Pandemic Practices, Part One. How to Turn "Living Through the COVID-19 Pandemic" into a Heuristic Tool for Sociological Theorizing

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Abstract

This paper uses the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to engage in an experiment in sociological theorizing. For this purpose, we analyze the pandemic as an unpredictable event emerging before our very eyes. To account for the unpredictability of the event, we propose to think about it in terms of "pandemic practices": social practices that emerge and are being reproduced, connected, disconnected and (de)-institutionalized in the course of the pandemic. We introduce a tentative typology of pandemic practices which highlights what we call "pandemic meta-practices", that is, practices that discuss, compare, and evaluate other pandemic practices. Meta-practices, we argue, shape the likelihood of other pandemic practices to prevail by establishing relationships between them (e.g. by comparing the "management" of the pandemic in different countries). The concluding section explains the heuristic advantages of this approach with a number of research questions that we plan to study in more detail during future phases of the pandemic. Our experimental strategy of theorizing compels us to develop our view further during the event, making this only the first of a series of papers exploring the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19; emergent event; practice theory; pandemic practices; practices of comparing.

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1   Introduction

At the time of writing, in May/early June 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over. In fact, epidemiologists keep reminding us that we are in its early stages, with possible second or third waves and further lockdowns lurking around the corner. The scientific state of the art and uncertainties about the virus, too, are changing on a daily basis, including vitally important information about promising cures and vaccines. Politics and markets are extremely dynamic, social movements are forming, daily practices are constantly changing. In short, the pandemic is not a well-defined object ready for comprehensive post-hoc analysis. It is a research object emerging before our very eyes.

As a temporal phenomenon, the pandemic is also different from most objects of sociological study. While it is common for sociological research topics to change constantly and evolve historically, viral epidemics such as Sars-CoV-2/COVID-19 have a *genuinely "eventful" character*: they are temporary by definition. They start, peak and end (as far as we know) — simply stop spreading or are vanquished by vaccines and herd immunity. They also spread unevenly and play out differently in different countries and regions and within different social groups (rich/poor, majorities/ethnic minorities etc.). Some "early adopters" may possibly have already lived through the first wave while others have yet to be fully affected. This particular pandemic, moreover, has succeeded in attracting the attention of multiple sectors of society (politics, business, healthcare, sports, the arts) simultaneously, with each responding differently while, at least at the beginning and in large parts of the world, subordinating itself to the imperative to save as many lives as possible (Esposito, 2020; Eyal, 2020; Stichweh, 2020).

The uncertainties surrounding the pandemic are closely related to these temporal dynamics and remind us of the possibility that *major effects of the pandemic are likely to be produced in its future phases*. If the pandemic's effects are profound, it could even turn out to be a "historical event" as defined by Richard Sewell (1996), that is, a sequence of occurrences recognized by contemporaries and resulting in durable structural transformations. However, the long-term impact of the pandemic may turn out to be minimal or ephemeral, making it just another run-of-the mill "crisis" with limited structural effects. We simply do not know yet. Taking these uncertainties seriously is all the more important given that, by most accounts, we are still at the beginning of the pandemic. After all, we could hardly have written a sociology of the French Revolution at the time of the storming of the Bastille: The "French Revolution" as a historical event simply did not exist at the time (and, as we are well aware, neither did sociology as a discipline), just as "the COVID-19 pandemic" as a historical event does not yet exist now.

In our understanding, these uncertainties and the "eventful" character of the pandemic point to the usefulness of a practice-based research strategy focusing on *routine activities that are being established, reproduced, upended, connected, disconnected, institutionalized, and de-institutionalized in the course of the pandemic*. In this article we define said activities as "pandemic practices," distinguish various types thereof and, in particular, suggest exploring how they establish connections with each other. We draw on recent approaches to practice theory, which caution against the deductive reasoning implied by many macro-sociological concepts and instead urge us to study empirically how social practices operate and connect, thus helping us to do justice to the unpredictability of the emergent event. We share the sentiments of Rhodes & Lancaster (2020, p. 177), who argue that "[p]ublic health emergencies are rarely studied as they happen. But they should be."

Our analysis is also part of an experiment in contemporary sociological theory that adjusts to the dynamic situation by constantly looking for new pandemic practices and by studying

the development of these practices as they unfold over time. We might say, tongue in cheek, that what we are experimenting with is a happy marriage of the theorist and the armchair-ethnographer by engaging in a sort of "coalface theorizing" that relies heavily on direct involvement, bearing some resemblance to the research strategy outlined in Burawoy (1997). We should therefore note that, for the purposes of this article, we did not "collect data" in a systematic fashion; the examples we are using are necessarily *selective* and might even appear arbitrary at times. However, our aim is not to present a well-rounded study but to document an exercise in sociological imagination that may ultimately inform the collection of data and help develop an empirically grounded model for doing research on emergent events such as the pandemic. We therefore think of this article as the first of a series — without being able to predict, due to the very nature of the emergent event, the number of papers we are going to write.

The article is structured as follows: In the first section, after a brief explanation of our praxeological approach, we introduce a preliminary typology of "pandemic practices", which distinguishes between the primary, responsive and adaptive varieties. The following section highlights a fourth type which we call *pandemic meta-practices*, meaning practices that discuss, compare, and evaluate other practices. Based on the idea that meta-practices can play important roles in stabilizing other practices and connecting them in "bundles" or "practice formations," we suspect that meta-practices are likely to play a major role in determining the resilience of other practices. We conclude by outlining research questions that demonstrate the heuristic advantages of our approach and will help guide our attention when exploring the next phase of the pandemic.

2   The COVID-19 Pandemic: A Preliminary Typology of Pandemic Practices

We suggest turning "living through the pandemic" into a heuristic tool by looking at *social practices as they are being established, upended, connected or disconnected in the course of the pandemic* — and possibly thereafter. In line with recent developments in practice theory, we conceptualize social practices as repeated physical enactments and continual processes of sense-making based on a "nexus of doings and sayings" (see e.g. Hillebrandt, 2014; Nicolini, 2009 & 2016; Reckwitz, 2002; Schäfer, 2013; Schatzki, 2005; Schatzki et al., 2001). We assume that practice theories are well equipped to guide our reasoning for two main reasons. First, they caution against the deductive reasoning of macro-sociological concepts and instead urge us to observe in detail how social practices emerge and unfold in time and space. Second, they offer fresh ideas on how to develop an empirically grounded, "bottom-up" approach to the study of "large phenomena" such as the current pandemic. The main idea we are going to pursue is that the stability and impact of individual social practices can increase through "bundling" (Schatzki, 2005) with other practices, since relationships between practices add meaning and, possibly, legitimacy (Hillebrandt, 2014; Nicolini, 2016; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2005). In other words, social practices depend on "practice formations" to prevail and possibly even expand (Hillebrandt, 2014; Müller et al., 2020).

Against this backdrop, we define *pandemic practices* as (1) social practices that (2) emerge and/or continue during the COVID-19 pandemic, are (3) related in some way or another to the discovery and spread of the Sars-CoV-2 virus, and (4) can connect to each other in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic (which, as Schmidt & Volbers, 2011 explain, requires practices to be "public" in a broad sense of the word). Generally speaking, this conceptualization refers to all kinds of practices that transform the Sars-CoV-2 virus into a social phenomenon. We assume pandemic practices to be generative in that they not only address and report on the

virus but in so doing literally bring it into existence.[1] They do so in various ways: they study it scientifically and provide definitions of its genetic structure, they treat it medically, observe it in terms of newsworthiness, react to it in terms of policies or business strategies, debate it publicly, make sense of it ideologically, create projections, help in coping with it in daily life, trigger the formation of new social movements in order to criticize it as a "hoax", and deal with it in various realms of life, from healthcare, law, religion, to the arts, competitive sports and, of course, personal as well as family relationships.

This article introduces a preliminary typology which we plan to refine and expand during the course of the pandemic. We present our typology in two steps. This section introduces a basic typology revolving around the construction of the pandemic as a social problem; the next defines meta-practices as a type that, we suspect, plays major roles in establishing connections between other practices, and develops a sub-typology of them. The present section introduces three basic types of pandemic practice that draw attention (1) to how the pandemic is defined and treated as a social problem (primary pandemic practices), (2) how other practices react to such problem-defining and problem-solving activities (responsive pandemic practices), and (3) how practices farther removed from immediate problem-solving emerge or develop during the pandemic (adaptive pandemic practices).

First, we understand *primary pandemic practices* as activities that are directly concerned with defining and dealing with "the COVID-19 pandemic" as a social problem, particularly by spreading virologic epistemological knowledge to the masses, producing clinical trials, discovering and diagnosing the virus, trying to slow down its spread, and dealing with associated illnesses and symptoms. In so doing, they define it as an issue that needs to be taken seriously by everyone. Examples include practices such as "testing for Sars-CoV-2" (cf. Stark, 2020), "treating COVID-19 patients in hospitals," "collecting statistics about cases, deaths, recoveries etc.," "studying the virus," "providing models of its potential spread" (cf. Rhodes & Lancaster, 2020; Opitz, 2017), "producing and testing vaccines," "making political decisions about lockdown and reopening," "producing statistics," "publishing studies," "holding daily press conferences focusing on the pandemic," "keeping a certain distance in public spaces," "wearing masks," "fining/sanctioning offenders or shaming them," "spreading hashtags such as #Flattenthecurve on social media," "bumping fists instead of shaking hands," etc. What all of these (for the most part politically and scientifically induced) practices have in common is that they are directly related to the coronavirus and treat it as a social problem in need of attention.

It should be noted that, while primary pandemic practices share roughly the same goal of identifying and treating the pandemic as social problem, this does not mean that they are always in harmony with each other. For instance, biohacks aim to "liberate" the content of scientific articles related to the COVID-19 pandemic, challenge the cultural authority of scientists, and fundamentally question the institution of intellectual property — in the name of the health emergency created by the pandemic (Meyer, 2020). Another example is Brazilian journalists assuming the role of the government — which has proven to be unwilling to provide reliable statistics — in counting and updating tested cases and deaths related to the virus (Lopes & Queiroz, 2020).

It is also noteworthy that the majority of primary pandemic practices appear to be directly related to, and promoted by, formal organizations such as hospitals, research centres, public administrations, ministries, legislative bodies and so forth. These organizations provide expertise, invest resources, set standards, suggest (or enforce) cooperation, but also grant the lockdowns

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1.   This is, of course, not to say that we think that "there is no such thing as the virus." Our point is that for the virus to assume social relevance, it needs to be practically enacted.

that we witnessed in the early stages of the pandemic a sense of urgency and legitimacy. In short, primary pandemic practices are for the most part also organizational practices.[2]

Second, *responsive pandemic practices* emerge or multiply during the pandemic as immediate reactions to the problem-defining and problem-solving activities mentioned above. These includes everyday practices that adapt to the new situation by confirming and supporting the underlying rationale of primary pandemic practices. Examples are "conducting business/politics/teaching via Zoom, Skype etc. (instead of meeting in person)," "ordering and delivering food online," "making funny videos and posting them on social media," "taking long walks," or even "agreeing to mass burials." In many cases, these practices seem to substitute for practices which, as a consequence of primary pandemic practices, are no longer possible, often addressing established social problems (such as teaching, seeking recreation, burying etc.) in novel ways (Holzer, 2020). However, as we have become increasingly aware over the past weeks, responses can also express resistance against the norms established in primary pandemic practices, ranging from carefully coordinated political protests against lockdowns to ostentatiously refusing to wear masks in areas where it is officially mandated to do so (e.g. supermarkets).

Until the end of May, responsive practices in many countries and with few exceptions were largely affirmative of the goal to fight the virus by adhering to the standards promoted by a powerful discourse coalition of politicians in public office, health officials and scientists, journalists and other actors who enjoy the privilege of being well-established "public orators." By early to mid-June, there were more and more signs of an increase in responsive pandemic practices aiming to resist the dominant definition of the situation — in some countries and/or regions more than in others. These practices mobilized a variety of rhetorical strategies and frames (in the sense of Snow et al., 1986) ranging from established political cleavages ("we cannot trust party X") and skepticism about science to full-blown conspiracy theories such as "Bill Gates is trying to depopulate the world" (Wakefield, 2020). The latter especially gain traction as it looks more and more likely that the virus is going to stay with us for the time being (e.g. Schaeffer, 2020). A particularly interesting mode of resistance is "highlighting inconsistencies", especially on the part of those who are in favor of the dominant definition of the situation.[3]

Whether primary and responsive pandemic practices are mutually reinforcing and stabilizing or contradictory and corrosive is, therefore, an empirical question that has to be closely examined in the months to come. From where we currently stand, a mutually reinforcing relationship might be envisioned as effectively strengthening social cohesion in a country or region resulting perhaps in levels of cohesion even higher than before the pandemic, while an increase in contradictory modes of responsive practices might deepen existing political and cultural cleavages or even create new ones. These scenarios also demonstrate the benefit of a practice-based perspective, which draws attention to multiple micro-practices that are enacted simultaneously and therefore have to be carefully examined in terms of how they intersect — with largely unpredictable outcomes. General elections such as the US-American presidential election in November 2020 are likely to be interesting sites of such practices and their intensification (see Lahav, 2020 for an analysis of political speeches during the Israeli elections in March).

Third, there are *adaptive pandemic practices* that are not directly concerned with defining

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2.   See Schatzki (2005) and Loscher et al. (2019) for organizations as sites of practices.

3.   As in the case of Dominic Cummings, the chief advisor to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who has been exposed as deviating from the very regulations mandated by the government (BBC, 2020).

or dealing with the pandemic as a social problem (or responding to problem-solving activities) but adapt to it in ways that may shape how they operate once the pandemic has run its course. In most cases, such practices existed before and can now be observed from the point of view of how they are being maintained and evolving during the pandemic. Typical examples are established ways of doing politics and business, academic research activities, production and performance in the arts, professional and amateur sports, as well as many other practices that are being performed, halted, continued, or changed during the pandemic. While some appear to have come to a grinding halt for the time being, such as (most) professional sport leagues, others such as "buying food at the supermarket" continue in slightly altered form, while yet others have evolved considerably and will perhaps change permanently. Possible candidates for the latter might be things like "EU interior market policies," "running up the national debt," and "marketing e-bikes." Compared to the two previous types, many of these practices are more indirectly related to the virus. For this reason, they require even greater care and heedfulness on the part of the researcher when defined as objects of study under the rubric of "the COVID-19 pandemic." Put differently, because the virus is such a major event, social scientists are in danger of either seeing too many or too few connections between the pandemic and pre-existing social practices. We tend to see too many when the virus consumes all our attention and we are overwhelmed by how it impacts our everyday lives ("the virus has changed everything"); we tend to see too few when we are preoccupied with skepticism about how the media — and some of our colleagues — constantly paint doomsday scenarios ("the virus and its ramifications are being blown out of all proportion"). Again, a practice-based perspective is well equipped to help us avoid these two extremes by urging researchers to carefully examine how practices develop and connect during the pandemic.

We do not suggest any kind of hierarchy between these three tentative types as we assume them to be equally important in furthering our understanding of "the COVID-19 pandemic" as an emergent event. Rather, we intend to use this typology to study *relationships* between different kinds of pandemic practices and, ultimately, to explore their (in)stability and resilience during and after the pandemic. In the next section, we therefore introduce a fourth type, *pandemic meta-practices*, which will, we suspect, play a crucial role in establishing relationships between the practices already mentioned (and possible further ones yet to be outlined).

3 Institutionalizing the Pandemic? Identifying Meta-Practices

Fundamentally, social science research that aims to account for the pandemic as an emergent event needs to address the question of which of the emergent or evolving practices will fade and which will stabilize and stay with us after the pandemic is over. Since the first two types — primary and responsive pandemic practices — are directly related to the spread of the virus and its treatment as a social problem, we might suspect that they will largely disappear as soon as the epidemic is over: the first because there will be no immediate threat to take care of, the second because there will be no problem-solving activities to react to. It might be safe to say, for instance, that a practice like "painting white circles on the grass of public parks to promote social distancing" is likely to be discontinued and turned into a curiosity to be reminisced about by historians (at least until the next pandemic of this kind arrives). However, some variants of these practices might very well stay with us, as Romania (2020) argues.

We suspect that whether new or evolving practices will turn out to be resilient is likely to be contingent upon the degree to which they *connect* to other practices: "Daily corona press conferences of political leaders" may turn into "regular press conference to demonstrate polit-

ical skill" — particularly if they align themselves with practices such as "authoritarian political strategizing." Many academics — though by no means all (e.g. Roll & Ventresca, 2020) — increasingly worry (and even decry the fact in public statements[4]) that "regular usage of digital teaching tools" may partly replace face-to-face teaching, particularly if such changes are supported by narratives that make them seem useful and legitimate. "Wearing masks" might turn into a (partial) social norm and institution, especially if discursive practices institutionalize public concern about contagious illnesses. "Washing hands frequently" could become much more of an entrenched practice than it has been and, in turn, "shaking hands" might be permanently discontinued as experts on infectious diseases continually demand in public (e.g. Gunia, 2020).

In fact, all kinds of pandemic practices can be expected to turn into stable routines once they interlock with other social practices and with supporting, that is to say, legitimizing, narratives. Take the example of a married couple who in April 2020, after a government lockdown forces both partners to work from home, take up the habit of taking a walk together every day. In and of itself, we might expect this "responsive pandemic practice" to disappear as soon as both partners return to their respective offices. Yet, by establishing connections with other practices — like, in this case, an ongoing marital discourse about the health advantages of daily walks — it could turn into a habitual practice that outlives the spread of the virus.

These hypothetical examples raise a more general point that will guide our reasoning about the pandemic as an emergent event: We seek to explain the resilience of pandemic practices by studying the *relationships* they establish with each other and with other practices. Looking for such relationships — and for practices that help create them — draws attention to a fourth type of pandemic practices which we call *pandemic meta-practices*. By that, we mean practices that discuss, compare, and evaluate pandemic practices, in short, "talking/writing about pandemic practices." By understanding such discursive practices as a type of practice in its own right, we wish to highlight the performative properties of meta-practices, which, more than anything, help establish connections between local activities and may ultimately transform pandemic into post-pandemic practices. There are, however, a number of ways of "bringing the pandemic into existence by talking and writing about it" that seem to have different kinds of impact on the formation of pandemic practices.

First, there are *discursive practices which "theorize" pandemic practices in terms of abstract models, values and ideas*.[5] Vibrant scholarly discourses have produced a considerable body of literature on biosecurity in the context of global pandemics, often with heavy involvement from international organizations such as the World Health Organization, which has for years been theorizing pandemics in "core documents" such as "Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and Response" (Abeysinghe, 2013, p. 908), outlining different phases of risk and aligned strategies of how to deal with pandemics (including simulations prior to the current pandemic, cf. Opitz, 2017). However, there are indications that citizens are not only recipients of such scientific or scientized models (of best practice, forecasting etc.), but also actively engage in discussing and framing, thus contributing to the institutionalized meaning attached to them (Rhodes & Lancaster, 2020). In broader terms, concepts such as "models of sustainable ways of doing business," "safe ways of preparing food," or "European solidarity" are also drawn upon, built, changed and used during the pandemic to favor certain practices while delegitimizing others. These examples (revolving around pandemics as well as other sites of practice) demon-

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4.   See for instance the open letter "Zur Verteidigung der Präsenzlehre" ("In defence of classroom teaching") by German scholars (https://www.praesenzlehre.com/), which has more than 1,000 signatures.

5.   See Schmidt (2016) for theorizing as a social practice.

strate that during the pandemic, just as in any institutional context, "theorization" (Strang & Meyer, 1993) may help accelerate the diffusion — and support the legitimacy and institutionalization — of some practices at the expense of others. Once successfully institutionalized and promoted as a success story, new "models of pandemic risk assessment," "norms of European solidarity," or "public health standards" may remain or eventually become globally accepted templates, possibly turning out to be the "new normality" (Maesse, 2020). In the context of the pandemic this specifically points to the following questions: which actors are mainly responsible for theorizing abstract models, values and ideas; how in fact are templates brought into the public sphere; and how do such "spreaders" deal with criticism (see Rhodes & Lancaster, 2020 for instructive examples)?

A second type of pandemic meta-practice is *discursive practices denaturalizing established practices*. Such practices draw attention to activities that have long been taken for granted by making them an object of debate and reflection. For instance, "taking a walk," an extremely common activity, has become something that is increasingly talked about as a desirable social practice. In a similar vein, "face-to-face interactions" and "the need for basic human contact" are also frequently debated and sometimes weighed against the importance of social distancing. Practices which render implicit practices explicit can make them appear relevant, useful and desirable in ways that have not been acknowledged before, strengthening their legitimacy and supporting them in establishing (harmonious or, as the social distancing example indicates, contentious) relationships with other practices. However, the opposite effect is also possible: on reflection, institutionalized practices may turn out to appear less desirable and even expendable. Air travel, for instance, which has already come under massive criticism over past years, could lose even more public support as sectors such as tourism increasingly try to cater to national markets. Moreover, academic conferences, which have seen a dramatic increase in numbers over the past decades and to a certain extent even amount to a business sector (Wood, 2019), are criticized, not least by academics themselves, because of their ecological footprint. We might therefore surmise that academic conferences are going to decline in number over the next few years, maybe even resulting in the loss of the importance that has long been placed upon them by the scientific community.

Third, *there are discursive practices which observe and construct "the COVID-19 pandemic" as an event with potential historical significance*. Just as "the French Revolution", "1968", and "the fall of the Iron Curtain" needed observers such as activists, experts, novelists, journalists, politicians, and historians to fashion them as historical events, so too does the pandemic. In highlighting this type of meta-practice, we draw attention to the extensive amount of sense-making that brings the pandemic into existence. Thus, the pandemic is not just "there", it has to be given a name ("the COVID-19 pandemic", as opposed, for instance, to "Spanish Flu"), it has to be narrated and explained with reference to causally related occurrences, it has to be awarded historical significance, and, last but not least, it has to be constantly invoked in public speech acts. Comparisons with other major historical events such as World War II or the Great Depression that have gained traction at the time of writing (May/early June 2020) might be seen as a strategy for fashioning the pandemic as a historic event. The same sentiment — that what we are living through is not just a crisis but also a historical era in the making — is sometimes evoked in everyday phrases such as "in times of corona" or "in pandemic times." These examples indicate that attempts to describe and experience the pandemic as a historic event have already begun. However, we should note that similar phrases are sometimes used to suggest that we are currently experiencing an "abnormal normality" that will soon give way again to the "normal normality" of pre-pandemic times, which indicates that collective mean-

ing projects aimed at "making the pandemic an historic event" do not go undisputed. Some invoke the Hong Kong flu in 1968 or the 1957 influenza pandemic to argue that the current crisis is not as extraordinary as we are led to believe and that our responses are out of proportion. To give an example: a news article published in the libertarian monthly magazine *Reason* in late March 2020 compared the death tolls during the 1957 pandemic with those of COVID-19 and came to the conclusion that, owing to the more laissez-faire approach of 1957, the pandemic did not result in an economic crisis (Bailey, 2020). We suspect that the more efforts are made to turn the pandemic into an event with historic significance, the more likely we are to witness the rise of counternarratives.

A fourth and, we believe, particularly interesting type of pandemic meta-practice that deserves more attention compares the "management" of the pandemic in various localities, countries and regions around the world. It links primary practices such as "developing tests," "collecting data," and "publishing statistical overviews (of rates of infections, numbers of deaths, reproduction rates)," with "narratives dividing the pandemic into phases (e.g. beginning, peak and end)," or "anticipating and speculating about future waves," while also adding the idea of comparing and evaluating the ability of governments to manage the outbreak of the pandemic and mitigate detrimental consequences. In so doing, this type of practice *connects various pandemic practices by ascribing responsibility to local and national governments based on global comparisons*. As has been shown elsewhere, practices of comparing have a highly generative capacity and can dramatically influence decision making, categories, boundaries and narratives (Heintz, 2010 & 2016; Heintz & Werron, 2011; Epple & Erhart, 2015; Steinmetz, 2019; Epple et al., 2020; Grave, 2020). To give an obvious example: rankings claim to provide neutral evaluations but in fact suggest competition by comparing the same group of entities repeatedly and publishing the results periodically (Brankovic et al., 2018), thereby impacting the behavior of those who are subject to them (e.g. Espeland & Sauder, 2007).

A focus on practices of comparing sensitizes to how governments' capacities to manage the virus are practically related to each other. Without going into detail here, a preliminary analysis reveals the emergence of an impressive worldwide infrastructure allowing the progress of nation states to be constantly benchmarked. International or global scientific databases such as the COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University[6] or the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control[7] are frequently referred to in blog posts, articles or news reports on TV. What these public statements essentially do is that they (a) compare performances over time (is the curve flattening or is it rising?)[8] and (b) evaluate and compare the overall achievements of governments. In many cases, the core message is that countries A, B and C have done this or that which has given them an advantage over countries D, E and F. Sometimes the electronic databases themselves actively construct a "race" between countries, such as the website endcoronavirus.org which benchmarks countries in terms of whether they are — and this is a direct quote — "winning" against the virus or not. To further highlight their intention to suggest competition via public comparisons, the website draws our attention to differences between "countries beating the virus" (coloured green), "countries that are nearly there" (coloured orange), and "countries that need

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6. https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html

7. https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en

8. That the spread of the virus is imagined in terms of curves is interesting in and of itself. As we have argued elsewhere (Werron & Ringel, 2017), visual devices are instrumental in the success of numerical devices as they allow a vast array of information to be represented in one simple picture. In this case, we can immediately grasp dynamics over time by simply looking at a graph.

to take action" (coloured red).[9] These examples demonstrate a more general point that we wish to explore in the coming months: while public and scientific discourses alike often presume an intrinsic willingness on the part of individual or collective actors to compete against each other, a constructivist perspective (Brankovic et al., 2018; Ringel et al., 2020; Werron 2014 & 2020) draws attention to how this "competitive spirit" is actively produced by pitting actors against one another in public comparisons. Such ways of looking at the crisis, suggested by third-party rankings and related devices, are likely to influence the way we see political systems around the world, possibly shaping governments and (global) governance structures in the future.

4   Directions for Future Research: Studying Pandemic Practices and Their Relationships

Our preliminary analysis of the first phase of the pandemic (up to the end of May 2020) has unveiled three types of pandemic practice — primary, responsive and adaptive — as well as a fourth type, which we call *pandemic meta-practices*. We have found four subtypes of meta-practice: those that theorize pandemic practices in terms of abstract models, values, and ideas; those that denaturalize established practices; those that construct and deconstruct "the COVID-19 pandemic" as an event of historical proportions; and those that compare local, regional and national entities, establishing global criteria for comparison and ascribing responsibility to (national) governments in the process. Fundamentally, our typology suggests the study of how such practices emerge and develop during the pandemic and how they connect to each other. In fact, we see the main contribution of our article as being to draw attention to possible *connections and relationships* between (types of) practices. We follow the praxeological advice to trace "connections between trans-situated practices" (Nicolini, 2016, p. 105) to develop an empirically grounded understanding of "large phenomena" such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Avoiding preconceived macro-theoretical assumptions and focusing on relationships between practices helps us to adequately deal with the unpredictability of the event without giving up on the aim of developing a comprehensive sociological understanding. In closing, we aim to demonstrate the heuristic advantages of this perspective by discussing a number of research questions which we plan to investigate in more detail during the next phases of the pandemic, exemplifying each set of questions with examples from the first phase.

First and foremost, our approach requires studying the *emergence and development of pandemic meta-practices* as the event unfolds over time. The four subtypes — theorizing, denaturalizing, historicizing, and comparing-and-evaluating — come in many forms and combinations, some of which have yet to materialize. What has become evident early on is that *statistical practices* serve as an essential backbone of how governments try to make the pandemic governable (Rhodes & Lancaster, 2020). However, statistical practices not only inform political decision-making; on a more basic level they also aid in constructing social realities.[10] Without numbers, public narrators such as virologists, but also scholars from other disciplines,[11] politicians, his-

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9.   https://www.endcoronavirus.org/countries

10.   For a sociological analysis of numbers as communicative and comparative devices see Heintz (2010); for an overview of sociological studies on quantification see Mennicken & Espeland (2019).

11.   While many scholars basically build on the claims made by virologists, thus, in a way "piggy-backing" on their accomplishments, others criticize them harshly (see Eyal, 2020 for a brief account). It is noteworthy that these debates are more than merely academic, as they not only imply different political outcomes but also different ways of imagining and therefore constructing "the individual." As practice theory has shown,

torians, journalists, pundits, activists and many others would be deprived of the possibility of pinpointing the "trends" that serve as arguments for the dramatic measures that are currently shaping our lives and that have impacted the economic livelihoods of many. In order to better understand how trends are constructed over time, we have to examine the full spectrum of practices, including the introduction and use of (new) categories of comparison, the collection, visualization and publication of data, and the reception, interpretation and use of these comparisons in public discourse.

As for meta-practices that might become increasingly influential during the next phase of the pandemic, ranking countries and governments is an obvious candidate. We have argued repeatedly that rankings are a prime mechanism for using numbers to compare various entities on a global scale and suggest competition between them (Brankovic et al., 2018; Ringel et al., 2020; Ringel & Werron, 2020; Werron & Ringel, 2017). So far we have witnessed the publication of only one corona-related ranking entitled the "COVID-19 Regional Safety Assessment" (Deep Knowledge Group, 2020) by the *Deep Knowledge Group*, a consortium of commercial and non-profit organizations. However, given the many incentives to publish rankings and the capability of organizations to engage in their production (Ringel et al., 2020), we might very well see more such endeavours in the months to come, especially if the pandemic stays with us for a longer period of time.

When studying these and other pandemic meta-practices, we have to account for the plurality of actors and organizations involved in their production and for the varying meanings attached to them in different social contexts (Maesse, 2020). For instance, there is reason to believe that the mass media — from newspapers to television to social media — play a quintessential role in adding political meaning and impact to pandemic meta-practices, as they constantly use numbers to compare and benchmark countries' performances against each other, designating "losers" and "winners" and addressing mass audiences (Lopes & Queiroz, 2020). To give a striking example from the first phase: In a segment entitled "32 Countries Are Beating Coronavirus. The U.S. Isn't One," the anchor of the US-American cable news station MSNBC Chris Hayes came to the conclusion that "this crisis is among other things a global test of governance, and it is just really hard to look at all the data and come to any conclusion other than that our leaders are failing" (MSNBC 2020). This is, of course, just one of innumerable cases in which constantly enacted public comparisons imagine countries competing with each other, amounting to what one of the YouTube users who responded to Hayes's video in the comment section referred to as "the corona Olympics." As of now, we think it noteworthy that designations of countries as "winners" or "losers" can change quickly: at first, South Korea was frequently imagined to be "the victor," but we saw case numbers rise after the country reopened and the voices of appreciation are currently rallying to New Zealand.

Second, our focus on relationships between practices draws attention to the fact *that pandemic meta-practices are subject to contestation*. In other words, pandemic and conflict practices are closely intertwined. It is partly for this reason that we are currently — and likely will be permanently — lacking a universally accepted standard of assessing "success and failure." Take the example of how the government of Sweden has been evaluated over the past months. Touted by some as presenting a "viable alternative model," Sweden has received a fair share of criticism *and* praise for deviating from international standards by deciding against a countrywide mandatory shutdown. It seems as if even government officials themselves have had a hard time getting a grasp of their (comparative) situation. For instance, the top virologist Anders Tegnell,

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the formation of individuals, referred to as "subjectivation," is an important object of study (Alkemeyer & Buchmann, 2016).

frequently interviewed by the international media, has long defended the country's strategy, but recently admitted that mistakes were made (e.g. Lindeberg, 2020). A focus on pandemic meta-practices thus sensitizes us not only to how the "Corona Olympics" is unfolding, but also to struggles over the "rules of the game," that is, which categories or criteria are being used to assess success or failure, and which groups engage in consensual or contradictory forms of meaning-making. How do these categories and criteria change over time, and how do such changes affect the public discussion of "winners and losers"? How is the reliability of the numbers discussed, and what attempts are made to improve or derail the compilation of statistics?

These observations lead to a third set of questions: *how do different types of meta-practices connect to and enhance each other*? The meta-practices distinguished above — theorizing, de-naturalizing, historicizing, comparing-and-evaluating — are not isolated but often relate to and sometimes seem to merge with each other. Comparative meta-practices such as rankings, when introduced into national political debates, let national practices appear as contingent political choices rather than unquestioned local traditions or cultural habits, effectively denaturalizing such practices. For instance, in light of global comparisons national and regional differences in the routine wearing of masks (when feeling ill) that were widespread in much of Southeast Asia even before the pandemic (as opposed to other parts of the world), can now be perceived, celebrated and criticized as the outcome of conscious collective decision-making as well as symbols of cultural (in)competence. In such cases, comparing-and-evaluating connects to or even merges with the denaturalizing of existing practices. Studying this and other combinations of meta-practices will be a major focus of our research during the next phase of the pandemic.

Fourth, our interest in relationships between pandemic practices suggests that *how pandemic meta-practices align with, and sometimes even turn into, other types of pandemic practices should be studied*. This will be particularly interesting to observe when it comes to the impact of comparing-and-evaluating on the definition and tackling of the pandemic as a social problem (primary practices). The perception of countries as being more or less successful in "solving" the problem can be expected to feed into the (contested) definition of the problem in other countries, and vice versa. Similarly, global comparisons of practices with regard to "wearing masks" seem to have helped turn wearing masks into a widespread responsive practice that cannot be understood without its relationships with pandemic meta-practices. Such relations, too, should be studied in more detail during the next phase of the pandemic.

Fifth, our view suggests looking into *how pandemic meta-practices contribute to the connection of other practices*. Take the example of counting death rates and convalescent rates, a practice that is initiated, standardized and organized by the meta-practices of national agencies or otherwise legitimate organizations acting as "centres of calculation" (Latour, 1987). In a second step, international organizations such as the World Health Organization or initiatives such as the COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University use these national data sets and further aggregate them, thus providing the numerical infrastructure for the global comparisons that undergird the "Corona Olympics". For this reason, it is of the essence to study how national and international "centres of calculation" initiate, standardize, stabilize and relate pandemic practices on a daily basis (Lopes & Queiroz, 2020; Maesse, 2020). We further suspect that in order for "centres of calculation" to act in such a capacity, they heavily rely on digital infrastructures, whether in regard to the collection of data or the publication of the aggregated numbers. Once published, these numbers can then be easily used by journalists such as the aforementioned Chris Hayes. We can further speculate that algorithms and their application in meta-practices might become an object of interest and could thus be examined in situ (Lange et al., 2019). We also suspect an influx of

social media practices in the months to come aiming at visually comparing local practices (such as opening restaurants, meetings friends in public etc.) by posting pictures, thereby creating connections that might, or might not, enforce pandemic practices, subsequently making them "normal practices."

And sixth, following praxeological calls for "examining the global in the local" (Nicolini, 2016, pp. 108–110), we wish to draw attention to *how other practices react to or reflect pandemic meta-practices*, thus establishing connections between various practices "bottom-up". In some instances, it is easy to pinpoint such relationships. In large parts of the world, teaching interactions are now routinely mediated via software such as Zoom, thus clearly reflecting the impact of the pandemic in local practices (Romania, 2020). While these "local" experiences are coming into being, the discussion whether and to what degree remote teaching produces the desired pedagogical results has developed into a transnational meta-practice in its own right which is likely to co-determine the acceptance of remote teaching tools — and thus, possibly, their "local" legitimacy and resilience after the pandemic (e.g. Roll & Ventresca, 2020). Again, what we find here, and possibly in many other cases, is pandemic practices reacting to, and further feeding back into, meta-practices.

In other cases, it is not immediately clear whether local practices reflect pandemic meta-practices or vice versa — and whether relationships are being established. Focusing on a broad range of practices allows us to indulge in controlled speculation about patterned relations that might at first seem far-fetched. For instance, while civil unrest due to police violence has for a very long time been a highly charged issue in the United States, we might analyze how the dramatic intensification of protests in the wake of the killing of George Floyd by a police officer (May 25, 2020) are related to or influenced by pandemic practices. Our approach suggests that we should be open to speculation and further explore such hypothetical entanglements. For instance, the fact alone that many of the protesters wear masks is an obvious indication that the demonstrations are connected to the pandemic discourse in some ways, as are media reports and social media posts speculating about how both events might be connected. However, the example also shows that the relationship between pandemic meta-practices and other practices is not a one-way street. With civil unrest erupting all over the United States and demonstrations globally calling for fundamental change and police reform, media attention has shifted over the past weeks, with the COVID-19 pandemic losing its prerogative of dominating the news cycle while also establishing new connections. We may also suspect that the pandemic and specifically the "Corona Olympics" are going to be an important issue in upcoming political election campaigns as incumbents try to tout their accomplishments and challengers are likely to weaponize the issue in public attacks. The ability to "manage the pandemic," or lack thereof, as documented in global comparisons, thus turns into a political tool connected to all kinds of campaign issues. And, as mentioned earlier, global comparisons can be expected to further affect, and be affected by, conflict dynamics of all kinds, making the study of pandemic meta-practices an important part of a sociological understanding of these conflicts.

To conclude, we wish to emphasize again what we see as the main contribution of this article: It draws attention to relationships that are being established between various — new and old — social practices during the pandemic and that together are constructing "the COVID-19 pandemic" as the global emergent event it is being perceived as today. A truly comprehensive sociology of the pandemic would have to study the rich variety of practices and meta-practices in-depth, tracing connections and relationships and detecting indicators for continuity and change. It would also have to account for national, regional and local differences (as indicated in the first contributions to the discourseNet-Working Paper Series on the Corona Crisis;

cf. Maesse, 2020; Nicoletta, 2020; Lopes & Queiroz, 2020). This, of course, is a collective task that cannot possibly be accomplished in a few of our articles. We therefore see our contribution first and foremost as an invitation to the sociological community to think together about these and other types of social practices that emerge, develop and connect during the pandemic. With some perseverance and good fortune, we might be able to develop a methodological template of sorts which we can use to approach not just this particular pandemic but also other emergent events awaiting us in the future.

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