



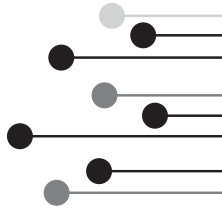
IDEA

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# Know That Things Are Not What They Seem

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Sociology



Sociology is the study of social forces that shape human lives. To illustrate this idea, imagine a group of sociologists walking down the streets of your neighborhood in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. They need to understand why things look the way they do. They pay attention to the businesses that closed permanently as a result of the lockdown. They notice if a grocery store is in the heart of the neighborhood or miles away. They observe the racial composition of the people walking or driving by. Sociologists look at the effects of COVID-19, the location of grocery stores, and racial composition as immediate forces that affect your neighborhood and the people who live there.<sup>1</sup>

Sociologists are not content to take at face value what they see. The discipline trains and even compels them to look below the surface. Sociologists want to be invited inside homes and buildings to see how people live. They welcome a tour of basements and attics, living rooms and closets, to learn about what is hidden from view. Sociologists leave their comfort zones to talk with people and observe them as they work, interact, and otherwise live their lives. They do not let a setting's reputation as dangerous, or even ordinary, interfere with their need to learn. Sociologists do not seek to exploit or disgrace. Rather, they are interested in getting to know people in the context of their communities. The way sociologists go about studying social forces can be summed up with the motto "Things are not what they seem."<sup>2</sup>

Sociologists know that people's options for responding to the COVID-19 pandemic expand or constrict depending on the resources they hold (e.g., income, occupation, support system) and can draw upon<sup>3</sup> (savings accounts, inheritance, home equity, social connections). They also know that the ways in which people think about the pandemic depends on who they most closely interact with—family, friends, and acquaintances. If nurses or doctors are in your social circle, the strain on hospitals is an urgent topic of conversation. If you know a delivery driver, you hear about pressures to deliver an avalanche of packages under tight deadlines. If many around you are unemployed, how to survive without money weighs on every conversation. The point is that how we experience the pandemic is constrained by who we interact with.

So how do we break free from these constraints? The discipline of sociology presents us with useful concepts that open our eyes beyond what

we can glean from our immediate social contacts. One concept is *anticipated versus unanticipated consequences*.<sup>4</sup> In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, this concept alerts us to the countless ways people experience and respond to the new coronavirus—ways that may be different from our own.

The word *anticipated* prompts us to look for responses to the pandemic that we can easily predict. When businesses close, we expect that millions of people will lose jobs and that low-wage workers will be the hardest hit. We can anticipate an underground economy of hairstylists and personal trainers meeting clients in their homes. With social distancing, we expect more loneliness and solitary activities. But we also expect that people will find new ways to congregate.

The word *unanticipated* shifts our attention to responses that we could not see coming. Unanticipated responses bring sensations of surprise. Of course, whether you anticipate a response largely depends on your knowledge base, where you live, and who you associate with. So one response that you anticipate, another person may not. To illustrate, read each scenario below. As you read each, think of your mindset at the start of the pandemic and ask yourself whether this is a response you could have anticipated. Why or why not?

- Some governors order roadblocks, forcing cars with out-of-state license plates (especially states with a high infection rate) to turn around or, if they must stay, to self-quarantine.
- People of Asian descent face discrimination and violence from those who blame them for COVID-19.
- Technology companies use robots to ask people if they are experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 and to hand out face masks.
- The number of job postings in public health (e.g., contact tracers), biotechnology, and pharmaceutical fields increases dramatically.
- Some people transform their Little Free Library into a pantry for food, inviting those passing by to take what they need.
- Respiratory droplets emitted from sneezing, coughing, and talking can spread a virus over an entire planet.

Each of these six scenarios could have been anticipated if your social circle included a state trooper, a person of Asian appearance, a robotics engineer, a public health worker, a Little Free Library steward, and a biologist. Certainly, it is impossible to fill your social circle with people from every walk of life, but you can work to expand what you know so that you become skilled at anticipating the unanticipated.

One way is to read widely and take in accounts from a variety of perspectives. Another way is to embrace academic subjects beyond your own that bring a different lens to how you look at the coronavirus pandemic. The payoff of anticipating the unanticipated is that you see

more options for how to respond, even in situations where there seem to be few good choices.<sup>5</sup> Just think, reading this short idea paper and taking in the six scenarios above offers a list, albeit incomplete, of how to respond in a pandemic:

- Consider how your travels contribute to the spread of infection. (traveling across state lines)
- Do not scapegoat; know this response is racist and only distracts from finding solutions. (targeting of the Asian population)
- Think outside the box. (robots asking people about symptoms)
- Identify new employment opportunities. (growth in pandemic-related job postings)
- Support vulnerable populations. (Little Free Libraries offering food)
- Realize that small acts—even an uncovered sneeze—can have large effects. (global interconnectedness)

Only when we put in the effort to look beyond our immediate situations and social circles can we see the world in a new light and grasp that things are not what they seem. We must dig deeper and think more broadly to create more possibilities. Then the opportunities and responses we perceive as available to us will be more than they first seemed.

Even sociology as a discipline is more than it seems; it cannot stand alone. Sociology needs biology to study this coronavirus and understand its characteristics that make congregating risky. Sociology needs history to understand how this coronavirus pandemic is different from and similar to past pandemics. Sociology needs math to compare infection and hospitalization rates across populations. Sociology reaches across disciplines to strengthen its capacity to deliver meaningful and relevant analyses, especially in times of crisis.

*Joan Ferrante and Chris Caldeira are applied sociologists. They earned their doctorates from the University of Cincinnati and University of California, Davis, respectively. They trust the idea presented in this idea paper because it centers around a sociological concept (anticipated versus unanticipated consequences) that brings no personal agenda to the table. The only way such an agenda can enter is when people refuse, ignore, or cover up what the concept asks them to see. As teachers, they have observed students from different circumstances, cultures, and political orientations apply the concept and come away with new understandings. Ferrante and Caldeira are also part of the Mourning the Creation of Racial Categories Project.*