Theorising – Problematising Categories: Understanding the Covid-19 Pandemic through the Sociology of Risk and Uncertainty (RN22)

Patrick Brown, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Maria Grazia Galantino, Sapienza University of Rome, Italy
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The sociology of risk and uncertainty is a young sub-discipline, but one which has a fairly established canon. Following influential works by Lupton [1], Wilkinson [2] and Zinn [3], it has become commonplace to refer to three key core traditions of theorising risk and uncertainty – reflexive-modernisation, governmentality, and cultural approaches. In this short article we briefly note some basic insights into Covid-19 from the first two, before shifting to consider key concerns arising from cultural approaches – categorisation and othering.

Considering Covid-19 in light of reflexive modernisation, following Beck and Giddens, renders the prescience of Beck especially striking. In *The Risk Society*, Beck argues that our political and social systems are being reconfigured by risks resulting from human activity and technology. These risks will exist on an unprecedented scale and generate reflexivity ('self-confrontation' [4]) at societal and individual levels. Indeed Covid-19 has already led to important challenges to recent directions in policy and political discourse, regarding different areas of the welfare state and economic policy. While in early April 2020 it remains too early to consider how lasting these challenges to the status quo may be, policies granting homes to homeless people (e.g. in Amsterdam, London and Toronto), temporary citizenship to asylum seekers (Portugal), and Keynesian-style forms of **stimulus** to the economy, each represent important breaks with recent policy tendencies. Reflexivity has also been commonly described as experienced by individuals, with an undermining of ontological security and identity [5] amid heightened forms of isolation (we will return to this later), alongside the reformatting of work-life balances, the disruption of everyday (family) routines, and new forms of virtual collective **gathering**.

Covid-19 is also importantly understood through the lens of the governmentality tradition, following Foucauldian writings on power and subjectivity. Critical considerations of a new public health oriented around risk [6] have represented one important focus of this work, drawing on Foucault's work on sexuality, whereby the State's interests and supervision at the population level function, with increasing efficiency, via a (self)disciplining of morality and subjectivity at the individual level. Different approaches to enforcing social distancing, from more strict and fine-based models, to the Swedish 'exception', hybrid models (the Netherlands), those harnessing extensive testing and use of smart-phone tracking technology (Singapore), and so on, each emerge from – and in important ways reconfigure – the historical relationship between the State, the subject and her body.

Problematising Categories

Governmentality scholars emphasise the dispersal of power (and resistance) throughout society, yet this approach is nevertheless understood as more of a top-down orientation to studying risk, given the central focus on State power. Meanwhile cultural approaches, following the work of Mary Douglas [7], denote some similar concerns – the development and ramifications of categorisations, the apportioning of blame – but from the bottom up [2]. In this sense, the core categories by which we understand Covid-19 and its risks form part of wider cultural-organisational processes, by which everyday rituals and practices are shaped by, and in turn shape, 'thought styles' – our 'manner' of thinking with categories and our handling of anomalies – which in turn drive wider organisational dynamics [7, 8] (see [9] for some further applications to Covid-19).

This tradition therefore leads us to critically consider the emphasis on some categories rather than others, and to seek to understand this relative emphasis in relation to broader organisational and group dynamics. By far the most common quotation of Douglas's work in risk studies is her assertion that risk 'does not signify an all-round assessment of probable outcomes but becomes a stick for beating authority, often a slogan for mustering xenophobia' [7]. Following this consideration, in this short essay we aim briefly to deconstruct two central assumptions that inform current pandemic debate: Covid-19 risk as probability; and Covid-19 risk as otherness.

Risk as probability

Covid-19 risk is, of course, inseparable from its numbers and probabilistic thinking, but which numbers, which thinking (**Bayesian**, for example, or other approaches) and how to represent these numbers (graphically, for example, through a curve) is never straightforward [10], and necessarily involves value positions. Experts can, and have, argued that Covid-19 may not make a large difference to annual mortality rates [11] and, at least in this narrow sense, represents a more 'normal risk'. As Spiegelhalter also acknowledges, however, this probabilistic assessment is shaped by the (annual) time-frame he employs and a shorter-time frame shifts the categorisation of Covid-19 drastically, especially when healthcare services become overwhelmed. Yet arguments for understanding Covid-19 as a more normal, or more exceptional, risk remain important as they encourage policy-makers to consider the inevitable trade-offs and externalities which any risk governance framework must balance. Spiegelhalter is addressing concerns that the economic impact of lock-down can, less directly, store up all manner of adverse shorter- and longer-term health effects, as has been well documented in light of other recent economic downturns accentuated by national and international institutions [12].

There is much less of an academic evidence-base upon which to model the likely effects of social distancing/lock-down policies on **domestic violence and murder**, but this represents a further important externality of Covid-19 policy which has often been neglected behind the dominant framing and categorisations of Covid-19 risk. The emphasis on some categories-at-risk, alongside the neglect of others, can be understood further by considering risk as an interwoven assemblage of probabilities, categories, values and time-frames [9, 13]. The relative neglect of domestic violence risk, as with the general lack of attention to different mortality rates across different categories of **race and ethnicity**, or the lack of specific data on mortality of **nurses** or **older people in care homes**, can be understood in terms of the (un)availability or (in)visibility of statistics based on some categories and not others, which in turn is embedded within historical concerns with some categories and not others; implicitly reflecting the values of the centre, and not the periphery [14]. Similarly, we have already seen that framing risk in different time-frames may lead to Covid-19 risk being seen as more normal or extraordinary, which leads us to consider some groups and to look past others [9]. Covid-19 risk is therefore an interwoven product of numbers, values, categories and

time-frames, but where 'inevitably, the centre information comes from the centre culture' **[14]**, with this tendency emerging from and reproducing a centre-periphery, in-out group categorisation and subordination.

Risk as otherness

In the past, epidemics 'invariably came from somewhere else' and usually from an exotic, primitive place **[15]**. Narratives on dirty, uncivilised subjects have served to exorcise the spectrum of the disease, placing it outside of our daily life and our clean modern societies **[14, 7, 16]**. By identifying others as the source of risk, we also reduce the sense of helplessness experienced during serious epidemics **[17, 18]**.

Today, the quick and wide diffusion of Covid-19 and its categorisation as a pandemic, does not seem to attenuate the process of 'othering'. On the contrary, narratives representing the Other as the cause of potential harm for us and what we value, proliferate both outside and within societies, often reinforcing but sometimes destabilising the traditional boundaries between centre and periphery; in- and out-groups. At an early stage, and in spite of the **'appropriateness' of its official naming**, **narratives on the origins** of SARS-CoV-2 permeated the media and political debate: representations of the virus referred to a specific geographical location – China – and they were buttressed by mythologies on primitive eating traditions, animal-human promiscuity and low-hygiene living conditions. At first, this strategy contributed to identifying causes, establishing distance, and attributing responsibility and blame outside our social world of reference.

Such a 'geography of blame' was then challenged by the spread of the epidemic in Europe, and the Others turned out to be ourselves. This reversal of positioning was particularly evident, and shocking, in the case of Italians who, first among 'Westerners', were refused admission to other countries and dubbed as 'plague spreaders' or, in some African countries, as '*white* **plague spreaders**'. As the death statistics increased and many countries toughened containment measures, the Other became ubiquitous. A plethora of (internal) Others materialised in everyday life, categorised along the very same lines constructed by epidemiologists, decision-makers, artifact producers: the (un)knowingly infected kin, the vulnerable elder, the careless out-goer, the negligent jogger, the serial shopper, the unmasked clerk.

At the time of writing, after many days of lockdown in most European countries, **social distancing or home isolation** still appear to be the most efficient solutions for containing the Covid-19 pandemic, and the only morally approved ones. For the time being, people have shown compliance and conceived of **creative ways** to support each other, paving the way for new, optimistic visions of global solidarity and social cohesion. But it remains an open question as to how new practices of self-protection, distancing and watchfulness will shape social relationships, identity and othering dynamics in post-Covid-19 societies. The understanding of future risks generated by today's practices for controlling Covid-19 offers a promising and important avenue of sociological inquiry.

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Authors

[Patrick Brown](#)

[Maria Grazia Galantino](#)