

## Understanding mind and society in the wake of 19: a socio-psychological perspective

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### ABSTRACT

The ensuing ‘lockdown’ due to the coronavirus epidemic has forced millions of people across the globe into ‘isolation’ within the confines of their four walls for days long. The lockdown on one hand, is necessary to break the chain of the virus, which in a short span, has claimed hundreds and thousands of lives all over the World; but, on the other hand, the lockdown is not without its consequences specially on the human mind. The present paper through review of pertinent literature endeavours to deal with the “right now” crisis in terms of understanding the impact of the crisis and the consequent lockdown specifically on human mind and the society in general.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Risk, Confinement, Mental Health, Social connectivity

“House Arrest” and “Trapped” are the names that keep coming to mind nowadays as we are fast moving into the third phase of the lockdown. Off course, the two films are comparable only because both reflect on the phenomena of ‘social isolation’ and its impact on the mind. While, in House Arrest (2019) the Protagonist, played by Ali Fazl had consciously chosen to stay in- doors for almost nine months for issues arising out from some personal circumstances; Shaurya, played by Raj Kumar Rao, in Trapped (2017) accidentally locks himself in the apartment and faces dire consequences till his survival instinct forces him to take a leap of faith to free himself from the entrapment. Both actors are finally happy and content once they are free from the confines of the four walls – making the effects of social isolation/ self isolation evident enough.

The ensuing ‘lockdown’ due to the coronavirus epidemic has forced millions of people across the globe into ‘isolation’ within the confines of their four walls for days long. The lockdown on one hand, is necessary to break the chain of the virus, which in a short span, has claimed hundreds and thousands of life all over the World; but, on the other hand, the lockdown is not without its consequences specially on the human mind. Perhaps, we too, within the confines of our homes may need to reconceptualise the notions of ‘freedom’, ‘work’, ‘hygiene’ and ‘social connectivity’ and in the process carve out a ‘new normal’ for

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ourselves. The present paper through review of pertinent literature endeavours to deal with the “right now” crisis (Ray & Rojas, 2020) in terms of understanding the impact of the crisis and the consequent lockdown specifically on human mind and the society in general.

### CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY AND ITS ASSOCIATED NOTION OF RISK

Ulrich Beck, interestingly had linked the idea of “risk” to the intellectual agenda in the 1980s and in his notable contribution *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (1992) explored the ‘multiple and nuanced ways’ (Elliott, 2010) in which ‘risk’ affects our lives at various levels. Beck points out that, risks like economic recession, terrorist attacks, ecological crisis actively transform the nature of the societies in terms of its environment, social-intimate relationships and politics. Irrespective of the reaction of the society to such risks (i.e. whether one actively accepts or ignores the dangers and hazards of the world), it is difficult to ignore Beck’s central thesis that ‘risk is fundamental to global social life’. The works by Anthony Giddens, notably, *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990) and *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991) also reflects on the tensions and contradictions of contemporary society and presents the image of modernity as a “Juggernaut” which is beyond control and is divided between extreme polarities of security and risk (Elliot 2010).

The global pandemic that we are facing right now, perhaps best corroborates with Beck’s notion of ‘World Risk Society’. The present situation makes it quite clear that in everyday lives, even the most privileged sections of the society, are not in a position to control the ‘cluster of risks’ (one impacting the other) that arises today, even with access to advanced technology and science. The ‘risk clusters’ are not only personally and socially challenging, but has deep-seated impact on the mind as well. Hence, confined within the home, our thoughts range from ensuring basic sustenance for the family to the economic crisis looming large globally and most importantly of ways to protect one-self from getting infected with the virus. But the confinement however necessary is not a desirable change for the people. Hence, coping and managing the risk has become an integral part of our everyday lives today and needless to say, the pandemic has ushered in an era which will witness drastic changes in the life world of the individuals in time and space.

The coronavirus pandemic and the simultaneous lockdown have brought in pertinent issues related not only to the biological vulnerability of the humans but also of the mind (Sadati et al). People of all age groups are trying to cope and normalize their everyday life within the ‘new situation’ ushered in with the lockdown and the confinement within the homes thereby. People are experiencing heightened sense of anxiety and stress. This is true not only for people living in a family but specifically for those who live alone – be it be the young or the elderly.

It is important to understand that while ‘anxiety’ is a feeling of worry, nervousness or unease about something with an uncertain outcome; ‘stress’ is more of a ‘mental state or emotional strain resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances. Society’s encounter with Pandemics is not new, but what makes the current scenario critical is the element of social isolation/ social distancing. Social connectivity and social support are crucial for maintaining a healthy and balanced mind (Kumar, 2020). Hence, coping with isolation and consequent loneliness may pose a big challenge to maintain mental health.

The common observations related to the psycho-social response of the individual to the pandemic and the consequent lockdown include heightened anxiety, acute stress reaction, and boredom, as well as lack of concentration, fear and panic due to loneliness. Individuals

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in trying to grapple with the prevailing uncertainty and insecurity often are manifesting sudden bursts of anger, irritation and suspicion towards others. The observations are perhaps true for all sections of the society across all stratification dimensions of caste, class, race and religion. But undoubtedly, the uncertainty associated with the covid 19 pandemic has worst hit the lower socio –economic sections of the society, who not only have to deal with the fear of contamination but whose basic sustenance has become a challenge.

Dr. Kumar (2020) delineates some of the mental health disorders which may be crucial for the present context. These pertain to anxiety disorders, adjustment disorders, panic disorders (due to a feeling of insecurity), obsessive compulsive disorder (related to washing of hands and maintaining hygiene within the home) and depressive disorder arising from a sense of worthlessness, helplessness, loss of power – due to the inability to control the prevailing situation. He points out that some of the early signs of problems related to mental health which would require immediate attention are:

1. If an individual is eating or sleeping too much or is sleep deprived.
2. Distinct mood fluctuations.
3. Fatigue
4. Withdrawn behaviour
5. Feeling of worthlessness
6. Consumption of excess alcohol or nicotine
7. Emotional instability
8. Constantly exhibiting signs of fear and suspicion.

The sense of restlessness and insecurity in the minds of the people may be explained by the absence or sudden change of the normal everyday routine of their lives. Anthony Giddens in his *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration (1984)* explains that individuals (agents) constantly monitors their own “thoughts and actions as well as their social and physical contexts”. Giddens further notes that individuals derive a sense of security by rationalizing the world around them, which is done by the active creation of ‘routines’. The routines not only give the actors a sense of security but also enable them to efficiently manage their social lives. Even though, apparently, routines might seem to constitute the most personal make-up of the individual, sociologically, routines may be regarded as the ‘social glue’ which holds together and ensures the regular flow of daily life. Daily routines and habits serve to shape the identity of the actor as well as the social world (Elliott, 2010).

Giddens’s Structuration theory focuses on social practices and the duality and dialectical interplay of the agency and structure. Giddens’s Structuration theory accords great power to the actor and action. He tries to grasp how individual action is structured within the mundane practices of social life and at the same how those very structures are reproduced by individual action. Individual action Giddens states are not mere discrete acts but in its core contain individual particles like intentions, motivations and reasons which accord a continuous flow to human action. For Giddens, the actor is reflexive in the sense that individuals reflect on the social world, and “have the capacity to understand what they do while they do it”. In this regard, Giddens talks about three levels of knowledge or motivation of the human subject. While *discursive consciousness* entails the ability to describe the actions in words and constitutes the realm of reflexivity for the individual actor; *practical consciousness*, on the other hand, involves actions that the actors take for granted (practical stocks of knowledge) that cannot be expressed in words. Finally, the *unconscious*, ‘is

differentiated from the discursive and practical consciousness by a barrier of repression' (Elliot, 2010, Ritzer, 2018).

The actions of the individual actors, thus, consist of both the rational accounts of what they are doing and a general awareness of the taken-for-granted knowledge without being aware of it. However, Giddens points out that there are certain subterranean forces that influence individual actions, the emotional dimensions of human life – the realm of the unconscious, which is held in check by our habitual routines. But the unconscious anxiety may erupt, as Giddens points out in times of crisis – in times of social and political upheavals (Elliot, 2010). Hence, the 'right-now' crisis in terms of the pandemic and the ensuing crisis of the human mind may be explained in terms of a conflict between the habitual processes of social life (routines) and the new forms that are yet to take shape; disjunction between the practical and discursive levels of consciousness of the individual actor. This, however, leads one to question the primacy that Giddens accords to his actor – the ability of the agent to make a difference in the social world. In this regard, it may be pointed that Giddens does recognize that actors may face constraints. But, it is through their ability to think, monitor and reflect (reflexivity) that individuals may be able to transform the 'constraining situation'/crisis.

### ***Risk management***

As discussed in the previous section, 'risk' has become a crucial component in both personal and public domain. Hence, life is now more about being able to carve out various strategies to manage risk more effectively. Risk management, in the present context specifically refers to the effective management of mental health in the wake of the covid19 pandemic and consequent confinements of people within their home.

Following Lazarus and Folkman (1984), it may be pointed out, that the efficacy of risk management in terms of mental health may depend upon how the individual 'interpret' the stressor. Their model of stress appraisal, includes *primary appraisal* which involves determining whether the stressor poses a threat; *secondary appraisal* which involves the individual's evaluation of the resources or coping strategies at his or her disposal for addressing perceived threats; finally, *reappraisal* is an ongoing process which and involves continuously reappraising both the nature of the stressor and the resources available for responding to the stressor (Stangor & Walinga, 2014).

A good way to manage stress and anxiety at this point may be through self – monitoring our lives at the cognitive as well as physical level. At all times Yoga, deep- breathing can be effective ways to keep one physically fit, especially keeping the current scenario in mind, when people will have a tendency to lead a sedentary life. At the cognitive level, meditation, specifically 'Vipassana' (Insight) may be extremely effective to clear the mind from tensions. Spending quality time with family members or pursuing a hobby (which otherwise may have lost importance in the everyday busy schedule), may constitute a positive distraction at this time of crisis. With the expansion of media and communication, vast and often undesirable information is available at our disposal. But it is important that we filter the right information that do not unnecessarily burden our mind and create unnecessary tension and anxiety for us and others. 'Social distancing' off course is the 'new normal'(Gupta and Chadd, 2020) of our day. But it implies maintaining a physical distance; not a distance of the mind. In fact, there is a greater than before need to be emotionally connected to our near and dear ones at this time of crisis. It will undoubtedly be a source of strength and support, especially for those who are trying to cope with the crisis alone. It

cannot be ignored that loneliness can have a negative impact on the immune system. Thus, social connectivity through online technologies or telecommunication is very important.

## **CONCLUSION**

Covid 19 pandemic, undoubtedly, have ushered in a 'cluster of risks', effective management of which may be a matter of time till society satisfactorily acquires the knowledge, expertise and skills to combat and contain the virus and its ensuing risks related to health. However, we cannot remain indifferent to some of the positive consequences of the lockdown due to 19. Apart from the fact that Nature has got time to heal herself, well reflected through the clear blue skies; people too have learnt to use resources more efficiently and thereby reduce wastage; be concerned and empathetic towards each other and more importantly have got an opportunity for self – reflection. At the societal level, an integrated academic endeavour from various disciplines (Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology, Public Health, Virology, Immunology etc) may lead to effective research studies that may enable society to better handle the 'risks' that threaten society at large. At the individual level, we believe, 'patience' and 'individual reflexivity' will help us to glide through the 'right-now' crisis.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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