

COVID and Society

Evidence Synthesis

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Health and wellbeing

1. General Health inequalities due to socioeconomic factors and ethnicity (at national and society level, near future and long term)

Stress and anxiety are factors proven to negatively impact people's overall physiological health, the strength of the immune system and life expectancy (McEwen and Stellar 1993). These effects are exacerbated in people subject to job loss, employment uncertainty or precariousness, those who pay rent or have to repay mortgages and also those subject to both covert and overt racism (Duru et. Al 2012; Wilson Gilmore 2006). These factors already explain partially why people from Black, Asian and other Minority Backgrounds were unequally affected during the 2020 pandemic in the UK. These demographics are more likely to be involved in manual works, unable to work from home, and require to use transports to commute. In the near future and on the long term, besides existing health inequalities, the ongoing privatisation of the NHS will increase these inequalities: only those with enough disposable income will be able to bypass long NHS queues and access healthcare through private companies. Furlough schemes and mortgage holidays didn't prevent over 20,000 households from becoming homeless in the UK¹ hence stronger safety nets are needed.

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2. Mental health inequalities and trust matters in the social media era (at international and society level, near future and long term)

The increased reliance on online content amongst younger generations puts people at risk of mental health disorders, especially if there is no critical filtering out of harmful content. Pre-pandemic, in Britain, 18% of 16-25-year-olds disagree with the statement that 'life is really worth living'². Although social media fulfil the need for connection, overall, image-focused platforms like Facebook or Instagram, because of their consumptive design and their limitation for creating meaningful

engagement, are estimated to undermine wellbeing by making people feel 'sad and lonely' (Kross, Verduyn, Demiralp and others 2013), the worse being Instagram (Royal Society for Public Health 2017). Social Media offer an addictive (Turel, He, Xue, Xiao and Bechara 2014) environment of comparison and therefore competition (Chou and Edge 2012). Users are engaged in self-promotional behaviours which produce an envy spiral (Krasnova, Wenninger, Widjaja and 2013) not only contributing to feelings of loneliness but also resentment (Burke, Kraut and Marlow 2011), jealousy and surveillance behaviour (Anderson, Fagan, Woodnutt, and Chamorro-Premuzic 2012). Young uncritical consumers create distorted 'edited selves' based on dominant beauty and success standard (Anschutz et. al. 2011; Boothroyd et. al. 2020). Recent research specifically points at the development of faith- and culture- sensitive counselling methods and the training of psychotherapist to bridge the existing gap regarding the access to mental health care services by people from Black, Asian and Minority backgrounds (Mir et. al 2019).

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Communities, culture and belonging

Thick trust versus thin trust and impacts on social cohesion and governance (at international but also national and local, at society level, near future and long term)

Modern lifestyle and reliance on technology has already atomised communities into individuals (Bauman 2000). People are more autonomous yet more lonely (Putnam 2001). As a consequence, 21st century politics rely more heavily than ever on 'secondary' or 'thin trust' (synonymous to branding, opposed to 'thick' or 'primary' trust) (Sztompka 1999; Williams 1988; Newton 1999). In other words, people trust people they have never met, never spoke to and only know superficially. World leaders, just like brands, rely on para-social interactions (Horton and Wohl 1956). As a result, and as seen since the mid-2010s, those who get elected are more likely to be those who are able to invest more resources into campaigning, marketing or keep media outlets under control.

Despite recent global movements for social justice, on a micro-sociological level, societies are increasingly polarised in terms of race, class and gender dynamics. The superficial trust prevalent in modern democracies doesn't give people the opportunity to meet and interact other than in transactional ways (people are more likely to meet regularly a supermarket cashier than their neighbour): modern societies rarely offer 'thirdspaces' (Soja 1996) where informal encounters can happen with people from different social, economic or cultural backgrounds.

There is a growing body of research which has emerged in France arguing for the study of non-utilitarian dynamics, the importance of non-numerable elements such as gift, love and emotions in the social sciences, and spaces for conviviality (Caillé 2009 and 2011). Caillé's work has given birth to the global Convivialist Movement and the Convivialist Manifesto signed by 276 social sciences, humanities and arts (SHAPE) academics worldwide³. All the works mentioned above all stress that only strong bonds of trust developed in informal, non-transactional ways can pave the way for a sustainable, participative democracy governed by consensus and consultation rather than in branding and polarisation. These strong bonds of trust and consultative forms of democracy already work successfully in faith-based grassroots charities (Barylo 201; Day 2016; Dinham 2012). I demonstrate in my work (Barylo 2017) how this thick trust is a key ingredient in conflict resolution, social cohesion and the prevention of violent behaviour.

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Knowledge, skills and employment

1. Seeking jobs: the importance of trust and face-to-face interactions (at international and society level, near future and long term)

The pandemic has made it increasingly difficult for jobseekers to secure jobs and for employers to rightly assess candidates. Jobseekers in pre-pandemic modern societies were already accustomed with an environment of uncertainties where jobs, houses and partners could be lost, found and changed at a pace never seen before – a phenomenon called ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman 2000). While the society becomes increasingly volatile (Beck 1992), businesses try to limit risk. Pre-pandemic, some companies were already hiring candidates through 5- or 6-stage online interviews or would decide to dedicate online recruitment techniques only for low-risk, entry level or precarious positions. Consequently, rather than a mindset of collaboration, online workspaces are moving towards a control-mindset: businesses have already been trying to implement intrusive worker surveillance measures, raising concerns about privacy⁴. French sociologist Gilles Deleuze (1992), already in the 1990s, observes how modern societies are increasingly geared towards the control of their citizens. How is it possible to build bonds of trust between co-workers, or workers and management teams?

2. Retaining jobs and effective workplaces: mentorships, cultural, linguistic and emotional skills (at international and individual level, near future and long term)

Industries have historically relied on flawed ‘cultural matching’ strategies to limit risks (Friedman and Laurison 2019). ‘Cultural matching’ relies on managers offering positions in priority to people matching the same social, economic, educational, ethnic and cultural background as theirs. In Friedman and Laurison’s study of the British media industry, one major contention is that cultural matching erects barriers to women, working class employees and people of colour in industries dominated by white middle-class males. Because cultural matching relies more on superficial characteristics than knowledge, skills and quality of work, it creates a paradox where people in executive and decision-making roles often don’t have the adequate competence to fulfil effectively their duties; Friedman and Laurison call this phenomenon ‘stupidity paradox’. The consequences of

these dynamics are thoroughly analysed in French psychology professor Roland Gori's work *La Fabrique des Imposteurs* [The factory of Impostors] (2013).

Friedman and Laurison suggest that one-to-one mentorship and sponsorship schemes are vital for both increasing jobseekers' chances of getting employed and sustaining the diversity and the quality of workplaces. Face-to-face mentorship or sponsorship are crucial elements for career progression since they rely on the building of 'thick trust' (see previous sections), which is itself built through informal interactions.

Finally, French psychologist Michel Desmurget argues in his book *La fabrique du crétin digital* [The factory of digital idiots] (2019), in a parallel with Huxley's *Brave New World*, that the most successful people amongst future generations will be those with the strongest language and cultural skills and emotional literacy; as these skills will become increasingly rare.

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¹ <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2020/08/revealed-nearly-20000-households-made-homeless-during-pandemic>

² Booth, Robert. 2019. Anxiety on rise among the young in social media age. *The Guardian*, 5 February. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/feb/05/youth-unhappiness-uk-doubles-in-past-10-years>

³ <https://civicsociology.org/the-second-convivialist-manifesto>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/27/shirking-from-home-staff-feel-the-heat-as-bosses-ramp-up-remote-surveillance>