home as a place defined in relation to multiple and contradictory roles and identities. In that respect, the authors showed in particular the challenges of marking boundaries between professional and private life when everything becomes squeezed inside the home (Risi *et al.* 2020).

3.2. Solidarity and cohesion

While, on the one hand, crises tend to exacerbate negative conditions, inequalities, and competition between groups for scarce resources, they can also often inspire individuals and social groups to engage in remarkable acts of solidarity, mutual support and help, even in difficult conditions (Grasso and Giugni 2019; Koos 2019). Some papers in this special issue demonstrated the multiple ways in which people may look after each other, positively relying on social networks (Carlsen *et al.* 2020), and mobilizing people in favor of migrants (Zajak *et al.* 2020). One study from Italy (Moralli and Allegrini 2020) further discussed the potential for social innovation triggered by the pandemic when focusing on the mobilization of resources by people living in vulnerable areas. The authors showed that these types of communities, which are often perceived as powerless, are on the contrary able to build bottom-up resilience through collective action and new patterns of solidarity (Moralli and Allegrini 2020).

Unsurprisingly, online communication technologies are a major conduit for people to counter their isolation during lockdowns. In this context, music has also served as a means to bring solidarity amongst

isolated people through online livestreams (Vandenberg *et al.* 2020). Other research employing Twitter data (Iranmanesh and Alpar Atun 2020) measures the changes in tweets' mean geographical distance between the pre-pandemic and pandemic periods. It shows that distance increased with the first lockdown and remained larger compared to the pre-pandemic times, even after most restrictions had been lifted. These findings raise important questions about the changing dynamics of social relations and the potentially negative consequences of the pandemic on the creation and maintenance of weak ties.

The family has also been a locus for solidarity to be expressed, challenged, and tested (Kushtanina and Vinel 2020). Using longitudinal survey data, Borkowska and Laurence (2020) analyzed social cohesion in England before and during the pandemic. They firstly showed that the overall levels of social cohesion were lower in June 2020 compared to all of the examined pre-pandemic periods. Secondly, they found that the decline in cohesion was the strongest in the most deprived communities, particularly among certain ethnic minority groups and among the lower-skilled, thus highlighting how the crisis aggravated the situation for those with precarious links to their communities.

Solidarity could also be observed at the transnational level, where specifically the European Union has come under pressure in terms of its coping with the crisis. One study analyzed attitudes towards financial solidarity with other EU countries in Austria, a net contributor country. It showed that the support for financial solidarity increased for Austrians who believed that such programs benefited their country in the long run and that the pandemic was not an economic threat (Kalleitner and Bobzien 2020). In a unique comparative study, Voicu *et al.* (2020) analyzed the levels of solidarity in Spain, Hungary, and Romania before and during the pandemic. They highlighted different patterns for how solidarity changed during the crisis, depending on the context at the country-level and in response to different individual social experiences of lockdown measures.

3.3. Governance and the welfare state

When it comes to responses to the crisis, countries often chose very different paths, underpinned by different analyses of the situation, the trade-offs entailed, and the perceived magnitude of different risks. Following the findings of Breznau (2020), the strength of the welfare state – approximated in this study via social spending and employment

injury insurance and protection – was found to be an important predictor of how citizens weighed their health risks, in particular in the absence of swift lockdown measures. In this context, Sweden represented a unique case (Grothe-Hammer and Roth 2020), since it decided to avoid an enforced lockdown, counting on the individual responsibility of citizens, the idea of a national civic culture, and mutual trust between government and citizenry. Utilizing a Foucauldian perspective on the governance of the crisis, Gjerde (2020) distinguished between a liberal ‘laissez-faire’ and a bio-political ‘interventionist’ logic of governance, characteristic of the earlier and later policy responses by the Norwegian government. These two logics and the government’s shift from the former to the latter, highlighted immanent contradictions in the responses to the crisis by the same administrations, which were further reflected in the discourse of politicians.

As noted, one of the major socio-political aspects of the crisis were border closures and lockdowns imposed by governments. Lockdowns seriously limited liberties and rights. Several papers of the special issue looked at questions of migration and border controls asking, for example, whether the crisis has marked the end of borderless Europe (Opilowska 2020) or examining how different national actors navigated the crisis bringing new models into being (Hennig 2020).

Another concern for governments were the changing patterns of criminality due to the increased reliance on technology and remote communication during the lockdowns. Cybercrime, in particular, had the potential to rise once daily routine had been disrupted by the lockdown. A study from the UK confirmed that – while crime declined in general – cybercrime rose (Buil-Gil *et al.* 2020).

Some contributions took a broader, more political-sociological view to other aspects related to the coronavirus crisis, linking it to other crises affecting European societies under neoliberal democratic capitalism (Condon 2020). Other articles invited the readers to reflect on the deep changes in our perspectives on individual and collective priorities generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Iozzo and Masini (2020), for instance, the exogenous shock caused by the pandemic highlighted all the weaknesses of the current state-centered policies. They argue that since the virus is a transnational issue, it needed more coordinated responses by the EU institutions. On the other hand, while overshadowed by globalization during last decades, the crucial role of local communities strongly re-emerges, emphasizing the need for more efficient – and potentially, decentralized – responses to the crisis. In this respect, the

first attempt at carrying out a new social, economic, political, and territorial planning could be pursued – it is argued – by transforming the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) from a temporary instrument for financial assistance during the crisis, into a proactive growth-promoting fund for local economies and infrastructures.

Finally, the crisis has already started to have an impact on the welfare state and social policies. One significant factor is childcare policy which gained importance since many schools closed for protracted periods and because of health risks for the elderly, grandparents often could not step in to help with childcare even where they previously might have where they lived close (Blum and Dobrotić 2020).

3.4. Psychological aspects – well-being and resilience vs. stress and anxiety

Coping with stress was linked to various aspects of the pandemic and represented another crucial theme that has emerged during these challenging times. The negative psychological and psychiatric aspects such as fear and depression attracted expert attention from the very onset of the pandemic (Wang *et al.* 2020b). However, coping is also related to adjustment and resilience. Both negative and positive aspects of coping were captured in the submitted manuscripts.

In its initial phase, the pandemic represented an unknown danger and triggered high levels of fear and anxiety even amongst healthy and resilient individuals. As time progressed, there was a need to impose regulations such as lockdown measures, isolation, quarantines, and physical distancing. All these reasonable epidemiological methods involved psychological drawbacks. Distance and isolation were potentially psychologically detrimental for many people since social support, intimacy and tactile contact are crucial factors in fostering resilience and well-being among human beings. As a result, vulnerable individuals in particular experienced psychological and also psychiatric problems. For many, their mental condition, already weakened by limited social contact, further deteriorated as a result of an additional economic blow.

The psychological aspects of the pandemic were routinely noted and analyzed by many contributions to the special issue. The approaches were varied and spanned from looking at individual coping mechanisms to wider, group phenomena. Some studies focused on individual responses to the pandemic in terms of risk perception (Breznau 2020; Soiné *et al.* 2020), anxiety and behavioral adjustment (Buyukkececi

2020), social resilience (Fernández-Prados *et al.* 2020), stress, reduced subjective well-being, and life satisfaction (Ohlbrecht and Jellen 2020). Other papers took a broader perspective and made comparisons across countries (Breznau 2020; Buyukkececi 2020), across social groups (Buyukkececi 2020; Fernández-Prados *et al.* 2020; Soiné *et al.* 2020) and social characteristics (Seidenschnur 2020).

In particular, the studies showed increased anxiety and risk perception among women versus men, and married or cohabiting individuals versus single or divorced individuals (Buyukkececi 2020). While depression and age were found to be positively related to anxiety, depressed and older participants were also more likely to counter the pandemic with health-protective behaviors (Buyukkececi 2020). Heightened risk perception was also linked to ethnic and racial otherness, and (un)employment (Soiné *et al.* 2020). Psychological consequences were especially dramatic following the social gradient, with a more pronounced effect among the lower educated social strata, vulnerable groups struggling with social isolation such as young adults, COVID-19 risk group members, single people, people with higher workloads (generally, women), and those with depleted socioeconomic resources (the unemployed and those who had experienced a deteriorating financial situation) (Kuhn *et al.* 2020).

Although women tended to report higher anxiety, they also manifested more resilience and willingness to cope with the implications of the pandemic, such as the state of emergency and the lockdowns, as documented by Fernandes-Prados *et al.* (2020) in Spain. Social resilience was also positively related to having higher education levels, political trust, and politically leaning to the Left. The importance of political trust for individual concerns regarding the pandemic was also found in the Czech context: people were less worried about the pandemic when they trusted political and social institutions (Tabery and Pilnacek 2020).

Seidenschnur (2020) approached the topic from a perspective of social characters resonating with social types, social figures, and group mentalities (see, for e.g. Moebius and Schroer 2010; Klicperová-Baker and Košťál 2015). In particular, the author analyzed the communication stream on the German online platform 'Yodel' during two phases of the first wave of the coronavirus crisis. Qualitative content analysis of the Yodel messages relevant to the @corona channel resulted in a typology of characters that differed in terms of their health- and economy-related narratives and most importantly, due to their differences in coping and in their attempts to control the situation. This typology

included: a crisis manager, crisis entrepreneur, frightened admonisher, health expert and depressed loner (Seidenschnur 2020).

Further studies indicate the importance of the context in which individuals operate. Risk perceptions appeared to be lower among countries with stronger welfare states, but only if countries did not introduce preventive measures (Buyukkececi 2020). This is in agreement with the finding that individual anxiety and behavioral responses were stronger in societies characterized by greater altruism, patience (in other words, time preferences for long-term orientation), and development measured via three components of the Human Development Index such as the standard of living, education, and health (Buyukkececi 2020). Stronger individual health-protective behavioral responses were associated with positive reciprocity and trust at the country level, which seems to be related to social norms (Buyukkececi 2020). Using an organizational perspective, Teekens *et al.* (2020) showed how social resilience can also be understood as resulting from specific workgroup characteristics and individual motivations that buffer against external shocks. Using a survey on nursing students in the health-care system, the same study analyzed the conditions under which students continued their voluntary work to help fight the crisis in the health system, despite potential risks.

Refreshingly, some authors approached the dire theme positively (Krajewski *et al.* 2020). Their respondents were supposed to list positive aspects of the pandemic. They came up with mostly personal advantages, such as more quality time with the family, slowing down of the pace of life and acquisition of new skills and knowledge, environmental benefits, and strengthening of social capital. The authors further analyzed the balance between defensive and progressive values (maintaining the status quo rather than seeking improvement) and socio-demographic characteristics associated with various positive visions. Ohlbrecht and Jellen (2020) also showed how the crisis revealed resources, e.g. a change in time management and new possibilities for self-care.

3.5. Culture and lifestyles

The pandemic has influenced various aspects of culture and several contributions focused on these by studying values, changes in lifestyles, leisure, and communication, among other phenomena. One of the fundamental sociological questions here related to the stability and change in public opinion and values. With respect to the coronavirus pandemic, one might wonder to what degree the world before and after the crisis

differs. The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic did not cause opinions and values in the Netherlands to change much and when so, there was a tendency toward a positive shift (an increase in political support), illustrating the so-called ‘rally effect’, along with heightened civic concern about privacy due to the new regulations (Reeskens *et al.* 2020).

An on-line survey experiment involving 1,846 individuals in a romantic relationship (cohabiting or living apart together) studied how future prospects affected marriage intentions. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of five treatments, each suggesting a different expected duration of the pandemic emergency, presented in a mock news bulletin. The findings confirmed the assumptions that the prolonged vision of the state of emergency would have a negative impact on marriage intentions while cohabitation – in contrast to marriage – would be more compatible with an uncertain world (Guetto *et al.* 2020).

Sport has been of significance for well-being in Germany, since lockdown resulted in forced inactivity for many individuals. The results indicated lower well-being in the aftermath of reduced sporting activities, with the drop being particularly intensive when the reduction of sporting was involuntary, such as in the case of lockdown measures. On the contrary, increased sporting behavior had a buffering effect on psychological health (Mutz 2020).

Religion and religiosity during the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy – one of the earliest and hardest-hit European countries – played a significant role in countering the feelings of insecurity, particularly among persons for whom religiosity was already a cultural, emotional, or social resource due to early religious socialization. The results revealed increased religious behavior in form of more frequent attendance of religious activities and praying as a consequence of experiencing contagion in the family (Molteni *et al.* 2020). Focusing on Switzerland, Bawidamann *et al.* (2020) studied the ritual modifications prompted by the crisis in the Roman Catholic Church and an Islamic organization via three categories: ‘change’, ‘shift’, and ‘cancellation’. With a focus on religious authority, following Bourdieu, they show that the response to ritual restrictions depends on the denomination’s degree of establishment within the societal context and the division of religious labor in the community.

Another creative project, a literary contest of pandemic diaries in Poland initiated by Łukianow *et al.* (2020) yielded a variety of over 400 submissions spanning from just a few lines of a poem to extensive electronic documents. Some diaries had a documentary character, others were fictionalized and poetic. Most entries carried a distinct

‘therapeutical’ character (contemplating the author’s thoughts and emotions, often dealing with an emotional crisis), others dealt with social relationships, the struggles of parenthood, or feelings of patriotic resistance. Although one might expect self-stylization in diaries which were not necessarily private but conceived for the public, as a response to an academic call, they can still be seen to represent a document of this unique moment in time, and further continuing the notable line of the classic Polish diaries and personal documents (e.g. the classic work by Thomas and Znaniecki (1919)).

Shifting the focus to popular beliefs, conspiracy theories related to the pandemic were examined along with the socio-economic profile of the antecedents of the pandemic in the Romanian context. The results implied that the supporters of the conspiracy theories were more likely to be older and more highly educated (which is probably country-specific and related to the distrust of government among better educated Romanians, cf. Stoica and Umbreş 2020); they also tended to have extremist political orientations and to be rather socially isolated. On the other hand, gender, social position, residency type and labor market position appeared to have no significant effect (Stoica and Umbreş 2020).

Another field of interest within the cultural realm was residential mobility during the lockdown. In Spain, this occurred in terms of bypassing the lockdown measures. The probability of moving during the lockdown was associated with being younger, single, a student, teleworking and in housing default. While working-class and lower-educated groups were more prone to move for reasons of comfort, proximity played a more important role for professional middle-class groups. Of particular importance were the mobility patterns of contagious subjects, who displayed lower overall mobility patterns. The socioeconomic profile of contagious movers seemed to imply that moving was more a result of individual precarious circumstances and social inequality rather than irresponsibility (Duque-Calvache *et al.* 2020).

4. Where do we go from here? Drawing a future research agenda

Owing to the breadth and depth of ongoing sociological research, the papers included in this special issue provided a thorough, diverse and pluralistic analysis documenting how the first phase of the pandemic in the end of winter, spring, and summer of 2020 affected European societies. Based on these studies, we have devoted this final section of

our introduction to a discussion of limitations, gaps and open questions in the study of the crisis. In doing so, we aimed at sketching future research avenues allowing us to better understand how the pandemic has affected and will continue to affect the lives of people in and outside of Europe. The section is organized in parallel to the major themes discussed above, and additionally, we also mention themes and issues that have so far received only limited attention.

4.1. Social inequality

Many studies have addressed different types of inequalities, with a lot of attention devoted especially to gender inequality. In terms of educational inequalities, some experts already speak of a ‘COVID lost generation’ (Children’s Commissioner 2020; Sampaio 2020) as a consequence of lockdowns. The impact of school closures and distance learning cannot yet be adequately captured. We need more comparative studies on the differential effect of school closures and lockdowns, and their long-term consequences. As time progresses, we should be able to analyze the extent to which lockdown duration has a varied impact on learning for different age groups and groups with lower resources (e.g. migrants, women, lower social strata). It will be a challenging future research task to analyze educational inequalities with respect to crisis-related outcomes, such as consequences on health.

Migrants, particularly forced migrants, are often especially vulnerable groups even in non-pandemic times. Their living conditions need to be more carefully examined across different societies with various integration regimes and histories of migration. With respect to the social conditions of migrants and minorities, we need to see to what extent the crisis will have affected these in the long-term and whether attitudes and conditions have continued to deteriorate for this and other vulnerable groups. The first findings paint a rather nuanced picture suggesting increased discrimination and disadvantages, but do not support a pessimistic view of societies being unable to integrate such groups or failing to help them cope with the coronavirus crisis. Future research should aim to further distinguish between different domains of social life and different migrant groups.

Future studies will also need to provide a better understanding of the impact of the pandemic on the labor market. In the first phase of the crisis, most countries were quick in implementing policies to shield workers from the harshest effects of the economic turmoil, such as

‘short-time work’ involving governmental income support. It remains to be seen whether these policies have a sustainable long-term impact and if they will help to retain qualified workers and save industries. The economic conditions of European countries are quite varied, with the Eurozone crisis and Brexit still heavily burdening some countries. The general state of the economy and the fiscal capacity of European states are likely to have serious underpinnings for their economic recovery. The pandemic is moreover likely to exacerbate pre-existing inequalities across Europe and to potentially create a substantial burden for future generations.

The wider implications for the job market should be analyzed through comparative and longitudinal perspectives. While we examine the trends in additional work from home or ‘smart-working’ and digitalization, we cannot yet well assess their longer-term consequences, especially with respect to the effects on productivity and inequality. An important question is whether, and to what extent, the coronavirus crisis has reshaped existing professions, industries and branches, and to what extent it provides new opportunities. Given the extensive use of the home-office due to physical distancing requirements, it is clearly important to understand to what degree this mode may endure after the pandemic and what implications in turn this may have. In the same vein, the development of online platform labor, i.e. digitally mediated service labor, and its potential to alleviate the economic consequences of the coronavirus crisis, seem specifically interesting in times of physical distancing. While research recognized so far the beneficial impact of new technologies on work-life balance, the pandemic experience also cautions against regressions in family roles and possible paternalistic setbacks.

Future studies should also examine the conditions of the most precarious groups, such as the homeless and the poor. Studies on the repercussions of the coronavirus crisis should examine its likely long-term effects on patterns of precarity and their possible exacerbation. Perhaps, some projects such as a guaranteed minimal wage, could go some way to begin addressing some of these major problems. However, more studies are needed to examine these issues and their potential for moving society forward.

4.2. Solidarity

With respect to solidarity, we will need better data to fully understand if it increased or decreased as a result of the pandemic and how patterns of solidarity changed with the protraction of the crisis. Early indicators are quite positive, with many citizens acting for the benefit of others.

As the crisis continues, we may begin to see the signs of fatigue and the reaching of a stage of exhaustion of both material and psychological resources, followed by a decline in volunteering and the willingness to share. While acts of solidarity stood out in the 'heydays' of the first lockdown (e.g. the Czech altruistic wave of home-made production of face masks (Trnka 2020)) at least in some countries (Carlsen *et al* 2020), overall levels of social cohesion may have palpably declined, especially among the most deprived communities (Borkowska and Laurence 2020). Thus, we need to better understand how acts of solidarity and social cohesion are connected, and how patterns might differ across countries and communities. In studying solidarity and cohesion, we should not forget the impact of digitalization, as we may witness a rise in virtual community life and activism.

The country-level dimension of solidarity is also relevant in terms of understanding whether the crisis has led to changes in international solidarity. Are citizens willing to enable transfers to help other countries in need and what conditions do they wish to apply to these? Will conditionality continue to be popular or rather is the haphazard nature of the current crisis a reminder that any country could be faced with challenges and need the help of others? The crisis might prove a powerful reminder that cooperation and altruistic support could be essential for moving forward.

Family life was another area where the pandemic had a strong impact. Questions in future research could involve looking at issues linked to intergenerational solidarity and support within nuclear families, care for children and the elderly, and the bases for societal arrangements that are conducive to supporting the right balance of responsibilities with other activities and duties.

While family issues were relatively well-covered in this special issue, surprisingly little attention was paid to the elderly. Yet, solely on account of their age, seniors are a high-risk group (The Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine 2020). While seniors were asked to self-isolate, in some countries that was a mandatory request, without concern whether they had comorbidities or not. That had far-reaching effects on their living conditions and well-being, almost irrespective of their material conditions. We need to know more about agism, about the inter-generation relations, about how older people cope with the crisis, what are their resources for resilience and how they can be fostered.

Speaking of solidarity, one last group deserves more research and attention, the first responders: the various professions which may be hard to reach for research but who deserve to be recognized and well cared for. We all owe them.

4.3. Welfare state, governance and politics

Over the last decades, private forms of governance have been gaining importance, supra-national institutions (such as the EU) have become more powerful and austerity can be seen to have undermined the very bases of social rights. The pandemic has, however, forcefully re-introduced the (nation) state, as the crucial political institution in times of crisis. Yet, the crisis threatens fundamental social and political rights. The capability of different types of welfare states in buffering from the effects of the pandemic is a major theme to be studied, as is the effectiveness of the political measures to contain the virus. These will be important research fields, which have strong implications for understanding also the complex dynamics of social inequalities. In the beginning of the crisis, non-traditional means of political participation, such as demonstrations, have been mostly muted, but demonstrations later took place across Europe, for example against government measures to fight COVID-19 and over other questions, such as for example those in France against the security bill restricting filming of the police etc.

The situation continues to evolve. Worried societies at the onset of the pandemic were cooperative and willing to conform to the decisions of their political leadership and to sacrifice their rights. However, this was followed by increasing fatigue combined with growing economic fears and placing the probability of more divided societies on the horizon. The potential trend towards divisiveness for many societies has been further underlined by their inability to develop a consensus on proper and effective measures to deal with the pandemic. There were at the same time people who continued to sew face masks and give them away while others demonstrated not just against the possibility of a lockdown but even against the wearing of face masks in public. With future research, it is imperative to better understand what drives people to fall for and help to spread the conspiracy theories, undermine trust, and protest against any measure to contain the pandemic.

4.4. Psychological aspects – well-being and resilience versus stress and anxiety

Epidemiology gave us relatively clear indications about how to defend ourselves against COVID as a society, medicine gave us the tools to prevent and partially treat it on an individual basis. However, these accomplishments need to be aligned with a generalized understanding

of the threat, application of preventive measures, resilience, patience and cooperation. These are largely psychological tasks. While psychological research and practice, health centers, and crisis help-lines can do a great deal to mitigate psychological aspects of the pandemic (Barbarin *et al.* forthcoming), what seems to be still lacking in the battle against the pandemic is effective, collaborative societal mobilization and compliance with a consensual rational plan. This is a space where sociology intersects with social and community psychology, psychology of the media, health education, clinical psychology, and behavioral economics, among others. Besides, this field is imbued with a host of moral and ethical challenges.

While research is crucially important, the real social benefit comes from action, application of the accumulated knowledge and passing on this wisdom to decision-makers and politicians. Public policies should benefit from cooperation with experts and practitioners on a regular basis. And we have seen a rise in (social) scientists as experts and public intellectuals in the COVID crisis. True collaboration would optimize national campaigns and also better focus on particular problems, such as the delivery of psychological services to needy clients, especially to underserved communities, properly designed, and targeted education campaigns that would reach those who need to be alerted, but at the same time that would not overwhelm those who already in stressful situations.

The course of events and the research that will follow will raise new issues to be attended to. Two issues are already urgent. With respect to the upcoming vaccines, we shall face a twofold psychological challenge: on one hand, for those who welcome the opportunity, an intense competition to get vaccinated as soon as possible, and on the other, that between supporters and opposers of vaccination – radical ‘anti-vaxxers’ who oppose vaccines as a matter of principle.

Another psychological challenge may further emerge if the initial reports of persisting post-COVID symptoms materialize. People who may experience lingering breathing or neurological problems (so-called brain fog or COVID fog) may also require longer-term psychological care. Further research will be necessary to address these issues and anticipate other potential problems that may further arise in the near future.

4.5. Culture and lifestyles

During the first wave, when the research for this issue was conceived, most of us imagined, or perhaps hoped, that the COVID-19 crisis

would come and go, almost like with seasonal flu. Now, coming to a year later, we may well be concerned that we will have to learn to live with the virus for a long time. If so, this would change not only our individual lifestyles but also societal culture in wider terms.

Moreover, a crucial issue seems to be that of the incompatibility of preferences (both individual and cultural). On an individual level, we see clashes between face mask-wearers and mask-rejectors/regulation-rejectors which can spill into large-scale demonstrations.

Indeed, it is not easy to find consensus among our individual, group, and cultural lifestyle preferences. The pandemic offers several scenarios and potential sociological experiments. The least imposing situation provides maximum individual freedom and requires least responsibility as long as the infection curve is flat enough not to overburden the intensive care units. The selective strategy focuses on the frail (usually the oldest) who are put in isolation and leaves the younger population to be relatively more free. The most cautious scenario strives for an infection-free society at the cost of strict quarantining and temporary radical controls. Most societies move between the strategies, recommendations of experts, industrial lobbyists, the will of the people and the numbers of COVID cases. In the pre-vaccination world it is very challenging to harmonize the will of individuals and cultures, to find a compromise between economic interests and health requirements, and to develop sound, long-term strategic planning in an increasingly unpredictable world.

The presence of the virus will ultimately affect our way of consuming, not only in terms of shopping routines, but also what and how we consume. Sites for cultural consumption have been closed and needed to move online, but to move culture online in this way is only possible to a limited degree. Eating practices are also likely to have transformed, due to the closing of restaurants and canteens and increased eating at home. The pandemic might have also changed what is perceived to be ethical consumption and potentially challenged the diffusion of sustainable lifestyles (Boons *et al* 2020) Where, for instance, car use had risen, the use of public transport declined, and consumption of single use plastic skyrocketed. More than ever, our societal systems and the corresponding quality of life will depend on our sense of social responsibility, on civic and political culture, and on civility to overcome the dystopic aspects of the current crisis (cf. Matthewman and Huppertz 2020). This will be a test for our communities, nations, and ultimately, a test for humanity in terms of its ability to rationally coexist. Coordinating our cultural approaches within and across societies is a major challenge

that makes this time unique for the social sciences in general and for sociology in particular.

5. Conclusion

Reading this special issue may be inspiring both by virtue of the theoretical wisdom and the rich empirical knowledge brought forth by the 58 papers included. We conclude with some broader observations on theoretical and empirical challenges. On a theoretical level, many studies have adopted theories from their specific fields, supplemented often by some generic understanding of the crisis and its impact. Some works have employed specific understandings of what a crisis represents (e.g. Condon (2020) based on Habermas). Others build on the experience of collective trauma (Voicu *et al.* 2020). This opens the horizon for further theoretical discussion on the concept of crisis and specifically for theorizing the many mechanisms via which the thinking and actions of people are affected.

On a critical methodological note, some (large-N) studies make use of convenience samples, thus raising the issue of representativeness. While this seems fine to get a first thorough impression, we should (and authors did) nevertheless treat findings based on such data with some caution. Future research could make use of existing panels and start collecting more representative data, which can also allow for replication and thus support more robust conclusions (Hoenig and Wenz 2020; Möhring *et al.* 2020). In turn, some of the qualitative (small-N) studies were confronted with difficulties in terms of gaining access to particular social groups, particularly while social distancing measures were in place. Additionally, using online media and exploring ‘new’ data sources might also further boost future methodological variety.

Europe is an excellent setting for studying and understanding the diversity of societies and governments and how these have been affected by the coronavirus crisis. Some studies made good use of that variety and already provide comparative perspectives, which should be further expanded in future research.

Finally, the coronavirus crisis can be seen as a catalyst, speeding up some social processes and bringing others to a close, uncovering social tensions and divisions, inequalities and power imbalances, but also revealing the capacity for collective problem-solving and solidarity among European societies in late modernity.

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