

Dual Reflections on the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This article is an autobiographical account of COVID-19 from two juxtaposed perspectives reflecting the experiences of a mature anthropologist and a young, prospective anthropologist. The article presents reflections about both personal and work experiences during the pandemic as well as thoughts about how the future might unfold. The two narratives are a reminder of the importance of identity, partially shaped by both lifecycle and context, to our understanding of how people have responded to the pandemic and the work ahead to repair a divided society.

Keywords

COVID-19, Impact, Personal Life, Work Life

Introduction

This article is a reflection both on the meaning and the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on our lives over the past almost two years now. It is an autobiographical account from two perspectives. One is my perspective, that of a mature career anthropologist (Julia) and the other is

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the perspective of a young high school student (Zach) looking ahead to a possible career in anthropology. When the editors of the *Journal of Business Anthropology* invited me to submit a piece for the focus issue on the pandemic, I was planning to write only about my own reflections. However, over the past few months, I have had the pleasure of collaborating with Zach. I thought it would be of interest to readers to hear two viewpoints juxtaposed as reflections and observations of the pandemic and related from the two very different experiences.

Not only does age or lifecycle shape our perspectives but also context plays an important role. Zach is writing from his home in the Silicon Valley, which has influenced his life overall and more specifically his viewpoint on the world and his actions in it. I write as someone who grew up in and still regularly visits San Francisco, so I have some familiarity with Zach's context. However, I am now and have been over the past forty years, living in Metro Detroit, a very different place. Zach and my daily lives embody these places; therefore, it is not surprising that the pandemic is experienced differently by each of us in relation to context, both personally and in our work.

We present our reflections on COVID-19 and its effect first on our personal lives. Then we move to our observations and experiences with the world of work over these past two years. We also discuss how we expect our lives to evolve going forward and conclude with some final remarks and observations about the pandemic with a broad view of its effects overall and what we have learned from it.

On Personal Life

COVID-19 has affected our lives differently. Of course, there are similar effects that all of us have felt directly or indirectly such as illness among our friends, family or in our communities, changes in our daily routines, restricted travel, and adjustments in our relationships. Our personal experiences, however, offer particular and contrasting accounts of the effects of the pandemic based solely on our ages. Lifecycle is clearly important in analyzing COVID-19 as a social phenomenon as is evident in our two accounts.

Julia

I did not experience much of a disruption in my personal life as a result of COVID-19. My awareness of a potential pandemic began when I was in Heidelberg, Germany with my husband for two months for the birth of my second grandson there. We were watching the news about the rapid spread of the new disease in China and the alarm it was creating for people there as well as for health professionals around the world. The German media were covering the story daily and widely, so we were

aware of potential danger when we returned to the U.S. in mid-February, although the belief at the time was that there had been no cases in the U.S. The disease was a problem only in other parts of the world.

It did not take long to realize, however, that our own world was about to be changed dramatically when we learned of the cases in Washington and especially when the NBA canceled its season in early March. My husband and I were planning to take an Amtrak trip to the Southwest and California at the end of March. We canceled the trip and all our associated travel arrangements. As the pandemic grew, we also continued to cancel or postpone travel until nothing remained on the calendar. Our eating patterns definitely altered as we gave up our frequent restaurant dining and cooked at home almost exclusively. My husband did all the grocery shopping. I learned to bake sourdough bread, like many others who turned to activities like this for comfort. We hunkered down at home and saw no one socially. At least we had each other. Our oldest daughter and her family lived in Chicago, and we were accustomed to visit with them frequently. That travel stopped, too, and we saw each other instead via FaceTime, which was a frequent part of our interaction already. Like everyone, we missed the personal contact, especially with our granddaughters. This period of my life has been the longest I have ever been at home. My husband and I got outdoors more than usual on walks around the neighborhood, connecting by phone with a friend so we could walk “together” while still physically apart in our respective neighborhoods. I also have been a sewer for most of my life, so I turned to making masks, probably more than a hundred, for friends, family, and neighbors. It was a “cozy” activity that kept me connected to the people important to me.

So many of my friends and family live in different parts of the world, and I have been accustomed to connecting with them virtually. Nothing much changed for me in these relationships, except that the topic of conversations was now dominated by COVID-19 and how we were all coping with its effects, except for one notable instance. Longtime local friends of more than 25 years emailed me a link to the *Plandemic* video that was circulating early in the pandemic. As always, I paid attention to what they sent, but was horrified when I realized it was filled with conspiracies and lies. I responded accordingly to the email, but my reply to my friends was met to my great surprise with disdain and rejection. What followed was a long text exchange in which I tried to explain “rationally”, with facts, that the video was false. Soon after that incident, my friends severed contact with me that has continued to this day. It is a great loss, and likely similar to the divisions that have arisen for others in this pandemic, fostered by social media and manipulation by hostile players, political and otherwise.

One of the most difficult effects of the pandemic for me has been the political division in the U.S. and tendency for a large segment of the

population to believe and espouse what to me are evident deceptions. The deteriorating tenor of both public and private discourse is almost intolerable to me. At the start of the pandemic, I, like many others, was glued to the television news to learn what was happening with the pandemic here in the U.S. and around the world and what was being done about the spread of the disease, which was becoming more frightening by the hour. I found that my stress level and my anger were rising, and I had to ration my consumption of the news or risk health problems, both mental and physical. I could not understand the prevalent animosity towards healthcare professionals leading the fight against the pandemic and the propensity to believe untruths among so many in this country. I tried very hard to apply my anthropological skills to make sense of it. My friends were contacting me as an anthropologist to help them process what was happening, and I achieved only modest success by relating to concepts like individualism as a core cultural axiom and to anti-intellectualism as another traditional aspect of U.S. culture. I also pointed to the grassroots nature that has underpinned the formation of the nation and continues as a value today. The collective often takes second place to the individual. There has been a growth in in-group collectivism, however, connected to identity and identity politics that has gained prevalence over the past decade to the detriment of the larger national collective and agenda. To this day, I struggle to make sense of the division in the U.S. and to be horrified and angered by it.

Zach

I can't remember exactly when I first heard about COVID-19, likely because it meant next to nothing to me at the time. The only experience I had with pandemics was reading about them in textbooks. I was alive for epidemics like the Ebola and Zika outbreaks, but they remained just exotic diseases separated from me by thousands of miles. They desensitized me to the potential of a seemingly innocuous virus to change the world. So, as I heard news clips floating around of a new virus circulating in China, I paid no heed. But slowly, things began to change. Reports came in of COVID debilitating Europe, and local outbreaks in the US began to be noticed. I remember seeing pictures of Italian supermarket shelves barren and doctors working out of crude makeshift hospitals. I think that's when I knew this one would be different. And on March 13, 2020, my school sent out an email sending us home and canceling classes for two weeks. Reality began to set in.

I never realized how closely my life was tied to school. It's the most classic juvenile complaint to grumble about school and education, but take it all away and we realize just what they were offering us. Close friends were easy enough to stay in touch with: I knew who meant the most to me and was able to keep them near in my life. But classmates and

acquaintances disappeared. The ones you'd chat with in the hallway or work with on an English project were gone. I believe this had a particularly strong effect on us youth because of the very nature of our lives. For the most part, we don't have friends or colleagues around the world like many adults do. We often grow up in just one community, without much of a chance to explore and befriend much of the world yet. Instead, we become tied to the institutions of our hometown and the people we meet through them; strip that all away and we're left without much of a net. With the closing of school and its associated activities taking away many of our friends, teammates, and passions, it really was a shock to have this pandemic overcome our lives. I had to learn to cope—such as by finding new ways to connect and new hobbies to pass my time—but the only way for my social life to truly return to normal was to wait for the pandemic to subside. I've managed to make it through okay, and if anything, I've gained a new perspective on the people and things that are important to me. But I worry about how the last couple of years may have affected teenagers' mental health as a whole. Take away the normal social development of in-person institutions, and will you have rippling effects in the coming years? For young children and young adults alike, we've never really experienced something of this scale, and seeing how we all emerge out of it will be a transfixing thing to do.

The largest impact that COVID-19 had on me was in relation to school, but it still touched many other areas of my life. Long-overdue trips to visit family were pushed back and pushed back again. Travel had never been a major part of my life, but going such a long time without a chance to see relatives highlighted just how much the small moments had meant to me. I still lived across the country from them regardless, but not being able to gather for just a few days a year, be it to eat Thanksgiving dinner or celebrate my sister's graduation, had its impact. Months felt slower, miles felt longer, and calls felt more canned than ever before. And in a more general sense, this lack of travel had additional unwelcome effects given the state of my life. The pandemic struck right as I was coming of age and taking an interest in exploring the world. Just as I was beginning to truly appreciate the deeper aspects that other cultures and places had to offer, rather than just their attractions and free WiFi, I was sharply disconnected from those opportunities. But beyond these requirements of visiting no other countries, no other states, and for a time, no other counties, there was the restriction of my room. I've never known what the wall behind my laptop or the ceiling above my bed looks like so well as I do now. The lack of literal travel I found paralleled itself in what felt like the entrenching confines of my room. I felt stuck in the same place, day after day in a monotonous and repetitive cycle. Getting out there in any sense—even if just driving to my friend's house across town—began to feel like an adventure after some time.

The political environment created by the pandemic also had a

profound effect on me. My intuition guessed in the beginning that the pandemic would bring us together. Fighting a common enemy and looking out for each other could only help us bond. But, as Julia mentioned, it seems that it only divided us. We took what should have been intelligent conversations and decisions and turned them into all-out wars over our ideologies and lifestyles. Rather than collaborating and caring for one another, we attacked each other in a spirit of distrust and enmity. In my own peaceful suburban town, town council meetings have ended in screaming as people diminish the value of decency and unity. I'm worried what this polarization will lead to. Was it just that a high stress environment has led us to act irrationally, or has it forced us to show our true colors? And will these symptoms subside with the end of the pandemic, or will my generation be forced to step out into the world as new adults and confront the division we face? I'm worried by the increasing hostilities we seem to see in government, online, and in our own communities. Similarly, to Julia, I'm perplexed by how we've gotten to this stage as a society and by how we can find our way forward from here.

On the World of Work

Beyond our personal reflections on the effects of COVID-19, both of us have adjusted to the changes in work life that have come about due to the pandemic. For Julia, who has been working for almost fifty years, there have been many big changes and small adjustments to both the workplace and work practices over the years. The effects of COVID-19 are just one aspect of continuous, long-term career change. For Zach, who is already familiar with work as an entrepreneur at a young age and is looking ahead to a lifetime of working, the view is very different.

Julia

As it became very clear that COVID-19 was not going away any time soon, my worklife changed only to a small extent. The amount of virtual work I was already doing simply increased. Beginning in 1991, I left private industry and began to work at home full time, forming my own research and consulting business, which expanded from a sole proprietorship to an S-Corp within a few years. My work as a professor at Wayne State University was added and then became dominant in the early 2000s, although I continued to do private research and consulting on a part-time basis. I was fully prepared both psychologically and physically to work from home since I had been doing it already for quite some time.

The integration of work and personal life has always been a goal for me, unlike for many others who prefer to keep these two aspects of their lives separate. My work has provided flexibility to accommodate the duties and pleasures of parenting and family life, although it has been

demanding and often required many hours beyond 40 per week as well as required odd hours to collaborate with colleagues in other parts of the world.

My work has focused for many years on global teams and collaboration, particularly in product development, so I was very accustomed to not only studying virtual work but working virtually myself. When it became clear that the pandemic was going to require virtual work exclusively, I was very ready and only had to make minor adjustments. I had already been teaching in a blended classroom since the early 2000s as part of the Engineering Management Masters Program (EMMP) offered by Wayne State University at Ford Motor Company. Working engineers in that program always had to travel from time to time and would sign into WebEx to attend class remotely. I also had been teaching doctoral seminars in the Global Executive Track (GET) Ph.D. in Industrial and Systems Engineering since 2008 that were synchronous, both in person and virtual. I was familiar with several different virtual collaboration programs, including Zoom that I had been using for a while already. It was easy to begin teaching from home, and I already had everything I needed. In fact, I welcomed the opportunity to relinquish the drive to campus and the late evenings on campus.

EMMP and GET also afforded me the opportunity to observe how the engineers and other professionals I was teaching were making adjustments in their own work practices as a result of the pandemic. The auto industry began requiring virtual work for anyone who could do it, and the plants required COVID-19 compliance with masks and then vaccines as they became available. Several of my students at Ford began working on Ford's emergency program to make ventilators, with many long hours and worries about bringing COVID home to their families. The resulting stress was evident. However, all with whom I interacted seemed to adjust pretty well, and no one left their jobs because the work became too difficult or their home situations required it. The Ford engineers are a tough bunch and used to demanding jobs and frequently changing conditions. That point deserves emphasis. A key to survival is resilience, which these engineers possessed, and the plant employees as well.

Consulting work has continued for me during the pandemic. I conducted training sessions for businesses on global work, did consulting and webinars on qualitative methods, and continued research in industry. I also worked with global colleagues on virtual conferences and workshops including the Global Business Anthropology Summit that Zach was also involved in as an intern. My yearly Collaborative Innovation Networks Conference, for which I am a Steering Committee member, turned to monthly, virtual "brownbag" sessions.

Throughout the pandemic, my income has remained consistent

and constant. I have been very fortunate and am very grateful. While the changes brought about in my life by COVID-19 have been minimal and easy to accommodate, I am fully aware of the societal and personal conditions that have shaped my circumstances. There is more to say about how we go forward and how we interpret the effects of COVID-19, which we will discuss in the next sections.

Zach

My relationship with work was not fundamentally altered by COVID-19, although I did experience some meaningful realizations. Both before and during the pandemic, my work experience has largely come in the form of entrepreneurship. Prior to the pandemic, I was involved in creating and running several e-commerce businesses. The very nature of these companies made them fairly resilient to the changing world; I did most of my work behind a computer screen, so being in lockdowns didn't require a significant revamp of my operations. In fact, while there were minor problems such as backlogs in global shipping, they were easily countered by the increased consumer demand in online shopping across the country. I was lucky enough to be in a position where my main streams of income remained secure and I could continue operating them more or less the same.

In other areas, however, my relationship with work did undergo more of a change. Once I was adjusted to the idea of meetings and networking being fully virtual, I embraced it fully. Career paths and intellectual opportunities that had once felt out of reach were now just an email or a Zoom call away. One such opportunity was with the 2021 rendition of the Global Business Anthropology Summit. As a student with a growing interest in the field of business anthropology, I'd come across the webpage for the conference and found the premise of it fascinating. In normal times, I would've just exited the page and added it to a mental list of activities to look out for in the future. But with the decentralized nature of work, I decided to send off an email on the off-chance something would come of it. A few more emails and a couple of Zoom calls later, I officially joined the team behind the Summit as an intern. Despite their location in Berlin 5,000 miles and 9 time zones away from me, we were able to have a meaningful and productive experience as a team. I brought to the group a unique tech background that was directly applicable in expanding the digital presence of the conference, as well as knowledge and familiarity of California and US-based institutions that could complement the partnership opportunities the core team was forming in Europe. Meanwhile, my far more educated and experienced colleagues were teaching me the whole time about the intricacies of anthropology and its uses within the realm of business. This mutualistic relationship was almost wholly the result of the reformatting of work. Our ability to

integrate so efficiently, a product of a Zoom-based world, enabled the conference to flourish and both groups to gain substantially from it. It's this virtual, decentralized access to endeavors that I believe has been one of the most valuable changes from the pandemic. We still need to work on improving access to these offerings, and we most definitely should still make physical interaction a part of our work, but the undeniably increased ability to tap into opportunities from anywhere is an invaluable asset in the world of work. I would still have liked to meet my Summit colleagues in person or worked side-by-side with them as we prepared for the event, but I can't complain for having gotten the experience I did over the alternative of nothing.

Outside of my own life, I've seen this democratization of opportunity manifest itself in many regards. Many adults I know have taken advantage of virtual education opportunities to expand their knowledge and gain new credentials. Other peers have replaced or supplemented their traditional income streams by endeavoring into e-commerce, content creation, and other forms of virtual entrepreneurship. Yet others have undergone career changes and entered industries that they've always wanted to try. The pandemic, at least in some regards, has put power into the hands of the people. With its associated labor shortages, career shocks, and moments of self-reflection, it's created an environment ripe for acquiring benefits and pursuing passions. I've seen this in my own life as I move into more complex and meaningful forms of entrepreneurship, and I've seen it in the lives of countless others as they similarly gain the professional and personal autonomy they've long been looking for. There's undeniably been a lot of economic harm throughout the pandemic, but I'd also argue that there's potential for there to be significant, lasting benefit. It will be fascinating to follow these trends over the next several years and identify how the patterns of collaboration, innovation, and decentralization ultimately establish themselves in the long run.

Going Forward

As both of us look back on our experiences over the past almost two years, we have observed patterns that give us a hint about what might be ahead of us. We hesitate to look too far ahead because the world around us is just changing too quickly, and there have been too many rapid changes and unexpected events in our recent past to make any sort of predictions. However, there are a few things that we are pretty confident we will experience going forward in 2022 and likely beyond.

Julia

Personally, I am most concerned about the political divisions in the United States and the erosion of democracy. I am astounded by the conspiracy theories and the lies that continue to be propagated by many

different groups, but by the political right especially. We are all in peril if facts and reason and a focus on our common well-being do not prevail. I will continue to puzzle about how we have gotten into this difficult situation, but I expect that it has resulted from fear and the perceived loss of power, control, or economic and social status among many. Finding a way to bridge divisions, even if only among my friends and family, will be a focus for me. Anthropology can truly help. I know there are already efforts among many in the field to bring both understanding and expertise to find solutions to social ills and economic inequality that underlie the divisions.

We are now learning how to live with a pandemic and how to plan for future similar health crises. Wearing a mask is commonplace for me now, and I can see it becoming a norm whenever contagion is upon us. The “laggards” will eventually adopt the norm, as is the usual pattern in diffusion of anything new. We will be careful about personal contact, and we may see fewer hugs and handshakes among strangers or new acquaintances. Asking about or determining vaccination status will become commonplace as will be regularly testing for COVID-19 whenever groups of people, even close family members, get together. We will adapt to a cautious new way of life.

There will be few changes in my own work practices. The world of work will continue to rapidly evolve to one that is more virtual and hybrid, with both online and face-to-face interaction. COVID-19 just accelerated this already developing pattern. Offices will continue to be important for intense project work and for socialization and socializing. We people still need one another to foster collaboration and innovation. There is nothing like talking spontaneously and in person to solve complex problems, build upon new ideas, and innovate.

At the same time, work will be increasingly conducted in interconnected project networks. I expect that the days of the bounded organization will soon be over, and we will work in ever more globally connected networks that continually evolve based upon changing conditions and needs. Local and place-bound work will remain important, especially personal services, but more of it will be folded into or connected to the flow of work in global networks. Because we are seeing a labor shortage now, employees have an edge. We may see more organizing among workers with unions becoming important again. We may also see increased entrepreneurship as people want to take more control over their own work lives and become less dependent on employers, who they feel may have let them down during COVID-19. It is worrisome that health care providers have been so taxed by the pandemic. We are likely to see a shortage of health workers of all types at a time when the population is aging and demand is likely to increase in general and not just due to the pandemic.

Travel will take some time to ramp up to pre-COVID-19 levels, especially personal travel. I began traveling again this past August and will be spending a couple of months in Germany in early 2022. I am not sure what a prolonged reduction in leisure travel, or even business travel, will mean for the travel industry in general. Adaptation will be necessary, and some hospitality businesses may no longer exist. Certainly, business travel will not be as prevalent as there will be less of a requirement for face-to-face meetings with the increased capability, frequency, and institutionalization of virtual work.

There are likely more patterns that will become evident as 2022 progresses, but these few are some of the most dominant in my view.

Zach

Looking at the future of commerce, I think much of the decentralization and democratization we've seen is here to stay. Companies and individuals have learned that they can achieve the same or more while having increased independence and autonomy. While we inevitably will begin to return to the office and reinstitute increased in-person interaction, I doubt we will ever return to the expectation of complete on-site attendance as before. Work that can be done virtually will stay at least partially virtual; it's a trend that was already happening before but has been vastly accelerated by the pandemic.

Of course, all of this hinges on the question of COVID-19's longevity in society. Will we be able to stamp it out, or will it become a recurring virus like the flu? This question in particular is more biological than anthropological, but analyzing the potential responses to it is very much within our domain. If the virus is to stay in society, will we be able to adapt to it, or will it remain a contentious issue? On one hand, as Julia mentioned, it could follow the pattern of everyone eventually adopting a new norm after the introduction of a change in society. Through productive discourse and debate, as well as the simple passage of time, we could reach solutions that make everybody content with moving forward. On the other hand, we're nearly two years into this pandemic and public harmony seems to be near an all-time low. COVID-19 and all of its related issues have become so politicized and polarized that I struggle to see how any progress could be made in the near future should the virus remain circulating in society.

Education will also be fundamentally changed as a result of the pandemic. Despite the presence of some downsides, virtual tools have proven to be more than adequate for providing both live and asynchronous teaching. I expect that this will cause a continued shift towards novel and independent forms of education. Whether that be with the growth of online course platforms or increased autonomy in formal education, I think we will slowly see the erosion of the dominance of the

traditional educational institutions. Their importance and influence will remain, but their seeming monopoly on the path to success has been exposed by the upturning of our world.

The personal experience I've had COVID-19 will affect my life in many ways moving forward. It's allowed me to connect with positions and opportunities I would have otherwise never known, enlightening me to the many life paths ahead I can take. It's enabled me to explore the field of business anthropology, which has now become a passion of mine. It has shown me just how dynamic and apt for disruption the world of work is. These ideas and their outcomes, imparted on myself and many others, will be fascinating to watch play out as the world moves forward from this period of turmoil.

Concluding Remarks

Zach and I have related our experiences with COVID-19 and what the pandemic has meant for each of us in our lives over the past couple of years. We would now like to conclude with a few remarks about "identity" as a multi-faceted concept that serves as a sensemaking lens for understanding variation in response to the pandemic and that explains much about how both of us have adjusted to pandemic life.

Eisenberg (2001) posited a theory of communication and identity which is multiple and dynamic, in line with the experience of living and working in a virtual world where boundaries are increasingly blurred and communities imagined. In Eisenberg's conceptualization of identity, it is not a noun; it is a process that we create and in which we live. It enables us to find meaning in interdependent, open systems in which we are challenged each day to know who we are and what we believe amidst an endless array of alternatives. The choices people make are connected with their personal narratives, or their self-talk, and with how they emotionally experience their lives. Experience takes place in an environmental context, or "surround," that is available for the creation and sustenance of particular identities. People draw from the surround, which includes culture as well as the physical environment, to make sense of their lives and construct their identities. The surround is a sort of information field that contains both symbolic and other raw material for sense making. For instance, the surround could be a physical environment (e.g., neighborhood, city street, farm, home or work office) located in a larger state or nation, such as California or the United States. It can include a virtual environment and interaction with colleagues from multiple cultures in multiple locations simultaneously, characteristic of today's mobile work lives. Both Zach and I are part of dynamic, diverse, urban environments, have access to rich resources, and interact with many others. This surround is in contrast to others, such as rural, sparsely populated areas or poor urban enclaves with few resources. It is not hard

to imagine how the surround as an information field would influence people's responses to COVID-19.

In Eisenberg's model there are three sensemaking processes that are mutually reinforcing. First, mood is the label for people's experiences of their body in the world. For example, we all have a physical presence which we feel and which others react to, that shapes our perceptions of who we are and how we think of ourselves. The physicality of one's identity is particularly influential if one stands out in some way. For example, if one is a person of color among a largely white population, or is someone who is very tall, or very beautiful, or physically abnormal or unusual in any way, one's experience in interacting with the world is likely to be shaped in a substantial way by these characteristics. For Zach, being a young white male in Silicon Valley reinforces opportunity and acceptance. For me, an older white woman from San Francisco and Detroit, experiences are similar, but viewed in a rearview mirror and shaped by lifecycle (Gluesing 2008). Further, being Black in an inner city or being a white male in a rural setting can produce contrasting views of the world and one's relationship to it in daily interaction. This diversity of perception and resulting action is evident in the Black Lives Matter movement and responses to it.

The second sensemaking process is the personal narrative, which takes account of the fact that people live according to stories, and that personal narrative is a primary tool for sensemaking. The stories we tell ourselves can heavily influence how we perceive the world around us, how we give it meaning, and how we behave in it, particularly in relationships with others. For example, Zach might tell himself that he is capable, that there are opportunities out there for the taking, and that he can contribute to the world. My own self-talk might be about winding down my career. Self-talk can create or reinforce a particular cultural or occupational identity, for example, as a Silicon Valley entrepreneur or an American anthropologist. The possibility inherent in narratives is central to identity. The narrative can be singular, inflexible, or even fearful. Or one's narrative can be one that embraces a dynamic, flexible, and pluralistic view of identity. Storytelling, what we tell ourselves about ourselves and our experiences, as well as what we tell others, is important. We can see these narratives in full view on the evening news, and there are many of them that contradict or conflict creating tribes based on shared narratives that can be hostile to each other.

The third sensemaking process is communication with others, which is dialogic. When successful, it reinforces the competency of individuals as well as the power of the group. Donald Trump and his followers have established such a successful sensemaking process that reinforces the self-worth of people in the group and enhances their power. The narrative has done harm to our collective attempt to combat COVID-19.

In dialogic communication each party to the process shares a commitment to both voice their experience and to be open to others in the group. There are numerous complexities associated with the practical aspects of dialogue, including who gets to participate, and what effect existing power and status relations have on the resulting communicative encounters. For example, privilege often predisposes people to develop narratives of opportunity, while disadvantage can have the opposite effect and close people off from possibility. We have seen much evidence of this process during the pandemic.

Identity is a complex process of drawing lists and stories from the surround that complement or otherwise inform one's mood, personal narrative, and communicative style. Changing communication is rarely enough to change social systems of relationships and society, unless these changes can also be tied to altered moods, narratives, and elements of the surround. For some, the advancement of information technology has largely changed the surround, making it more virtual and enabling people to develop in-groups that shrink the surround and limit interaction with others outside the group. For others, such as Zach and me, information technology has opened the world up to us and increased the opportunity to interact with diverse others. Our own personal narratives are such that we seek out these interactions as reinforcing to our identities as part of a global surround. Others experience information technology differently, with some perceiving it as a threat to a way of life they want to preserve.

The challenge that faces us all now is figuring out how to open up boundaries and enable more flexible identities that can both handle uncertainty and allow our shared humanity to enter our narratives, both personal and cultural. The media can play a positive role in this endeavor. So can social networks, our educational institutions, and the government. The same tools that often divide us can be the key to bringing us together. Institutional collectivism with a superordinate goal, such as fighting COVID-19, can be a balancing force against too much in-group collectivism, and can foster tolerance for diversity and more inclusive identity narratives. We all have work to do, but we are hopeful.

Only connect ... (Forester 1999).

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Zachary Stevenson is a high school senior from Los Gatos, California. He has explored business anthropology from the perspectives of a student, researcher, and entrepreneur. His topics of interest include venture creation, political economy, and startup culture.