The Continuity of the Social Sciences During COVID-19: Sociology and Interdisciplinarity in Pandemic Times

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Abstract
I argue that the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity for sociologists and other social scientists to focus their scholarship on this apparently new event, while applying theoretical and methodological traditions that were established during pre-pandemic times. I substantiate this argument by critically reviewing published sociological research on COVID-19, especially as it developed early on during the pandemic, in the light of the historical development and original ambitions of sociology and other social sciences. Evaluating these contributions, I make a case for the value of a collaborative notion of interdisciplinarity to analyze the multi-dimensional dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic from the viewpoint of various disciplines. On the basis of sociological work on celebrity culture during the pandemic, I argue that this task can be accomplished without resorting to all too readily made judgments concerning the unprecedented nature of the pandemic. Studying the multiple dimensions of the pandemic, each of the social sciences can usefully contribute to interdisciplinary research by relying on the proven perspectives of their respective disciplinary orientations and specialty areas.

KeywordsCelebrity · COVID-19 · Interdisciplinarity · Pandemic · Sociology

Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic is in many ways not only a medical, health-related reality but also a complex social event that sociologists and other social scientists are ideally equipped to study and that, because of the gravity of the situation, they must study. This statement will be uncontested among scholars, if not among the public at large, although there will be disagreements on its implications. Divergences of opinion on how to study the pandemic were readily revealed, especially early on during the spread of the coronavirus in the spring of 2020, when the first sociological works on the pandemic quickly began to appear. It was then that the original impetus for the idea of the present paper originated: to contemplate the role of sociology and the value of interdisciplinarity in the study of the pandemic. Working to construct a framework for the study of celebrity culture during COVID-19, I examined sociological and other social-science contributions from which inspirations might be gained. A tendency was thereby discovered for social scientists to make strong proclamations about the important of studying the pandemic from social-science viewpoints because of an “urgent need” for such work (Ward 2020: 726). I wondered why such explicit statements were made as, one can safely assume, no epidemiologist would have to make any explicit justification to study the spread of the coronavirus. Epidemiologists and other natural scientists, including interdisciplinary oriented scholars in social epidemiology, who study the pandemic can straightforwardly present their research to address questions relevant from their expertise. One has to wonder why the situation would be different for social scientists.

My examination will show that some of the early published writings by sociologists and other social scientists on COVID-19 were not so much an examination of the pandemic as an expression of the reactions to the spread of the virus. Such efforts typically emphasized the unprecedented nature of the pandemic and the need to develop and apply radically different and novel concepts and perspectives. However, the apparently exceptional nature of the pandemic alone does not necessarily mean that old concepts and methods are irrelevant. In what follows, I will critically investigate the social-science discourse surrounding the pandemic, especially with respect to the idea of interdisciplinarity.
I will argue that it would be very unfortunate if we as social scientists would assume that the pandemic, given the unusual nature of the event, has to be studied in ways that are radically different from those that were applied in earlier research. In the immediate days of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, such claims were at times made to advocate for a profound re-thinking of how social-scholarship should be conducted (Matthewman and Huppatz 2020; Pfaller 2020; Ward 2020). At times, such efforts involved a harshly dismissive attitude towards classical scholarship and its alleged irrelevance for contemporary work. In this respect, Raewyn Connell (2020) must be cited for lamenting early sociological reactions to the pandemic for their “conventionality,” particularly singling out those “pieces that urge sociologists to understand the COVID-19 epidemic by going back to the Great Classics, for heaven’s sake (I’ll not cite them, out of kindness)” (Connell 2020:746). To analyze the pandemic on the basis of the insights from the disciplines’ various specialty areas, Connell further declared, could only lead to “re-run conventional ideas” (ibid.). Against such an intellectually defeatist attitude, I maintain, the exact opposite strategy should be followed for our work to be valuable. As a multi-dimensional social reality, the COVID-19 pandemic can be usefully studied on the basis of the established areas of expertise which the various social sciences have developed over the course of their long histories. In the case of sociology, therefore, I advocate a position to work in line with acquired theoretical and methodological skill sets and, being distinctively sociological, to contribute meaningfully towards collaborative interdisciplinary work with other disciplines.

To make my argument, I will mostly focus on some of the earliest published contributions in my own discipline of sociology that have examined various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic from the viewpoint of various specialty areas. I examine work published shortly after the outbreak of the pandemic because these early publications will show most clearly what sociological work had to offer under novel and problematic conditions. Focusing on the possibility and quest for interdisciplinarity, my examination relies on the idea that, while it is commonly argued that interdisciplinarity is at its best based on multi-disciplinarity, less often recognized but at least as useful is the need for multi-disciplinarity to rely on disciplinarity as it is realized by the contributions of each of the various social (and other) sciences (Lyle 2017; O’Reilly 2009). I will therefore argue that social scientists need to build on the advances their respective disciplines have made, and should not be held captive by the immediacy of the pandemic or abandon their traditions in favor of new fields of inquiry. Interdisciplinarity is necessitated by the multi-dimensional nature of the pandemic and can be achieved meaningfully when it relies on the unique achievements of individual disciplines. Among the social sciences, the place of sociology can thereby be affirmed.

I develop my argument by first recalling the objectives of sociology in the context of the historical development of the social sciences. Special attention will go to the role of sociology, which from its very foundation was designed to respond to social change. I will next look at some of the research that has been conducted on the pandemic in sociology and closely related fields of inquiry. Illustrating the value of sociological work in continuity with the historical development of the discipline, I discuss my own research on the transformation of celebrity culture since the COVID-19 pandemic (Deflem 2022a, 2022b). I will highlight my research’s theoretical foundations to substantiate the argument about the value of interdisciplinarity. As I suggest that interdisciplinarity can only be usefully achieved on the basis of various disciplinary contributions, this paper’s analysis of sociological work on the pandemic is therefore not in tension with, but in support of, my arguments on the quest for interdisciplinarity.

Exemplifying the direction that social-science research should take, I will in the discussion section of this paper reflect back on the state and direction of the social sciences following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. I will defend the argument that the pandemic presents an opportunity rather than a challenge from the viewpoint of social-science scholarship. Sociology and the other social sciences can make good on their original promise in terms of the intellectual traditions that were born out of important processes of social change affecting social life. Applied to the COVID-19 pandemic, these traditions can therefore demonstrate what they have to offer because of, not despite, the unsettling nature of the event.

Social Change and the Birth of the Social Sciences

The objectives of contemporary sociology and other social sciences will inevitably connect with their historical origins. Especially during these times which we so easily label as unprecedented, examining the origin and evolution of our scholarly fields remains useful for articulating what we have to offer today. This historical excursion is not meant as a venture into the past, but as a history of the present that serves as a reminder of the essential ambitions of the social sciences embedded in their foundations. This brief and perhaps somewhat basic review is also necessitated by the fact that the history of sociology has recently at times been criticized in such fundamental ways that it involves calls to not only forget, but to obliterate, the past in view of a host of alleged shortcomings. Classical sociological scholarship rooted in the Enlightenment, most strikingly, is nowadays critiqued by a rather wide variety of camps, ranging from post-modern
approaches (Mirchandani 2005) to post-colonial (Go 2020) and anti-racist perspectives (Morris 2022). My position not only parts with, but actively opposes, such ill-fated attempts to distort and misrepresent the history of social thought.

With the scientific turn in the Enlightenment and the nineteenth century, various fields of social science emerged and were institutionalized in the academy, starting with history, continuing with economics, psychology, and anthropology, and ending with sociology (Collins 1994). The social sciences emerged not only via an internal process of knowledge formation but also under the influence of external societal developments, especially the momentous economic, political, and cultural changes that took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thus, what we see in the early history of sociology is the founding of a new discipline in the course of an institutionalized intellectual process that was born out of the need to study societies undergoing change (Collins 1994). This process is additionally complicated by the fact that sociology and the other social sciences have since globalized and diversified in multiple understandings in different parts of the world. It should further be noted that the very notion of the idea of the “social” historically changes as well (Scott 2005), as does the meaning of sociology. Whereas sociology was originally associated with August Comte (who introduced the neologism sociologie in response to Adolphe Quetelet’s empiricist perversion of Comte’s term “social physics”), it subsequently dispersed to a variety of broader understandings (Abbott 2001).

The main concepts of the classical sociological in regard to social change are well-known. Auguste Comte distinguished between the statics and the dynamics of sociology; Ferdinand Tönnies relied on the twin notions of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft; Emile Durkheim wrote of a transformation from mechanical to organic societies; and Max Weber analyzed societal change in terms of a process of rationalization. Despite their theoretical differences that would later inform the various schools in modern sociology, these perspectives shared a concern for the study of the whole of social life and social change. After World War II, the central themes of classical sociology continue to shape the discipline. In some theoretical schools, the centrality of change was studied in relation to basic societal needs that were defined in functional terms, while other perspectives focused on change in terms of conflict. Modern sociology shares with its classical roots a formal similarity in devoting attention to the tension between order and change.

With respect to interdisciplinarity, it is important to observe that the continued development of sociology following its initial institutionalization also brought about the formation of new fields of inquiry, separating themselves from sociology, followed by subsequent calls to reformulate the interrelationships among the existing and the newly developing areas. The formation of such thematically unified fields of study out of sociology, especially following the tumultuous 1960s, can be embraced or criticized (Horowitz 1993), but it is in any case an undeniable fact of academic knowledge production, alongside of which emerged the ideal of interdisciplinarity. This challenge is not unique to modern times but was already discussed at the dawn of sociology. Emile Durkheim (1893), specifically, wrote of the dangers associated with an anomic division of labor in the sciences in the form of disciplinary and sub-disciplinary hyper-specialization. Durkheim therefore advocated for the unifying role of sociology as one among a multitude of social and human sciences (especially anthropology) with which cooperation should be pursued.

In sum, what emerges from this brief reading of the birth of social science is the idea of social change as an essential inspiration for sociology and related social sciences. Particular to sociology is the notion that, despite whatever specialization is adopted within the broader discipline, a primacy of social life as a whole remains part of any framework of inquiry. As Jürgen Habermas (1981) argues, what is unique to sociology is that it has retained a focus on society and its transformation as a whole. Furthermore, as a result of the development of sociology and the other (plural) social sciences, an understanding emerges of social science (in the singular) as a unified though also contested field. A level of interdisciplinary collaboration is accordingly called for among the various social sciences, mirroring similar conditions in connection with sub-disciplinary specialty areas. The fact that interdisciplinarity is explicitly advocated among so many scholars shows that collaboration is not readily attained but remains an important ideal. How this ideal can be properly achieved is a matter of some controversy, as the case of scholarly work on the COVID-19 pandemic will show.

### Sociology and COVID-19

Published research in the social sciences concerned with the COVID-19 pandemic can be reviewed both in terms of its disciplinary contribution and its relevance for the idea of interdisciplinarity. As any conception of interdisciplinarity always relies on the notion of individual disciplines (either to be integrated in collaboration or overcome into a new field), I will restrict my observations to sociological research on COVID-19. Not trying to be exhaustive of all sociological work on COVID-19, I review several exemplary instances of the sociological research that was conducted in response to the pandemic early on in its development. To find relevant works published by February 2021, I relied on the electronic database Sociological Abstracts using the search terms “COVID” (in abstract) and “sociological” (anywhere). In this way, 32 articles discussing various sociological aspects of the COVID-
19 pandemic were retained for analysis. As a result of selecting only articles published in established sociology journals and with a broad perspective on the pandemic as a whole (rather than an extremely specialized focus on one place), a slant towards American publications is acknowledged. This limitation is particularly to be noted in view of the global nature of the pandemic.

Turning to the findings of this analysis, it can generally be noted that many social scientists have indeed studied various sociological aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The publication of a relatively large number of contributions very soon after the pandemic began in the spring of 2020 and was in part facilitated by enterprising journal editors, as many papers appeared in special issues devoted to the pandemic. An immediately noticeable finding among these writings is that a wide variety of angles are represented in sociological COVID-19 research, showing that sociology as a whole has clearly acknowledged the multi-dimensional nature of the pandemic. More specifically, COVID-19-related research in sociology represents the following specialty areas: healthcare; politics; economy; protest and social movements; crime, law, and social control; race, gender, and other inequalities; and various institutions (such as family, religion, education, sports). Other pandemic-related articles are written from a specific specialty area but offer reflective interpretations on the role of teaching and sociological theory. Most of the articles were written by scholars who already had an established expertise from which angle they now examine certain components of the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating an important continuity of research.

As to the themes of the sociology on COVID-19, it will cause no surprise that medical sociology is among the best represented areas of investigation (Chen 2020; Denice et al. 2020; Gerwin 2020; Monaghan 2020; Van Bavel et al. 2020). Whatever else the pandemic is, it is a condition that, at its core, revolves around an infectious disease caused by a virus. It is both logical and wise that sociologists with an expertise in health and illness, the organization of healthcare, and other topics in medical sociology have duly been paying attention to a problem they are ideally suited to examine.

Questions of politics and economy, the two arguably most long-standing topics in sociology, are also discussed in COVID-19 research, along with issues concerning protest and social movements. However, published works on the pandemic focusing on politics (Kavanagh and Singh 2020) and economy (Ilse and Larsen 2020) are not nearly as numerous as are those on health nor are those concerning protest and social movements (Gerbaudo 2020; Pinckney and Rivers 2020). This disparity will in part be due to the nature of the pandemic, but might also be a result of the fact that sociological questions of politics and economy run through many of the contributions written from the viewpoint of other specialty areas. In the case of politics, by example, discussions on healthcare will examine the position of health professionals in relation to the powers exercised by government authorities. Economic concerns, likewise, affect the pandemic as a whole, especially in view of medically substantiate lockdown orders and in relation to various class-based and wealth-related inequalities.

A next group of sociological COVID-19 contributions concentrates on problems of crime and deviance, a predictable aspect of the pandemic as the social order has been profoundly disrupted, leading to both constraints and opportunities for rule-violating behavior (Boman and Gallupe 2020; Fitzpatrick, Harris, and Drawve 2020; Mohler et al. 2020; Stickle and Felson 2020). Although intrinsically connected to crime research as well, sociological work studying various aspects of social control (especially policing) has also taken advantage of the concerns that have over the course of the pandemic been voiced about matters of criminal justice, especially with respect to racial disparities (Abraham, Brown, and Thomas 2020; Jennings and Perez 2020; Jones 2020). Inequities in policing received wide public attention during, and in no small part because of the unsettling conditions created by, the COVID-19 pandemic, especially following the video-taped police killing of George Floyd on May 25, 2020.

The George Floyd incident and its aftermath, especially the Black Lives Matter protests, instigated a more decisive turn in sociology towards the examination of racial inequities, even though race was of course already an important theme in sociology. Much attention in race studies of COVID-19 goes to disparities and inequities (Li and Shakib 2021), with special attention for Black Americans (Elbaum 2020) and, in view of reactions to the SARS-CoV-2 virus originating in China, various Asian groups (Gover, Harper, and Langton 2020). The focus on inequality in race scholarship is shared with sociologists of gender, again a popular sociological concern, which over the course of the pandemic received renewed appeal (Landivar et al. 2020). The impact of COVID-19 has also been studied with respect to other disadvantaged categories, such as people with disabilities (Dobransky and Hargittai 2020).

Apart from professionally oriented essays commenting on pandemic-related matters of teaching (Gillis and Krull 2020), social theory (Collins 2020; van Krieken 2020; Walby 2021), and the general state of sociology (Matthewman and Huppatz 2020; Pfaller 2020; Ward 2020), a final category of sociological work on COVID-19 in the papers retrieved in Sociological Abstracts involves the impact of the pandemic on various social institutions. These include studies of pandemic-related issues concerning family (Quah 2020), religion (Baker et al. 2020), education (Grether, Macdonald, and Higgins 2020), and sport (Rowe 2020; Swanson and Smith 2020). What is most striking about these contributions is that they respond to the disturbance of the pandemic by examining institutions that have a high degree of permanence in
society. As such, these studies examine social change in terms of its effects on the relatively stable functions institutions seek to fulfill.

Some areas of sociological scholarship have not as yet been well represented in contemporary work on COVID-19, despite the fact that they were greatly affected by the pandemic and are also widely recognized by the public at large. Among these, mention can be made of popular culture, tourism, leisure, and entertainment as having been almost completely ignored by sociologists. It is striking that the historical neglect in sociology in the study of popular culture has not been remedied during these times when the entertainment industry and cultural sector have never been hit harder, and felt to be more relevant, than ever before. In my sociological research on the transformation of celebrity during the COVID-19 pandemic, I have sought to redress this oversight.

**The Case of Celebrity Culture During COVID-19**

In my research on the dynamics of celebrity culture during and since the COVID-19 pandemic (Deflem 2022a, 2022b), I seek to fulfill sociological objectives in line with the discipline’s intellectual history by contributing to an understanding of the pandemic from the established and proven viewpoints of one of the discipline’s specialty areas. To be sure, the sociology of fame and celebrity is, unlike many of the areas discussed above, not a specialty with a long history of development but has, within the broader area of the sociology of popular culture, been established only relatively recently (Deflem 2017; Ferris 2007; van Krieken 2019). Nonetheless, the specialty area can and does fit properly within the framework of sociology, especially in theoretical respects. I here discuss my ongoing work as an example of what sociology can accomplish in continuity with its (disciplinary) objectives in order to contribute to the (interdisciplinary) study of the pandemic as a complex social phenomenon.

My sociological research on celebrity culture during COVID-19 is oriented at unraveling the patterns and dynamics of celebrity conduct in relation to the pandemic, ranging from relatively passive or reactive involvements, such as celebrity infections and adaptations in the entertainment industry, to more deliberate interventions in the form of celebrity activism (Deflem 2022a, 2022b). From a sociological viewpoint, fame and celebrity are thereby studied as cultural matters related to a particular kind of status and the privileges associated therewith. This perspective is conceptually rooted in Max Weber’s (1922) notion of status as a form of cultural prestige. Although Weber did not envision the rise of celebrity culture in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it is his distinctly sociological understanding that informs my work from a conceptual viewpoint as well as in terms of its focus on the characteristics of fame and celebrity accordingly. Hence, defined as being well-known and being known or celebrated for being well-known, respectively, fame and celebrity are perceived to come with special privileges in terms of wealth and influence.

Extending the sociological lens from Weber to the modern era, fame and celebrity can theoretically be conceived as cultural matters that are meaningful in a particular social context that is not naturally given but socially constructed (Berger and Luckman 1967). As a component of culture, celebrity should not be reduced to its assumed political and economic role, a reductionism that has plagued much of the work in the area (Deflem 2017). Reductionist perspectives have, for a long time, indeed marked the study of celebrity (and of popular culture, in general). Especially influential in this respect were the work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1944) on the culture industry and the writings by C. Wright Mills (1956) on celebrity culture as a form of diversion created by the economic and political elites. While these perspectives were instrumental to put the sociological study of popular culture and celebrity on the sociological agenda, their pessimistic and dismissive attitudes did much to hinder a proper scholarly understanding based on questions rather than answers. As a cultural issue, celebrity can and should be studied in its own right without any assumed preconceptions. From a non-reductionist cultural perspective, fame and celebrity can empirically be studied in relational terms that pertain to an interaction between the famous person or celebrity, on the one hand, and the audience, on the other (Deflem 2017). The role of the media establishing the direction and strength of this relationship is essential and, in today’s age, strongly influenced by the popularity of social media on the internet.

No special argument is needed to accept Talcott Parsons’ (1937) pragmatic understanding of sociological theory in terms of its usefulness for social research. As such, a sociological understanding of celebrity based on a Weberian perspective will ultimately have to prove itself by means of an empirical examination of relevant patterns and dynamics. Applied to a study of the transformations of celebrity during and since the COVID-19 pandemic, my research accordingly focuses on relevant actors, media, and actions from the viewpoint of their functions and consequences. The conceptual contours of this effort again further demonstrate the continuity of sociology in the execution of this project (Deflem 2022a, 2022b).

Functions involve the measurable contributions of celebrity conduct, both manifestly and latently, towards the maintenance of the social order. Separately examined are the (objective) consequences of celebrity conduct, irrespective of functionality, and the stated (subjective) motives professed by the celebrities and their (inter-subjective) reception among...
the work of Robert K. Merton (1968). Paralleling what was said above about research on the behavior of various institutions during COVID-19, I understand this interplay between social change and stability in terms that go back to, and are explicitly rooted in, the foundational works of sociology. Especially important to recognize hereby is the need for a social science defined in terms of social change, on the one hand, and the formation of a complex social order that, despite trends of individualism, is essentially of a social kind, on the other. I argue that this dual focus, so sharply articulated by the classics, must remain a central concern to sociology today.

In terms of research findings, as I have shown at greater length elsewhere on the basis of a variety of empirical indicators (Deflem, 2022a), celebrity conduct has generally increased sharply over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the world of online communications where celebrities have been especially busy being celebrities. In the current age, the continued expansion of celebrity culture might be a somewhat banal observation to make were it not for the fact that the pandemic caused much of the entertainment world to be shut down. However, the void that was created in the entertainment industry as a result of policies and reactions to the pandemic (stay home, social distancing) created pressures and opportunities for many a celebrity to find alternative outlets of expression and, demonstrating the relational nature of celebrity, also be duly responded to and reported on accordingly, especially via social media.

Besides a quantitative rise in celebrity conduct, the pandemic also brought about a qualitative shift towards celebrity activism (Deflem, 2022b). In the early months of the pandemic during the spring of 2020, such celebrity activism particularly concerned matters intimately related to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as providing aid for healthcare professionals and promoting safe practices among the public at large. But, testifying to the multi-dimensional nature of the pandemic as a broader cultural phenomenon, celebrity activism during COVID-19 has also extended to other issues that emerged during the pandemic, especially matters of racial justice, gender inequality, and the 2020 US presidential election (Deflem 2022a, 2022b). By the time of this writing in the summer of 2022, a considerable cooling down of celebrity activism has taken place, mainly because of a return of celebrities to their usual ways of entertainment following the availability of vaccines and the general, albeit it still precarious, re-opening of society. In which direction celebrity culture will evolve in the years to come remains to be seen, but any reports of the death of the celebrity are surely greatly exaggerated.

Pandemic Scholarship and the Social-Science Imagination

It is gratifying to observe that sociologists have been studying a wide variety of issues in the COVID-19 pandemic and that they have conducted this research from the proven viewpoints of their respective specialty interests. Yet, whether they (and other social scientists) will continue to do so and further develop their efforts, and not merely treat the pandemic as a momentary fad, remains to be seen. Judging from the number of publications mentioned in the Sociological Abstracts database, sociological work on the pandemic has increased over the course of its first year and has also continued since then. By the time of this writing in July 2022, more than 400 sources were found in the Sociological Abstracts database on the basis of the search terms mentioned above (“COVID” in abstract and “sociological” anywhere). Yet, longer-term trends cannot yet be predicted, and some caution must remain as other moments of great social disturbance in the past have also not always instigated consistent sociological research efforts. Most striking in recent times, for example, has been the relative sociological silence on terrorism and counter-terrorism following the events of September 11, 2001, a momentous disturbance that happened now more than two decades ago but many implications of which are still with us today.

Whatever the reasons that are invoked for the sociological retreat from the study of momentous crises, a return to normal after periods of dramatic societial upheaval will never be a return to the same normal that existed before. Studying the pandemic, social scientists should therefore seek to avoid what Robert van Krieken (2020: 714) has aptly called an overly “present-focused” approach, although they should also not abandon a topic of study because of the immediacy of its nature. For such reasons, many a social issue has not been sufficiently studied precisely because and when it occupies the minds of too many members of society at large. This condition has all too often applied to the study of extremely impactful events (such as war and terrorism) and societal concerns that are routinely present in the everyday (including celebrity culture and fame). Resonance and popularity of a theme on a wide societal level cannot be the sole justification for a social-science investigation, but neither should it be an impediment.

Notwithstanding the undeniable merit of sociological research on COVID-19, three weaknesses can be observed. First, sociologists have tended to engage more in reflective commentaries on certain problematic aspects of the pandemic, rather than conducting empirical examinations of the conditions and directions thereof. On popular social-media sites such as Twitter, for example, social scientists routinely make proclamations about pandemic-related
issues, especially matters of policy. Although these musings come from professionally employed sociologists, they are not based on research. Furthermore, several published social-science writings on the pandemic exist as commentaries in short essay-form on blogs and websites rather than as full-fledged research articles (e.g., Zevallos 2020). By February 2021, just under a year into the pandemic, a Google search for the keywords “COVID” and “sociology” produced over 31 million results, of which more than 26,000 were Twitter posts. More than a year later, at the time of this writing in July 2022, those numbers had increased to 60 million finds on Google, including over 190,000 tweets. Such commentaries might be useful as preliminary reflections and preparatory endeavors from which research can eventually be developed. Yet, they cannot take the place of theoretically grounded empirical work, nor should they substitute the value of an analytical social-science question with a normatively driven answer based a particular notion of justice.

The uneveness in the value of sociological contributions on the COVID-19 pandemic is also apparent in the study of celebrity. Although more research may currently be in progress, published academic writings concerning the celebrity dimensions of the pandemic at present remain scant. Among the now available published studies on celebrity and the pandemic, some are but brief interpretive essays (Larabee 2020; Leppert 2020), while empirical research pieces have mostly studied, in instrumental terms, the role celebrities play in communicating information and misinformation about the COVID-19 virus as a disease (Cohen 2020; Mututwa and Matsilele 2020; Myrick & Willoughby 2021). Other studies examine celebrity culture as part of broader research projects on the role of (mis)information concerning the virus (Luengo and Garcia-Marin 2020; Pulido et al. 2020). Along with my own published writings from the sociology of celebrity (Deflem 2022a, 2022b), the thematic affinity among these works offer interesting, but yet to be explored, opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration.

Because my analysis of publications in the sociology of COVID-19 was restricted to articles found in the Sociological Abstracts database, works of an especially collaborative nature, specifically edited volumes, were not included. Judging from a broader consultation of the literature, the pandemic has been addressed in several multi-author anthologies, such as on social problems (Muschert et al. 2020) and a variety of pandemic-related issues across national settings (Lupton and Willis 2021). Several special issues of journals, edited volumes, and books on the pandemic with sociological and social-science interest have also been published. From the viewpoint of the search for interdisciplinarity, it is interesting to note that authored monographs tend to be framed as area studies, and on specific topics, such as surveillance (Lyon 2022) and pandemic policy (Feierstein 2023). Interdisciplinary efforts typically come in the form of edited volumes, especially those that address the idea and ideal of interdisciplinarity in view of the pandemic, with participating authors coming from multiple disciplines and areas (Ferreira and Serpa 2022; International Journal of Sociology 2022). The prevalence of interdisciplinary work on the pandemic in this form indicates the value of interdisciplinarity as collaboration.

As a second shortcoming, several of the earliest writings in the sociology on COVID-19, no matter their theoretical or empirical strengths, are introduced in terms that betray an assumed subservient position of the social sciences in the broader constellation of scientific research concerning the pandemic. Rather than framing the multi-dimensional nature of the pandemic in terms that enable sociology to become a valued partner in interdisciplinary research (Lyle 2017), such a position might, however inadvertently, lead to a marginalization of the discipline. It is of course true, as Alexander Chen (2020) writes, that it is “necessary to challenge the tacit assumption that the pandemic is strictly a public health issue that is primarily reserved for the technocratic expertise of health professionals and officials” (p. 453). But it is also telling that a sociologist feels the need to write this statement when introducing a piece of research on a matter as obviously recognized to be as problematic as COVID-19. While the social construction of science, including the differential reception of the social and natural sciences, is itself a matter of sociological interest, a defensive positioning of pandemic-related research in sociology and other social sciences is not necessary. Adopting such a position might only reinforce tendencies about the relative value of the social sciences, especially vis-à-vis the natural sciences, with which we readily disagree.

Relatedly, sociological research on the COVID-19 pandemic is sometimes presented (however unintentionally) in a manner that makes its contributions sound too trivial to be deserving of inquiry, when these contributions actually concern serious issues for analysis. Such a presentation is especially problematic when proclamations are made about various pandemic-related disparities in health and healthcare based on race, gender, class, and other dividing lines. “When an unpredicted catastrophe like this suddenly hits,” we then read, “the poor and the disadvantaged are still the bodies of our society suffering more” (Li and Shakib 2021). The usefulness of such a statement can be questioned, not because it would be false, but because it is, in the manner in which it is stated, tautological about poverty and inequality. Such proclamations are also not expedient when made at the beginning of any social-science study because they already assume what has yet to be systematically examined. As a result of the drift towards sociological thinking based on preconceptions concerning—rather than critical analysis of—popular notions of justice (Deflem
2013), scholarship then reflects what it is meant to study. The immediate and overwhelming emphasis in the sociology of COVID-19 towards inequality and disparities along racial, gender, and other lines is at times, though it does not have to be, an indication of an inability to detach oneself from the immediacy of the situation and adopt a second-order perspective of looking not from within but at the pandemic.

A third problem in sociological work on the COVID-19 pandemic is that it tends to be formulated and justified in instrumental terms as part of the ongoing relief efforts against the impact of the virus. Several of the relevant research efforts by social scientists argue for the analysis of social dimensions of the pandemic in terms that accord primacy to the pandemic as a medical issue and that, accordingly, subjugate social-science scholarship to the role it can play in halting the spread of the virus or mitigating its impact. Positioning itself as practically useful to find a solution to a medical issue, social scientists then proclaim that their research contributes to an “effective response” to a “massive global health crisis” (Van Bavel et al. 2020) or “optimize[s] our response strategy” (Adams, Light, and Theiss 2020). While such work can surely be valuable, the history of the social sciences has precisely been to turn away from knowledge designed for practical purposes towards the development of independent knowledge systems. Scientific knowledge can be useful, of course, but it must also, and always, find its ultimate justification in the scholarly objectives and guiding principles of truth, falsification, theoretical grounding, and methodological rigor.

The instrumentalization of knowledge in sociological COVID-19 research is all the more remarkable because sociologists, especially in medical sociology, have often learned from their work on the social aspects of infectious diseases (dating back to at least the spread of HIV) that many aspects of health and healthcare are simply beyond the scope of medical expertise (Dingwall, Hoffman, and Staniland 2013). In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, such research has provided valuable insights on implications of social-distancing guidelines on people’s sense of community and well-being (Vaterlaus, Spruance, and Patten, 2021). The multi-dimensionality of COVID-19 also includes components that have little or no bearing on the control of the virus, yet that present themselves nonetheless as real and consequential. Specifically, as Sandra Pfister (2021) argues, “the symbolic dimension of how the Corona pandemic becomes social reality” is a matter squarely within the province of the social sciences. Efforts to develop interdisciplinary work on COVID-19 therefore have to take the diversity of the objectives, not only the findings of research, of the various social and other sciences into account.

The Quest for Interdisciplinarity

Sociologists and other social scientists have studied various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic relying on the rich analytical tools they had constructed over the course of the long history of their respective disciplines. The development of the social sciences and their gradual institutionalization were brought about by momentous changes affecting social life. In this sense, the late nineteenth century remains a golden age and can serve as a continued inspiration for the social sciences today, not because of any specific methodology—others have argued in favor of modern-day techniques of research (Buyalskaya, Gallo, and Camerer 2021)—but because of the questions that were then introduced and that remain important today.

Social-science research has faced problems as a direct result of certain conditions of the pandemic, especially in terms of having access to the usual avenues for data collection. Yet, adjustments to the special conditions of the pandemic can today also benefit from opportunities to overcome any such obstacles, especially by virtual means. Precisely in order to examine the impact of the pandemic on the social order, the fundamentals of sociology and the social sciences can and should remain in place. Those who have recently argued to rethink sociology because of the pandemic, for instance in terms of risk (Ward 2020), abjection (Pflaue 2020), and rupture (Matthewman and Huppert 2020), appear to be caught by the immediacy of the pandemic itself, the fears and anxieties of which they manifest rather than analyze. And those who have explicitly lamented and even ridiculed the supposed “conventionality” of sociology during and since the pandemic (Connell 2020) in my opinion overlook the continuity of change itself over the course of social life—and the recognition of change since the very founding of the social sciences. The failure to understand the enduring power of the imagination of social science would necessitate not only a “new” sociology to comprehend the pandemic but also another “new” sociology once the pandemic will have passed!

Recently published sociological and other social-science contributions on the COVID-19 pandemic provide much food for thought that can serve as an inspiration for continued work. In terms of the cross-disciplinary appeal of pandemic-related social-science work, interdisciplinarity can take advantage of the unique contributions of each of the participating sciences and perspectives—an attitude that has historically proven beneficial for the development of interdisciplinarity (Jacobs and Frickel 2009). Interdisciplinarity cannot just be a fashionable idea that once was popular, especially in the 1990s (Nissani, 1997), but must be actively aspired to when a situation as multi-dimensional as the COVID-19 pandemic presents itself. Taking the history of the social sciences as a guide, it can be argued that such attempts to build cross-specialty collaboration can be achieved by considering that an important constant
of social life is social change. The social sciences can and should accordingly operate in continuity with their intellectual strengths and academic objectives, especially under conditions of an exceptional circumstance such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The notion of interdisciplinarity I defend rests on the idea that various disciplines need to form collaborations in the study of certain themes to be effective (Jacobs and Frickel 2009; O’Reilly 2009). Arguing against the notions of trans-disciplinarity and post-disciplinarity which, in various ways, involve an idea of un-disciplining (Graff 2015), I maintain that such collaborations can only be fruitful if each of the participating disciplines has contributions to offer in terms of the study of topics of inquiry that are complex and multi-dimensional. The manner in which interdisciplinarity in higher education has been constructed does not always follow this model. In the USA, specifically, efforts to promote interdisciplinarity at universities have been institutionalized in area programs (Jacobs and Frickel 2009). The scholars working in these programs, however, remain dependent on appointments in disciplinary departments for purposes of tenure and review. Such interdisciplinary programs are at times transformed into full-fledged departments, typically as the result of administrative decisions that are made without regard for scholarly objectives. Any potential loss of identity and lack of intellectual grounding are disregarded in view of practical considerations related to student enrollment and research funding (Horowitz 1993).

Even in principle, interdisciplinarity as collaboration is not easily achieved as it requires horizontal relationships among the various participants, a condition that is not readily met. Sociologist George Steinmetz (2017) has on the basis of historical research shown that cross-disciplinary interactions are indeed most successful when they involve disciplines of equal power and standing, with their various scholars motivated to go beyond their respective disciplinary contours. In the case of collaboration between the social and natural sciences (an obviously useful objective in the case of research on pandemics), medical sociologist Kate Lyle (2017), who herself works in an interdisciplinary setting related to healthcare, has observed power differentials between sociology and medical science. She noticed that sociology was thereby typically marginalized for lack of relevance in terms of a narrowly framed (medical) research objective. Such difficulties show that different disciplines not only approach a topic from different viewpoints but define it differently as well. The value of interdisciplinary research for policy will as a result be limited. In the case of COVID-19, even scholars working in social medicine (in which the field of social epidemiology is situated) have had to observe that pandemic policies have failed to adequately address relevant social dimensions (Trout and Kleinman 2020).

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not even clear to all involved in research that the pandemic is multi-dimensional in nature and that a mediation process is needed to create integrated systems of knowledge upon which adequate policies can be based (Mol and Hardon 2020). Ideally, indeed, interdisciplinarity in the form of collaboration among various disciplines would create an integrated research field, which a mere borrowing from other disciplines within each singular discipline cannot accomplish. In order to achieve interdisciplinarity in this sense, sociology and the other social sciences also should not redefine their objectives to serve cooperation with scientific efforts of a different kind. Any revision, let alone discarding of established traditions, would only lead to a lack of clarity over objectives that need to be met and communicated to others in order to show the relevance of each participating contribution. Even and especially after COVID-19, the tradition of sociology and other social sciences can be maintained; for example, in terms of a sociology of celebrity on the basis of the contributions of the likes of Max Weber and Robert K. Merton (Deflem 2022a). Other such examples relying on the continuity of social thought include work on the pandemic on the basis of Norbert Elias’ theory of civilization (van Krieken 2020), Erving Goffman’s concepts of havoc and containment (Hawk and Garner 2021), and Karl Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge (Furedi 2020).

The condition of intellectual continuity is not always met, particularly when research is presented narrowly in terms of its potential value for healthcare measures. The instrumentalization of the social sciences during COVID-19 confirms the primacy of the medical gaze, shaping interdisciplinary work in the name of “scientific mobilization” to search for a cure for the virus or, at least, relief from its negative effects (Adams, Light, and Theis 2020: 39). Used instrumentally in service of outside goals, the social sciences then betray their historical promise. Such unnecessary subservience is also troublesome when it is clear that the medically based healthcare response to the pandemic has been anything but perfect. Although important medical advances have obviously been made (most clearly in the form of vaccines), healthcare professionals have during the COVID-19 pandemic too readily and unjustifiably been singing their own praises (Horton 2021), when they have also made many mistakes and have been unable or unwilling to recognize errors in a timely and candid fashion.

Whereas the idea that interdisciplinarity has to be achieved with proper reliance on the various (multi-)disciplinary foundations is far from revolutionary (O’Reilly 2009), its realization is not easily accomplished, for a number of intellectual and institutional reasons. Interdisciplinarity has indeed been
found to be achieved in only very limited (and deficient) ways in some areas of research (Mitra, Palmer, and Vuong 2020) and is generally said to be underdeveloped, even in those fields where it has been claimed to have been achieved (Silvast and Foulds 2022). Besides the power differentials that exist in the hierarchy of the sciences (Steinmetz 2017), interdisciplinarity is also hampered because of certain developments within sociology and other disciplines. Specifically, certain areas of sociology and other social sciences have in recent times splintered off into new fields of inquiry that lack any meaningful connection to their original disciplinary origins (Horowitz 1993). Interdisciplinarity is then often claimed as an attribute of these newly established fields on the basis of an alleged solidarity among the community of scholars inside the field (Merton 1972), yet without having a clear unifying theoretical or methodological orientation. Such interdisciplinarity as a solidarity claim, in other words, can function as a cover for non-disciplinarity.

In the case of sociology, balkanization has been said to have brought about a loss of identity and a subversion of the discipline (Holmwood 2010), if not its outright decomposition and disappearance (Horowitz 1993). With respect to the study of fame and celebrity, recent years have seen the formation of a new area of so-called Celebrity Studies, which is held together by a thematic interest, but that is otherwise still in the process of developing its (multi-)disciplinary contours. Other examples of such fragmented fields abound (“Animal Studies,” “Whiteness Studies,” “Queer Studies,” “Internet Studies,” and “Metal Music Studies,” to name but a few.) The formation of a field of “Pandemic Studies” or “Covidology” cannot yet be observed, but developments such as the appearance of a Routledge book series called “The COVID-19 Pandemic Series,” which to date has already published over a dozen publications (e.g., Feierstein 2023), show that it is not outside the realm of possibilities. Such a newly formed pandemic specialty would also need to develop an epistemological foundation to be meaningful as a field of scholarship, if that is at all possible.

Interdisciplinarity cannot be achieved by merely bringing together scholars from different fields and disciplines; it must result from a focused integration of various discipline-based insights around a unifying multidimensional theme. The essential components of this work are available and ready to be employed, as several scholars in sociology and other social sciences have already shown. Sociologists, by virtue of their long-standing specialty in social change and the structure of social field as a whole, are ideally equipped to study the COVID-19 pandemic in its manifold dimensions. Focusing on the interplay between change and stability, their efforts can take place in continuity with prior accomplishments, precisely to allow for their applications to be sensitive to contemporary conditions—not as manifestations of, but as reflections on, the pandemic.

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Declarations

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