

Research Perspectives on the Covid-19 Pandemic with a Focus on Alienation

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At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in late winter and early spring of 2020, a group of board members and regular members of the Research Committee 36 on Alienation Theory and research at the International Sociological Association organized a number of colleagues from eight countries in the preparation of a survey that had an overall focus on the various levels of worry, stress, and experiences of alienation as well as the coping strategies employed by different population groups during the early stages of the crisis. The survey questionnaire was translated and distributed in a number of languages, and our international research team collected comparable data from Sweden, Bulgaria, Italy, China, Brazil, Germany, Israel, and the United States that was uploaded on our quick-survey platforms. The results of these quantitative studies are now being analyzed on the national level, which will be followed by qualitative interviews and comparative analyses in respect to selected themes of universal significance. The latter include the underlying factors that determine the feeling of alienation, the level of stress, a sense of optimism and well-being, national and individual differences in the areas of greatest concern, manifestation of gender, educational, and age differences, choice of information sources concerning the public health crisis, attitudes towards the changing working and private life conditions, and others. The research goal of this study is to explore, on the basis of data collected in Sweden, the significance of changes in social interaction subsequent to the pandemic for the sense of alienation in relation to experiences of worry, stress, loneliness, meaningless and powerless, on the one hand, and, on the other, attitudes towards the new conditions of work-related communication.

This presentation proposes a theoretical framework for analyzing the Covid-19 pandemic survey results that utilizes both macrosociological and symbolic interactionist approaches. It argues that the specific focus on alienation is especially appropriate for employing a micro-macro sociological approach that relates the communication processes of social systems to interaction patterns in personal encounters. In the terms of Luhmann's systems theory of society, the pandemic generates one of the particular conditions that qualify as an "environmental irritation" and challenge the communications processes of the social system in respect to the necessity of an uninterrupted production of communications and *operational closure*. On an empirical level, this may be observed in the difficulties encountered by systems communication in fulfilling social expectations and securing the continuation of social, organizational, and individual planning concerning the needed resources. The use of multivariate analysis methods – *multiple correspondence analysis* (MCA) and

multiple regression analysis (MRA) – when examining the survey results can provide support for the claim that society, as a social system comprised of communications, has itself become a type of “high-risk technology” whose functional reliability can no longer be taken for granted. The introduction of new social behavioral norms (social distancing) and new technological solutions for dealing with the threat of communication disturbances has made it clear that ensuring society’s security is a matter of new technical solutions as much as it is a question of psychic or social performance. Empirical evidence will be provided in support of the hypothesis that the changes that have taken place in the social conditions for communication and interaction increase the pressure for higher-level social performance under the conditions of a growing alienation from work, from the other, and from the self.

We will employ survey findings concerning the changes in the nature and quality of experiences of alienation that are consequent to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. It will include a discussion of these changes concerning patterns of human relationships, communication patterns and the character of working places in relation to structural changes in modern society that enhance individualization and alienation. Finally, the presentation will propose that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact upon the field of alienation theory and research, moving it towards the center of modern sociological debate at a time when the foundation of the social has come under attack.