

Citation

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Puzzling data policy

>> In the social sciences, the inadequate corona data policy of the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) and the focus on the daily or cumulative number of confirmed Covid 19 cases has been criticised, albeit only sporadically, already in spring 2020. For example, one of the leading statisticians in sociology in Germany, Rainer Schnell - together with Menno Smid of the Infas Institute for Applied Social Science - stated in unsparing clarity at the digital colloquium ‚Sociological Perspectives on the Corona Crisis‘ of the Social Science Research Center Berlin on 15 April 2020 that it was incomprehensible why the RKI would limit itself to absolute reporting incidences of those tested positive without taking into account influencing factors such as test occasions and test frequencies. The RKI also refrained from representative surveys on the incidence of infection and instead relied on unreliable survey instruments. Professional pandemic management is simply not possible without a solid database. These early cautionary recommendations went unheeded instead of shedding light on the darkness of the official data desert on the actual infection rate and individual infection risks.

In forceful words, Schnell and Smid proposed, firstly , to conduct representative prevalence samples stratified by state and town size (n = 30,000) to identify the proportion of infected people in the population, secondly , panel studies (n = 5.000) to capture actual disease trajectories and symptom-free trajectories of people who tested positive; third , post-mortem sampling (Covid secondary or principal diagnosis, popularly ‚in the context of‘ or ‚with‘ vs. ‚on‘); and fourth, random sampling among the general population (n = 3,000), including the elderly and disadvantaged, to empirically examine social effects of the pandemic response.

Even the question of whether bus drivers or hairdressers were at risk of exposure could have been tested simply and straightforwardly, as medical statistician Gerd Antes noted. One would only have had to ask for the current occupational position in the case of antigen rapid or PCR tests. None of this happened in the pandemic years in Germany. Even in the second pandemic year, there was no fundamental change in the completely inadequate data situation and data policy of the RKI, especially in comparison with other European countries. While, for example, the Office of National Statistics in Great Britain and later Corona Immunitas in Switzerland conducted regular seroprevalence studies from May 2020 onwards, the responsible decision-makers and authorities in Germany saw no need for this in the second year of the pandemic. Instead, they used excessive fear rhetoric in public communication for too long to convey the seriousness of the situation to the population. The bottom line was that the political decision-makers and their expert staffs were of the opinion that they could control complex social systems by means of reporting incidences and that far-reaching top-down interventions were a proven strategy to ‚get a grip‘ on the virus.

It is a sociological mystery and at the same time an open research question why the relevant state institutions in Germany ignored the relevant methods of social science statistics, did not produce valid, representative data on the pandemic and did not conduct evidence-based monitoring of measures. Instead, they relied for too long on speculative mathematical-physical computer modelling. The gloomy forecasts about the further course of the pandemic were also culturally underpinned with the collective fear that we were dealing with a universal, indiscriminate health threat to the entire population (‚killer virus‘) that could rapidly assume an exponential course.

Under the selective radar of modelling positivism, much of what constitutes a pandemic in a society remained unobserved in 2020 and 2021, first and foremost the significance of social settings, structures and institutions as well as ‚local‘ cultural practices for the occurrence of infections, and above all the undesirable consequences of a restrictive, paternalistic policy of measures. In retrospect, it seems almost bizarre that the pandemic was communicated as a ‚socially structureless‘ biomedical natural event, with a clear distribution of roles: society as the ‚herd‘, politics as the ‚shepherd‘ and the citizen as the ‚sheep‘, to take up a pointed formulation by Wolfgang Streeck from the ‚Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung‘ of January 2021.

In view of a puzzling data policy and an ad hoc pandemic management that seems almost erratic for long stretches, the question of the vulnerability or resilience of democratic institutions in times of extra-ordinary crises is all the more pressing. This makes it all the more urgent to review the last three years in a methodologically controlled, unbiased and open-ended manner, taking into account broad professional and interdisciplinary competences. In the last three years we have experienced directly that a pandemic is not an isolated virological-medical event, but a complex bio-social process. An interdisciplinary assessment of pandemic management would be necessary if only to be able to systematically take a look at the unintended consequences of the policy measures that have been overlooked for too long. No less than the question of the institutional learning capacity of state, politics and society is on the test bench. <<

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