

Discrimination, governance, and trust in the age of COVID-19

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The coronavirus pandemic has upended daily life around the world, and is simultaneously triggering challenging questions of discrimination, governance, and trust, says sociologist Jenny Reardon, who calls for higher levels of public oversight and vigilance as the pandemic unfolds.

Reardon, the director of the Science and Justice Research Center at UC Santa Cruz and a leading scholar of genomics and medical ethics, said the pandemic has been "decades in the making," rooted in profound ecological disturbance and climate change, as well as the gutting of public health infrastructure and—public governance itself—amidst the ravages of "hyper-capitalism."

"This isn't a temporary hold on normal life," said Reardon. "It would be more accurate to think of this as a complete reconstitution of what is going to be counted as normal."

Climate change is a "[public health problem](#)," according to Reardon, noting that industrialization, habitat destruction, and [climate change](#) make

pandemics more likely. But the crisis is revealing fissures not only in the ecological world, but in the human domain, as well. Lack of government preparedness in this country, underscored by the lack of [coronavirus](#) tests and protective equipment like masks, has focused discontent on the Trump administration, but Reardon said it would be a mistake to focus too much attention on critiquing Trump. "Obama gutted the public health infrastructure, too," she said. "We all need to take responsibility for what's going on. Everybody has a role to play here, and everybody has responsibility."

Governance

Public health experts have been worried for years about the outbreak of new emerging diseases, and fears of a global pandemic represent the worst-case scenario. The coronavirus crisis has been aggravated by a backdrop of governance that has skewed too far in the direction of private property and individual rights, according to Reardon.

"We need to reassess, fundamentally, how we're governing ourselves," she said. "We can't rely on private industry. We need a government. We need public infrastructure. Pandemics require collective responses. There has to be some sort of correction."

Reardon described the "perversion" of policies put in place for the public good, citing an attempt by the biopharmaceutical company Gilead Sciences Inc., to receive a government tax break for the development of a drug, Remdesivir, that could be useful against COVID-19. But the "orphan drug" tax break is available only for diseases that affect fewer than 200,000 people, so the timing of Gilead's application is critical—and unclear.

"When pressed to state the day they filed their request, they wouldn't give up this information," said Reardon, adding that Gilead faced pressure to rescind its application for the tax break, something

it did last Wednesday.

Which gets to the issue of trust, said Reardon. "There's information, and there's the matter of trust," she said. "It's not just public versus private, it's how the constitution of the public has been so perverted in our country with its hyper-capitalist focus that many people have lost their trust in public government."

Similarly, officials with the Centers for Disease Control cannot relay information to the public about what companies are doing to address the pandemic, because it's considered proprietary information. "They can't share critically important information," said Reardon. Beyond the biology of the coronavirus, this pandemic is "making visible deep problems that are now being felt widely by everyone."

The public must be vigilant, ensuring that economic bailouts don't overlook those with greatest need. The public must also watch out for what Reardon calls "disaster authoritarianism" as leaders try to implement policies they want, regardless of whether they directly address the pandemic, such as closing off borders.

"I'm calling it the pandemicene, because this is going to re-work everything," said Reardon. "We are going to be asking fundamental questions about how we order ourselves. This pandemic is forcing us to reckon with those questions, and that's all to the good. We shouldn't think any of this is temporary."

Discrimination

Reardon also rejected descriptions of the coronavirus as the "China virus," saying that how we characterize the virus matters. "We're already seeing discrimination against people who seem to be from that part of the world," she said. "There are numbers on that."

Accuracy matters, and inaccuracy persists: the so-called Spanish Flu of 1918 actually originated in Kansas, she noted.

Reardon wonders how communities that have

historically not been treated well by the government are responding to government orders to social distance or shelter in place. "There's a huge problem of trust," she said.

Finally, discriminating between those infected with coronavirus and those who are not begs uncomfortable and challenging questions about who receives treatment and of what type, as hospitals and doctors confront the scarcity of supplies and equipment like ventilators.

"Discrimination is the basic capacity to distinguish between this and that, but that capacity is shaped by values," said Reardon. "There will be many forms of discrimination as we move forward, and their consequences will grow weightier."

Stockpiles or high-tech science?

The pandemic has exposed regulatory uncertainties regarding whether the Food and Drug Administration has the authority to regulate testing for things like coronavirus—or genomic testing, a subject Reardon has examined in great depth.

It has also shone a light on deficient stockpiles of basic health care materials, including swabs, goggles, and dry ice. "What you need in a pandemic, first and foremost, is those basics," said Reardon. "We need high-tech science, but we also need the public health infrastructure and goggles and masks. We need people in those different worlds to work together, to see themselves as needing one another."

As a result, the crisis may also reconfigure ideas of what it means to help, she noted. "As scientists and scholars, we may have a greater capacity to respond to the needs of people rather than to work in our own exact area," she said.

Spring quarter seminar

Reardon is tracking the pandemic closely, and teaching a class about it this quarter.

"I wasn't supposed to be teaching this quarter, but I'm not sitting this out," said Reardon. "The world is changing, and if you're going to be part of what

comes after, you've got to be a part of it now."

The upper-division seminar, Living and Learning in a Pandemic, is an outgrowth of her winter quarter class, Sociology of Health and Medicine. "I was totally primed," she said. "A lot of students found that class really helpful. I like to use contemporary examples, and coronavirus was in the news. Our last class meeting was canceled when we got word that the campus was shutting down."

Several students expressed interest in a follow-up class—a "part two," said Reardon. "It's a really stressful time. They wanted to learn and stay focused on what's going on around them."

The class also gives Reardon a window on how the [pandemic](#) is unfolding in communities across the state and beyond. "I can learn from my students what's going on where they live," she said. "When you tap into what your students have to offer, you can learn a lot."

Provided by University of California - Santa Cruz

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