

SOME PANDEMIC REFLECTIONS FROM THE “SOCIOLOGY AT THE DAWN OF A SUCCESSFUL CENTURY?” CONFERENCE

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The Centre for Social Sciences (Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre of Excellence) held a conference entitled *Sociology at the Dawn of a Successful Century?* on October 8-9, 2020 in Budapest. The concept of the conference was built around Dénes Némédi's 20-year-old article and its updates. The ambitious goal of the organizers was nothing less than to review the state of Hungarian sociology and its latest research results. In this spirit, the plenary speaker, Károly Takács (Linköping University and CSS-RECENS, Centre for Social Sciences), first approached this complex subject from the perspective of teaching sociology, and then – among other things – argued for a reflexive sociology.

The review of the current state of science inevitably had to focus on the COVID-19 epidemic and its social impacts as well. Accordingly, out of a total of 24 sections and more than a hundred talks, two separate sections and ten presentations were explicitly devoted to analyzing the social implications of the coronavirus. The presentations were commented on by invited speakers, and there was vibrant scientific dialogue in both panels.

It should be noted that although we give an overview of the papers from these two particular sections only, various reflections on the coronavirus definitely appeared in further panels and presentations as well. Some examples of the research topics analyzed in the context of the epidemic were: concerns about the virus; the impact of the pandemic on different social segments; the social care system; the social economy; experimenting as a scientific method; the health-damaging behaviors of students; online demonstration, etc.

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The epidemic also had a significant influence on the preparation and implementation of the conference. The challenges posed by the new situation were addressed by the organizers in a hybrid, personal, and online conference format, which proved to be both lecturer- and participant-friendly.

The presentations in the first block discussed the social impacts of COVID from various different perspectives and approaches. In most cases, changes in family roles, relations and responsibilities received a lot of emphasis, among which the duties related to online education were determining. As well as coping strategies, the psychological effects and employment consequences of the epidemic proved to be important topics, and gender differences were also outlined in several presentations. In two cases, the need for a territorial, country-specific approach was emphasized, and one reported a change in the mental burden associated with elderly care during the COVID period. The structure of the first section was based on the principle of “individual to general”: presentations moved from micro-level qualitative research to large-sample quantitative analyses.

The first two lectures were about the coping strategy of families and the rearrangement of their relationships through different approaches. The focus of Krisztina Rékai’s (joint researcher Ivett Szalma) presentation was the changing relationship between parents who had separated and their children during the COVID outbreak (see current issue for more details). Based on 22 longitudinal semi-structured interviews, the researchers found that the epidemic caused a change in the nature of their contact, despite the fact that the restrictions on movement did not apply to personal contact between separated parents and their children. One-third of families reported a suspension of face-to-face meetings, and a further one-third reported a change in the frequency or manner of encounters. Online communication channels became more valuable, although the parents who typically communicate often via the internet or telephone are those who also communicate regularly in person. After the spring epidemic season, reorganization was rapid in most families, but most of the missed encounters were not made up for. Overall, the researchers found that no conscious or mature strategies were applied by the families during the first wave of the pandemic, thus ad hoc responses were typical of the emerging situations that were greatly influenced by the official regulations and restrictions in force at the time.

Nikolett Somogyi and her colleagues (Beáta Nagy, Réka Geambaşu, and Orsolya Gergely) interviewed 52 highly educated female members of dual-earner families in Transylvania and Hungary who worked from home during the first COVID wave (see current issue for more details). Based on the interviews, many of the negative effects that were outlined stemmed from working from home and the blurring of the border between work and private life. Such is the

case with the constant remorse that resulted from the feeling that the former had been unable to perform perfectly in all fields (teaching children, housekeeping, and their own work). However, respondents also mentioned the positive benefits of flexible work at home: families spent more time together, their lives were characterized by a calmer tempo, and so on. This group of highly educated women can also be characterized by the use of both conscious and less conscious coping strategies, including framing difficulties as “I am lucky because...”. The comparison between Transylvania and Hungary led to the recognition of an important difference: the conditions and expectations about education in the neighboring country were less strict, so there was much less pressure on parents. Overall, research showed that barriers were easier to overcome when respondents were able to work in flexible jobs and the working environment was supportive, while having sufficient space and good technical conditions were mitigating factors.

Like the previous one, the presentation by Júlia Koltai (and Fodor Éva, Gregor Anikó, and Kováts Eszter) based on representative research that used a large sample (1900 people) also showed the importance of flexible work: many people saw this as the key to resolving the tension between work and private life. However, data show that two-thirds of respondents worked flexibly, but only three out of ten people were able to work from home, and these individuals typically had a higher level of education. People were also very much looking forward to the reopening of educational institutions, which is fully understandable due to the fact that time spent caring for children increased by 30% in general during the first period of the epidemic. This resulted in an exceptionally large number of hours per week spent on child-care related duties, especially for women (12 hours/week more than men). The exceptional increase in the burden on women was interpreted by researchers as part of the “gender gap.” Based on the representative research, the presenters also painted a detailed picture of the labor and material consequences of the first wave of COVID in Hungary. Among other factors, it was highlighted that a quarter of workers were forced into paid or unpaid leave, which mainly affected low-skilled people (especially women with less than eight years of general education), and one-third of respondents felt that their financial situation had worsened during the COVID period (here, skilled workers were overrepresented).

The growing burden on women was also shown by a study of Anett Tróbert, Márton Bagyura, and Zsuzsa Széman that was conducted among people who care for the elderly. The online survey reached more than a thousand people, 96% of whom were women. According to the data, the burden of caring increased in particular for those who care for elderly persons with dementia. This is partly because they had a greater burden before the pandemic, and because they are

more reliant on the services of the health care system (such as home caregiving), to which they had less access in the epidemic period. Using the COPE index method,³ the researchers also found that those who had a harder time in terms of the effects of the epidemic situation felt that the task of caring was also a greater burden, and that caring-related duties were less valuable. In addition to restrictions and care-related difficulties, the greatest burden on caregivers was mental and psychological pressure, which was partly because recipients of care also required more emotional and mental support, and because they had bad experiences with the related constraints. In addition, many of them also had financial and work-related problems, which were further exacerbated by their lack of recreation and opportunities for recharging, which they especially need.

Gyöngyi Schwarcz and Zsombor Csata spoke about the results of a large-scale online survey and netnographic research conducted in the Carpathian Basin by the National Strategy Research Institute for Hungarians. They highlighted two topics: the results of the research on resiliency, and a narrative analysis of the coronavirus. The resilience study showed, among other things, that the economic crisis caused by the epidemic affected Transcarpathian Hungarians in the most unfavorable way (a decrease in income, loan repayment difficulties, border closure, etc.) while Slovakian Hungarians were considered the most resilient of the examined groups (higher income level and reserves, daily commuting, etc.).

Regarding the patterns of orientation derived from the media, Zsombor Csata said that it is becoming increasingly typical that Transylvanian Hungarians consume mainly Hungarian media content and keep in touch only with Hungarians (only 12-15% mentioned that they have Romanian friends). Regarding the perception of danger, he emphasized that the monitoring of Hungarian media content had a negative effect on the perception of health, income, and personal safety of viewers. In general, there is a tendency for those who are more informed to have a higher sense of fear, more distrust, and be more liable to be involved in searching for scapegoats – of course, this picture may be made more nuanced by involving additional analytical aspects.

The second COVID-related section of the conference focused on the educational consequences of the pandemic from several angles. The series of presentations exploited empirical evidence in the field of primary, secondary, and tertiary education. The research covered a wide array of target groups (from marginalized to privileged levels) and perspectives (students, parents, teachers, other educators, and non-governmental actors). The research was based on non-representative samples and concentrated on perceptions related to the digital era

3 The Carers for Older People in Europe Index contains 15 items and 3 subscales (negative aspects of caring; positive values of caring; quality of support).

of COVID-19 and mainly presented the learners' perspective, while teaching aspects were also embodied therein. The main research instrument was the questionnaire in four of the five cases, and an online audio-visual focus group in one case. In some cases, in-depth or orienting interviews were also used as complementary methods. The vast majority of data collection was undertaken during the time when curfews were being applied, while one survey was conducted in the summer.

Ágnes Kende and Vera Messing's presentation focused on the lower strata. Their research explored the perception of several stakeholders about the transition of disadvantaged / Roma students to a digital curriculum. They involved teachers (mainly from primary schools), after-school club instructors, and representatives of Roma and pro-Roma organizations in their survey. Families' insights were incorporated through phone or chat platforms. Those teachers working in segregated schools (i.e. where the disadvantaged/Roma pupils are over-represented) reported that around two-thirds of their pupils were able to become involved in digital education. However, their participation often happened through offline tools. The main hindering factors were the lack of material and non-material resources such as ICT devices, weak digital literacy, a limited internet connection, inappropriate space for study, weak capability to study independently, and lack of family support. In addition, overcrowded homes, as well as existential and other uncertainties, weighed on families as an additional burden, which also decreased students' school performance. Despite several difficulties, some teachers and after-club instructors reported more personal treatment and closer relationships with children or their families as positive outcomes of the extraordinary situation.

Another piece of research focused on a more privileged group of primary school students – those willing to be enrolled in “small high schools” after the fourth or sixth grade. Eszter Berényi's study fits into the theoretical discourse of early selection – including self-selection – and tracking. The panel study compared the experiences of families during the period of preparation for “small high school” admission and the digital curriculum. The results indicate that preparation is a several-month-long, costly, time- and energy consuming process, and that shadow education plays a major role in it. Another lesson from the analysis of the pandemic is that affluent families also encountered a number of difficulties during distance learning, although both the extent and nature of these problems differed from those of disadvantaged families. Parents reported that their children were more relaxed after the enrolment exams, whilst they (the parents) felt even more tired (but less nervous and anxious) during the digital semester. As these families were well equipped in terms of both ICT devices and family support, they worried most about the

unpreparedness of the education system and the lack of an appropriate online methodology on the side of schools.

In the panel, Zsuzsanna Szvetelszky and Éva Sztárayné Kézdy's paper was about the high school age group, or more precisely, about graduates and their perceptions. The novelty of the research was that it was interpreted as a kind of natural experiment. The authors learned valuable methodological lessons about the use of VCP (Virtual Communication Platform) tools in focus group research. The study took place on an online platform (Zoom), in relation to online education and the baccalaureate, and the age of the university student moderators was close to the age of the target group. Some results of the research may be instructive in the future in relation to dealing with similar distance learning situations. With regard to online education, it can be emphasized that the lack of standardization in terms of online platforms and the use of parallel channels, as well as the uncertainties surrounding graduation, created extra burdens for students. In retrospect, however, it was considered a good decision to maintain the written graduation exam, and to cancel the oral one. In the field of social and societal contact, the graduates suffered significant losses, as conventional events and transitional rites were cancelled or transformed. However, the efforts of teachers and school management were appreciated by students in all fields. According to the graduates, the experiences of the COVID pandemic can also be incorporated into the preparation period for graduation in the future (graduation-centric preparation, distance learning, VCP, and personal consultations).

Two papers from the panel were dedicated to higher education. Out of these, Andrea Lukács and Emőke Kiss-Tóth scrutinized the well-being of university students and the factors influencing it, while Andrea Szabó and Eszter Szabó examined the digital preparedness of universities and teachers from the perspective of students. The first piece of research was conducted in the framework of the 27-country COVID-19 International Student Well-being Study (see current issue for more details). The results were derived from the database of the University of Miskolc. In the study, student mental well-being was measured using eight items of the CES-D (Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale) Questionnaire. Conclusions were formulated based on a four-level hierarchical regression analysis. Factors related to the pandemic were included in the fourth level of the analysis. The variables included if students were concerned about their own or their acquaintances' infection with COVID or serious illness, as well as deficiencies in the health care system. The researchers (Andrea Lukács, Emőke Kis-Tóth) found that, except for leisure time, the students' living conditions had worsened in every area. The results showed that students were more concerned about others than themselves, and

that anxiety about the virus did not significantly affect their mental well-being. Factors that increased well-being included a positive vision, satisfaction with their lives, better subjective health, and more free time.

The second piece of research concerning university students and online education was based on a study conducted in the summer of 2020. The results show that students expressed that the universities of Budapest were somewhat better prepared to deal with the challenges of digital education than rural ones. However, significant shortcomings in terms of the diversity of online teaching tools were reported by respondents, who received a notable proportion of teaching material only in a written form from some of their professors, instead of taking advantage of various audiovisual tools. One of the hypotheses of the study was that students improved their academic performance during distance learning, but this was not clearly confirmed by the results. One of the notable aspects of the research was that the students were asked to characterize and evaluate distance learning in their own words. Like graduates, the majority of respondents reported that they missed the traditional form of education and their peers a lot. Distance learning did not seem to be attractive to them in the long term, while they also highlighted the convenient and frugal/economical nature of the online approach.

SUMMARY

Overall, presentations reported a wide range of consequences and impacts of COVID regarding various social groups. More research reported that barriers were easier to overcome when respondents were able to work at flexible jobs and the working environment was supportive. However, data show that two-thirds of respondents worked flexibly, but only three out of ten people were able to do their work from home (those who typically had a higher level of education). However, working from home was important in that the time spent caring for children significantly increased. Highly educated women working from home, despite the increase in duties and constant remorse, reported several positive consequences too. However, large sample surveys show that less well-educated people (especially women) were more affected by forced leave and a worsening financial situation.

Regarding education-related research, it can be seen that distance learning increased the burden on all actors in the education system, but that burden varied across different segments of society. Online education caused the most significant difficulties for the lowest strata, amplifying the disadvantage-

mediating role of schools. However, adaptation mechanisms were put in place too, through which some of the benefits of online education (time and cost savings, individual learning, personal treatment, more leisure time) were reflected in the research results.