

New routines under new conditions: social and cultural implications of the COVID-19 pandemic

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The worldwide spread of COVID-19 brought multiple and profound changes and restrictions into the everyday lives of people in contemporary societies. Most countries imposed a number of lockdowns and other measures in order to contain the virus. These measures have had a profound impact on the economy, the lives and welfare of people as well as on societal structures. Numerous questions have arisen for sociological analysis. These questions concern topics around the organization of everyday lives during the periods of lockdown and social contact restrictions, such as family lives, childcare, work, social ties, possibilities for contact, and media uses.

Current sociological analysis is also required regarding the impact of the pandemic on the economy and social stratification: How does the pandemic influence different forms of social inequalities? How does it affect specific segments of the population or professional groups? In this special issue, three contributions employ such a perspective. The contribution by *Lukas Richter and Theresa Heidinger* investigates the problem of loneliness among the older generation, *Nadia Steiber and Christina Siegert* study the economic impact of the pandemic on couples and

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single parents with children, and *Andrea Jesser, Anna-Lena Mädge, Carina Maier, Jana Hierzer, Sylvia Dörfler, Martha Haslinger, and Beate Schrank* analyze the emotional stress of family care workers and family counselors in their work during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 related political measures, aiming at reducing and minimizing personal face-to-face contact, seemed to have fostered and accelerated digitalization processes. Literally overnight, school and college students, teachers and other professionals found themselves forced to develop and strengthen digital skills; the amount of time spent online has increased and new online media practices have emerged. How is the pandemic and its social and practical consequences reflected in digital media? In this special issue, two articles investigate digital media practices: *Paul Eisewicht, Nico Steinmann and Pauline Kortmann* focus on social media memes, while *Tilo Grenz and Philipp Knopp* apply an ethnographic approach for analyzing how the pandemic transferred specific routines to digital media.

Finally, sociologists are also studying how the pandemic has influenced social values. In this perspective, the special issue is concerned with the following questions: Which attitudes towards the future have Austrians developed in the pandemic? How does the experience of a pandemic relate to the existing discourses on social and ecological sustainability? The contribution by *Beate Klösch, Rebecca Wardana and Markus Hadler* investigates how the pandemic has impacted people's willingness to make sacrifices for the environment. In their research note, *Dimitri Prandner and Robert Moosbrugger* investigate how the general attitudes of Austrians towards the future have changed during the first phase of the pandemic.

In summary, the aim of this special issue is to discuss crucial aspects of the social and cultural implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. It consists of three main articles and four research notes. All articles and research notes are based on recent empirical research and they apply a quantitative, a qualitative or a mixed-methods approach. In the following, we will provide a brief overview on each contribution, in the order of their appearance in the special issue.

Paul Eisewicht, Nico Steinmann and Pauline Kortmann investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic is reflected in social media. For analyzing the discourse on social media, they focus on the platform *Imgur* which is one of the most popular online platforms for sharing memes. Memes typically consist of a picture and some short, catchy text with funny or ironic content. For this article, the authors have analyzed a sample of posts published on *Imgur* under #coronavirus. Applying a mixed-methods approach, the posts were analyzed according to (visual) Grounded Theory as well as descriptive statistics. The results show that during the pandemic, a large number of memes have changed from being funny to being critical and that this development was also echoed and reflected in new memes on the same platform. Memes also criticized the number of COVID-related memes. These, above all, deal with new daily routines which became established during the pandemic (for example online shopping) as well as with new practices related to the measures designed to reduce face-to-face contact. The authors conclude that during the pandemic, *Imgur* seemed to be used less for fun and communication than for expressing one's opinion.

In the second main article of this special issue, *Tilo Grenz and Philipp Knopp* are interested in the dis/continuity of routines at the outset of the pandemic. Based on a process-oriented ethnographic study of *Fridays for Future* in Vienna, the authors elaborate on the changes in the forms of protest that the pandemic gave rise to. In the case of *Fridays for Future*, protests had to move from the street to digital media. The investigation starts from questions about the conception and description of intentional change in organizational studies. It applies the perspective of an eventful sociology in order to understand how socio-material negotiations of routines can unfold to more far-reaching structural changes. The authors find two conditional moments through which structure is made reflexive: the normative-discursive and the material-bodily condition. This understanding of reflexivity is finally connected to the debate on the world risk society.

In the third main article, *Andrea Jesser, Anna-Lena Mädge, Carina Maier, Jana Hierzer, Sylvia Dörfler, Martha Haslinger, and Beate Schrank* are concerned with the impact of COVID-19 measures, such as social distancing, on psychosocial care services for children, adolescents, and families, which are traditionally reliant on face-to-face contact. Applying a longitudinal approach with three waves of data collection, they investigated how professionals in psychosocial institutions experience their work under the changed circumstances and which opportunities and risks they perceive for their work with clients. Drawing on the theoretical concepts of the “Arbeitskraftunternehmer” (Voß and Pongratz 1998) and vulnerability (Dahlvik and Reinprecht 2014), they found that despite difficult conditions, the professionals put in great efforts to maintain supportive services during the crisis. Since their clients needed even more assistance than before, the professionals were under constant pressure. The authors conclude that the professionals in psychosocial institutions had to apply individual strategies at their own expense due to the lack of institutional and political support.

In the first research note of this volume, *Nadia Steiber and Christina Siegert* analyze the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for the economic welfare of different types of families in Austria. Based on representative survey data from the AKCOVID study (Steiber 2021) and national population statistics they compare the employment status and income situation of couples and single parents with (and without) children before the start of the crisis in February 2020 with the situation in June 2020. Their descriptive results indicate that a large proportion of families were already affected by the economic consequences of the pandemic a few months after the onset of the Corona crisis. Pandemic-related unemployment and “short-time” work of parents led to substantial financial losses and rising numbers of families who found it difficult to get by with their current household income. In line with previous research on the economic effects of severe social and economic crises (e.g. Simona-Moussa and Ravazzini 2019) the authors found larger families (with three or more children) and single parents to be the hardest hit. The study thus confirms again that vulnerable families, i.e. families whose employability is complicated by their family constellation, are particularly affected by the negative economic consequences of the pandemic.

The research note of *Lukas Richter and Theresa Heidinger* deals with psycho-emotional consequences of the pandemic on the older generation. Using data from

surveys carried out in Lower Austria before and during the first period of the pandemic, the authors investigate the impact of the lockdown and the mandatory restriction of social contact on the feeling of loneliness among people over 60. Their analyses highlight that older people are by no means a homogeneous group: Already before the pandemic, the level of loneliness differed strongly between different categories of people, depending on the household-constellation (single vs. non-single households), the level of education, personal income, and the size and strength of one's social support network. The findings suggest that the pandemic had similar negative effects on the emotional well-being of the entire older generation. In the first phase of the pandemic, the feeling of loneliness increased in (almost) all groups, yet the existing differences (of the pre-pandemic period) were largely maintained.

The contribution by *Beate Klösch, Rebecca Wardana and Markus Hadler* is concerned with the question of whether or not the pandemic lowered public awareness regarding the climate crisis. Using survey data from the *Values in Crisis* study (Aschauer et al. 2021), collected in May 2020, they investigate the link between people's attitudes to environmental issues (e.g. climate change) and their willingness to make sacrifices for the environment (e.g., pay higher prices or higher taxes, or cut back on their standard of living in order to protect the environment). Their findings show that this link has remained strong in the pandemic. Moreover, worries related to the economic impact of the pandemic had additional effects on people's willingness to sacrifice for the environment. Those who were extremely worried about the implications of the crisis for their financial well-being were the least likely to express a willingness to make sacrifices for the environment. This is in line with previous research which has found that economic crises and high unemployment have negative impacts on people's willingness to contribute to the protection of the environment and climate change mitigation.

Finally, the research note by *Dimitri Prandner and Robert Moosbrugger* investigates expectations for the future among the Austrian population during the first phase of the pandemic (in 2020). Based on data from the *Austrian Corona Panel Project*, the authors find a strong difference between the future expectations for the country and their individual expectations for the future. The analysis takes up Anhut and Heitmeyer's (2000) perception of three states of crisis: structural, regulation, and cohesion. On this basis, the authors show that trust in institutions is a key driver for a more optimistic or pessimistic view. Further, future expectations are strongly influenced by the perception of societal inequalities as well as from engagement with politics.

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