Social Connectedness and Detachment in COVID-19: a Sociological Insight

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COVID-19 is an ongoing pandemic which has affected the globe socio-economically. It is a pandemic different from the previous pandemics in context of its spread, medical and social aspects. The social aspects of this pandemic are as important as the medical aspect due to global interconnectivity (globalization). This article is an effort to gain a sociological insight to the social connectedness and detachment during COVID-19. The article is a review based whereby journal articles are preferred while reliable web sources are also considered. The discussion shows that social connectedness is affected by COVID-19 in many dimensions such as at micro level as well as macro level. The global interconnectivity has played role in its spread at macro level, and at macro level the connectedness is affected. This include closure of global businesses and trade, tourism, migration and traveling. At micro level individuals and families are affected, for example, isolation, quarantines, avoiding others etc. This have multifaceted impact on micro and macro level including economic, social and mental. Besides, sociological perspectives have been applied in context of COVID-19, social connectedness and social detachment. The discussion concludes that structural functionalism, conflict perspective and symbolic interactionism successfully explains the social connectedness and social detachment in context of COVID-19.

**Keywords:** social connectedness; detachment; Covid-19; sociological insight; global interconnectivity
1. Social dimensions of COVID-19

Ward (2020) explicates that social theory is important to understand the social reality of COVID-19. In this regard, the risk, the crises, and the trust are the important sociological terms which are important in context of COVID-19. Duration and physical presence in social interaction is the risk; burden on health care, new disease and the socio-economic breakdown of economic giants are the crises; and, the joint collaboration of the global community is the trust required to deal with the situation. This article is about the social connectedness and social detachment which are important in context of risk as well in context of crises. Social connected increases the risk of spread of the virus whereas the lock downs, lack of physical interaction, quarantine, fear, stress and anxiety and social stigma are aspects of social detachment which is the crises.

2. Social Connectedness and Social Detachment

Social connectedness is an important social concept referring to measuring interaction, contact and emotional attachment with each other. There are further two aspects to it; first, the quantity of interaction, contact and attachment; and second, the quality of interaction, contact and attachment (Papadopoulos, 2018). Social detachment is another aspect which relates to social connectedness but gives an opposite meaning to social connectedness. Sociologically, social detachment can be defined as the inability of a person be an active and recognizable component of the socio-economic and cultural sphere of life. Therefore, sociologically both of the concept or term are very important.

3. Social connectedness in COVID-19

The social aspects of COVID-19 are of an equal importance to the medical aspects of the pandemic. Long ago social theorists have mentioned and predicted the outcome of globalization. For example, Ritzer (2010) presented the theory of solidity, liquidity and gaseousness in terms of social connectivity or globalization. To Ritzer, social aspects were solid in primitive times such as there was very limited social change over thousands of year; then liquidity started whereby it was easy of social and cultural aspects to move from one to another; and, after industrial revolution social and cultural components starting moving from one place to another like gas which moves
very easily. Based on this theoretical perspective I will explain the pandemic of COVID-19 in terms of social connectedness and detachment from micro and macro level perspective:

4. level perspective on social connectedness and detachment

Negative global flows and process are closely linked with the process of globalization. This includes chemicals, crimes, terrorism and so on and most importantly flow of disease while considering the ongoing pandemic. The most astonishing historical fact regarding the current pandemic is the prediction that connectedness (globalization) will bring some sort of dangerous disease which will quickly spread and will affect the while world. Ong (2007), for example, explicated that the business of beef can be a source of an outbreak in Great Britain. Patton (2002) stated that swine and avian flu and HIV/AIDS is because of flows due to the process of globalization. Most important World Health Organization (2007) alarmed the world that due to global interconnectivity the humans are facing a significant threat of a disease outbreak. And at that time China was one of the countries who didn’t allowed World Health Organization to investigate about small level epidemics. Many viral disease such as HIV/AIDS, Flu and SARS are the examples in history which spread due to human to human contact (some with normal and some with sexual); and the increased global connectedness was raising the threshold of a major outbreak that could very easily as compare to Flu. HIV and SARS, and that happened in Dec, 2019. It is important to mention that here I am taking in consideration the migration, trade, tourism which are the aspects of globalization or the global connectedness leading to the current pandemic.

However, the connectedness led to a pandemic which is detaching the world now. For example, I was in a market to upgrade my laptop. In market I found that laptop were short on supply because of closure of businesses in China. Besides, the available were so expensive because of black marketing that I was unable to buy it. With writing this article, it came to my mind that the connectedness led to pandemic and now the pandemic is detaching the world. Another suitable example is the reduction of movement of people from one country to another country whether for educational, employment, tourism or any other purpose. Air transport services has the biggest lost in 2020; the countries have closed the borders for each other. In addition, educational institutes are the important sources of human interaction, cultural mix and social activities. The closure of the institutes is another aspect of social detachment due to COVID-19 pandemic.
Despite of these problems, the detachment have paved ways for new forms of connectedness. For instance, the online educational trends in educational institutes across the globe. There are many who for the first time came to know about google meet, zoom and other interactive applications.

5. Micro level perspective on social connectedness and detachment

At individual and familial level COVID-19 pandemic have introduced new social patterns. For example, the extent and nature of connectivity has been altered. Probably, the most cited social term or concept in the year 2020 is social distancing. According to symbolic interactionist perspective, hand shake is an eminent form of symbolic interaction which represents greetings, sense of emotional attachments and belongingness among two interacting individuals (see Macionis, 2007). But the pandemic has brought new forms of interaction, and probably the waving of hands has become the norms of meeting and greeting in order to avoid spread of infections. The trends of touching the foot or legs were also a humorous aspect shown in the media at the very start of the pandemic. So there are some sort of detachments but with alternatives of connectedness.

In terms of connectedness and detachment, at micro or individual level there are certain dilemmas as well. For example, the avoidance of the ill or the infected. This can be explained in two important ways. First, staying with and taking care of the ill is a norm and a tradition throughout the globe and across times. But is it the same in this pandemic? No, because the virus spread by physical contact with the infected one and even having close social interaction even without physical contact. Therefore, the detachment in this scenario is one of the most difficult things for the ill as well the close ones.

Isolation or quarantine are the two important terminologies mostly used in 2020. It simply indicates social detachment. Social isolation or detachment is one of the key aspects of emotional and psychological issues at individual level, and when combined with illness it is a significant dilemma. Panchal et al (2020) explicates that mental health issues have significantly increased during 2020. The major variable in this regard is the pandemic but the relationship is chain relationship (based on causal theory in quantitative research). Let us take an example of a causal relationship that COVID-19 pandemic is associated with an increase in mental health problems.
So there are so many intervening variables, for example, social isolation, fear of being infected, fear of losing a close one, loss of employment etc.

In addition it, it is evident from history and previous research that diseases and social stigma are closely linked such as evident in case of HIV/AIDS (Sartorius, 2007). Social stigma in case of diseases is linked with labelling, isolation, social rejection or exclusion and so on. In terms of the current pandemic World Health Organization has already published guidelines in order prevent it. World Health Organization have explained it in words such as the fear of others. The fear of others (social stigma) decreases the connectedness and increases detachments.

6. Impact of Lack of Social Connectedness and an Increase in Detachment

The first and the foremost consequence of social detachment is social isolation. Social isolation (at individual level) is associated with many problems in one’s life, for instance, economic issues, stress, depressive symptoms etc. But there is another chain such as stress is further linked with obesity, suicidal ideation, unemployment and so on. It is also important pin down that the impact of social detachment varies across gender and age as well. The work of Hudson (2017) is important in terms age related consequences of social detachment whereby the author found same consequences for elderly as mentioned above. Suen, Gendron and Gough (2017) found from research that social detachment creates a social environment in which the parameters of social satisfactions are affected. Manti et al., (2009) conducted a cross-cultural research and concluded that social detachment leads to many disruptive behaviors. Most importantly, children are highly affected by social detachment. For example, Scholte et al (2008) conducted a research on Dutch children and concluded that aggressive, anti-social behaviors and emotional problems are common among such children. Now these findings are important in this pandemic as well such as social isolation is responsible for social detachments; if parents are infected and are isolated it can lead to a short term as well as long term impacts on the children. In addition to it, the schools, the playground and the community interactions are very much important for the children whereby such interactions are significantly affected by the ongoing pandemic. The same is true for the elderly as well.
7. **Structural Functionalism, Connectedness and Detachment:**

Structural functionalism is one of the most cited perspective or paradigm in sociology. It simply see society as a system whereby different components have functions contributing to stability in society. In this sense, social connectedness is a structure which contributes to stability in the society. COVID-19 has a significant impact on social connectedness. As mentioned earlier that fear of others leads to social detachment whereby this can be termed as the dysfunction of social connectedness as a functional unit to society. Social connectedness when is dysfunctional leads to social detachment, and according to structural functionalism the stability in society is affected. This true as well considering the current chaos created by COVID-19 pandemic. Social isolation, fear, stress, unemployment and so many other social outcomes of COVID-19 are resulting from the dysfunctions of social connectedness. In the recent times we can take example of government and private institutions closed completely during sever COVID-19 pandemic partially during when government felt it can be disastrous if not controlled in time. Functions of many institutions were closed and economic and social activities were banned. All gatherings were suspended or delayed. It has been observed during this period how structure could not work properly. Furthermore, from individual life to communities took new initiatives to protect human beings from this disastrous situation.

8. **Conflict perspective, Connectedness and Detachment**

Conflict perspective asserts that society is an arena of inequalities. These inequalities can be seen in each and every sphere of social life such as inequalities in the basis of age, gender, ethnicity and so many others (Kendall, 2007). Conflict perspective to my opinion is a source of social detachment in society and reduces connectedness. Societies with greater inequalities are known for their lack of development.

COVID-19 is a pandemic that have surfaced many inequalities throughout the globe. For example, access to health facilities, availing basic facilities during lockdowns and social isolation. Besides, there is a new discussion in this connection, for example, access to vaccine.
Another inequality is the digital clearance certificates. This will exclude many sectors of society to travel, get access to certain health facilities, and the elite will get benefits (Chandran, 2020). This will further detach the society in terms of gender, age, class and ethnic regard.

It has been observed that COVID-19 pandemic caused many dents to economy and political or development processes in society. The complexity of situation pushed many public and private functionaries towards economic deterioration. Hence, COVID-19 pandemic created many troubles through the world. New studies are ongoing to understand how it affects social fabrications and functional deficiencies. The outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has doubled the health crisis in the world. It again has had a deep impact on the way we meet, do things together with normal life and people or relatives in all the COVID-19 care settings, given the need to maintain isolation and social distancing. It all indicates the crisis in human life and conflictive circumstances.

9. Symbolic Interactionism, connectedness and detachment

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the micro-level interactions in society. It views daily life interaction as the building block of social structure, and focuses on language and symbols as a mean of social interaction (Hall, 2007). Symbolic interactionism allow us to view cohesiveness in society on the basis of language and divide on the basis of language. In this regard, COVID-19 can be framed under symbolic interactionism in terms of connectedness and detachment. For example, labelling and social stigma are key aspects focused by symbolic interactionism perspective. Center for disease control and prevention (CDC) explicates that stigmatization of individuals, groups and certain communities are confronted with stigma in terms of spread of the disease. This can be in form of rejection, isolating someone, and even physical and verbal abuse.

Social stigma reduces social connectedness and leads to detachment. Ali, Shaheen and Bibi (2020) illustrates that the pandemic of COVID-19 has exacerbated social stigma related with diseases. It has led to discriminatory behaviors against people of certain ethnic backgrounds as well as anyone perceived to have been in contact with the virus. There are three basic dimensions of COVID-19 related social stigma; first, the disease of COVID-19 is new, and the world knows very little about it; second, people are afraid of the situation of lack of knowledge about the disease; and third, it is leading to linking fear with the affected individuals by the disease which further
results in stereotyping, stress and anxiety and negation of the affected individuals. This is an important aspect in social connectedness and social detachment. The work of D’Amours (2017) is very important in this regard. The work illustrates that social stigma is a source of connectedness. It brings unity among those who are excluded, for instance, the transgender; people with disabilities; and even, people having certain diseases such as HIV/AIDS (and this can be related in the current situation of pandemic as well). But on the other hand, it contributes to social detachment as well as some are excluded.

Social stigma in context of current pandemic is important as well. It is a fact that social stigma is a source of fear. With regard to the role of social stigma in fear among individuals or community see work of Bockting, Robinson and Rosser (1998). Fear is a factor which leads to social connectedness (among those who are socially excluded) but is associated with detachment from others particularly those who are socially included. These both are very important in context of stigma related to COVID-19 as well. Fear is a common thing in this pandemic particularly thinking about isolation, quarantine and lack of social contact with others. The labelling and stigma confronted by Muslims in India and Tableeghi Jamat in Pakistan are key and important examples of social stigma and labelling during COVID-19. This also represents the social exclusion of certain groups.

10. Conclusion

COVID-19 is an ongoing pandemic which has affected the globe socio-economically. It is a pandemic different from the previous pandemics in the context of its spread, medical and social aspects. The social aspects of this pandemic are as important as the medical aspect due to global interconnectivity (globalization). Social connectedness and detachment includes in important social dimensions in COVID-19 pandemic. Social connectedness refers to measuring interaction, contact and emotional attachment while social detachment refers to degree of disconnection (emotional, social and physical).

The discussion in the article shows that social connectedness is affected by COVID-19 in many dimensions such as at micro level as well as macro level. The global interconnectivity has played role in its spread at macro level, and at macro level the connectedness is affected. This include closure of global businesses and trade, tourism, migration and traveling. At micro level
individuals and families are affected, for example, isolation, quarantines, avoiding others etc. This have multifaceted impact on micro and macro level including economic, social and mental such as unemployment, isolation, fear, stress, depression etc. Besides, sociological perspectives have been applied in context of COVID-19, social connectedness and social detachment. The discussion concludes that structural functionalism can explain the lack of social connectedness and social detachment as the dysfunction of functional structures of the society. Conflict perspective explains that COVID-19 has brought to surface the inequalities in terms of health and social development and may lead to further inequalities whereby lack of social connectedness and social detachments are predicted. Lastly, symbolic interactionism successfully explains the social connectedness and social detachment in context of COVID-19 through social stigma and labelling. The social connectedness is decreased and social detachment is increased because of the fear of others, avoiding physical interaction, lingual and verbal stigma confronted by ill and so on. Stereotyping is also very important in this regard whereby certain people, groups or communities are stigmatized for the spread of the disease.

References


