

	<p>Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems Issue 12, Vol. 8, 2025</p> <p>RESEARCH ARTICLE </p> <p>How COVID-19 Reshaped Everyday Social Interaction: A Qualitative Field Study of Post-Pandemic Social Relationships and Physical Distancing Practices</p>
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Abstract <p>The COVID-19 pandemic constituted an unprecedented global crisis that extended beyond its immediate health implications to profoundly transform social life and everyday interpersonal interactions. While extensive research has examined the medical, economic, and psychological consequences of the pandemic, comparatively limited attention has been given to its long-term social effects, particularly in the post-COVID period. This study seeks to explore how prolonged preventive health measures—most notably physical distancing—have reshaped social relationships, interactional norms, and daily social practices after the decline of the pandemic. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study relies on in-depth interviews conducted with a randomly selected sample of six respondents. This methodological approach allows for a nuanced understanding of individuals' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of post-pandemic social life. The analysis focuses on changes in patterns of interaction, social proximity, trust, and emotional engagement, as well as the persistence of distancing behaviors in everyday contexts. The findings reveal a clear causal relationship between enforced physical distancing during the pandemic and the observed decline in social interaction in the post-COVID period. Participants reported enduring behavioral shifts, including reduced frequency of social gatherings, heightened caution in face-to-face encounters, and a redefinition of personal space. These changes suggest that physical distancing has moved beyond a temporary health measure to become partially internalized as a normalized social practice. Drawing on sociological perspectives, particularly Erving Goffman's concept of civil inattention, the study demonstrates how pandemic-induced interactional norms continue to shape daily life even after the immediate health threat has subsided. The study concludes that the COVID-19 pandemic has left lasting imprints on social relations, contributing to a reconfiguration of everyday interaction and social cohesion. These findings underscore the need for further sociological inquiry into the long-term transformation of social life in post-crisis societies.</p>	Citation Fekir, A.; Elbaa, M. (2025). How COVID-19 Reshaped Everyday Social Interaction: A Qualitative Field Study of Post-Pandemic Social Relationships and Physical Distancing Practices. <i>Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems</i> , 8(12), 1540-1547. https://doi.org/10.56384/sei/8.12.130
Licensed	<p>1540 - www.imcra.az.org, Issue 12, Vol. 8, 2025 How COVID-19 Reshaped Everyday Social Interaction: A Qualitative Field Study of Post-Pandemic Social Relationships and Physical Distancing Practices Fekir, Abdelrahmane; Elbaa, Mohammed</p>

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1. Introduction

Importance and Objectives of the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic represents one of the most profound global crises of the twenty-first century, extending far beyond its immediate health consequences to deeply affect economic systems, political structures, cultural norms, and, most significantly, patterns of social interaction. While extensive scholarly attention has been devoted to the medical, economic, and psychological dimensions of the pandemic, its long-term social repercussions—particularly those shaping everyday interpersonal relationships in the post-COVID period—remain insufficiently explored.

The importance of the present study lies in its attempt to examine the post-pandemic social reality and its manifestations within daily life, focusing specifically on how prolonged preventive health measures, most notably physical distancing, have reconfigured the nature of social relationships. These measures, though essential for public health protection, disrupted long-established forms of social interaction, intimacy, solidarity, and collective participation, leaving enduring traces on individual behavior and social practices (Pah, Manehat, & Malut (2022)).

This study aims to contribute to sociological understanding by analyzing how physical distancing has altered patterns of social interaction and reshaped interpersonal relationships even after the formal decline of the pandemic. By adopting a qualitative approach grounded in in-depth interviews, the research seeks to capture individuals' lived experiences and subjective perceptions of post-COVID social life. Ultimately, the study aspires to shed light on whether these changes represent temporary adaptive responses or signal a deeper transformation in social norms and everyday interaction within contemporary society.

Problem of the Study

Human social action, despite its apparent diversity and variability, is never entirely random or arbitrary. Rather, it is continuously shaped, structured, and regulated by specific social contexts that define acceptable behaviors, interactional norms, and patterns of response. Even moments of apparent disorder or social disruption are embedded within pre-existing social frameworks that influence how individuals act, react, and interpret their surroundings. This dynamic relationship reflects a reciprocal process in which individuals actively construct their social reality through daily practices, while society simultaneously constrains, guides, and reshapes those practices.

However, there are exceptional circumstances in which social contexts are imposed upon individuals in an unusually coercive and restrictive manner. Wars, natural disasters, economic collapses, and epidemics represent such moments, as they generate emergency social conditions that profoundly limit individual autonomy and reorganize daily life according to newly imposed rules and priorities. The COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a paradigmatic example of such an emergency context, as it introduced unprecedented constraints affecting nearly every dimension of social existence.

As a global health crisis that emerged in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly transformed social life at both macro and micro levels. At the macro level, it disrupted economic activity, healthcare systems, education, and social security structures. At the micro level, it imposed new behavioral norms on individuals, including lockdowns, compulsory health protocols, vaccination campaigns, restrictions on mobility, and, most notably, physical distancing. These measures redefined social encounters by minimizing face-to-face interactions and reducing social gatherings to the lowest possible levels deemed necessary.

Within this context, a new pattern of social interaction emerged—one characterized by caution, avoidance, and spatial separation—even among family members, friends, and community peers. This transformation can be analytically linked to Erving Goffman's concept of "*civil inattention*" (or polite neglect), wherein individuals mutually acknowledge one another's presence while deliberately maintaining distance as a socially accepted norm. During the pandemic, such distancing was normalized and institutionalized; however, its persistence in the post-COVID period raises critical sociological questions.

The central problem addressed by this study concerns the extent to which physical distancing has produced lasting changes in patterns of social action and interpersonal relationships. Has daily social life returned to its pre-pandemic form, or do the effects of prolonged distancing continue to shape interactions, trust, intimacy,

and social cohesion? To what degree have pandemic-induced behaviors become embedded within everyday practices, even after the immediate health threat has diminished?

Accordingly, this study seeks to investigate whether the decline in social relations observed during the pandemic persists in post-COVID society and to explore how individuals interpret and negotiate these changes in their daily lives. By addressing these questions, the research aims to provide a deeper understanding of the long-term social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the evolving nature of human interaction in a post-crisis world.

Study hypothesis:

Physical distancing as a health protocol has contributed to the decline of social relations between individuals in daily life following the pandemic.

In this hypothesis, we attempt to explore the implications of physical distancing as a precautionary measure or protocol during the pandemic and the possibility of its continued impact on individuals' daily lives by revealing the nature of interpersonal relationships after the pandemic.

Study concepts:

Physical distancing:

Social distancing, also known as physical distancing, is a set of non-pharmaceutical infection control measures aimed at stopping or slowing the spread of an infectious disease. These measures can range in severity from encouraging remote work and staying at home, to wearing masks, to the most extreme measures imposing curfews except for those with exceptional travel permits, such as those working in essential services and emergency services.

The goal of social distancing is to reduce the likelihood of contact between infected people and uninfected people, reducing the rate of transmission and ultimately reducing mortality. (Wikipedia)

Social Relationships:

It is defined as the mutual connections between the components and groups of society that arise from their contact and interaction with one another. It is also defined as a model of interaction between two or more individuals. This model represents the simplest unit of sociological analysis and involves purposeful contact and prior knowledge of the other person's behavior. (Dalia, 2018, p. 146)

Max Weber believes that the term "social relations" is often used to refer to a situation in which two or more individuals engage in a particular behavior, each taking into account the behavior of the other and directing their own behavior accordingly. The content of the relationship can be determined by conflict, hostility, sexual attraction, friendship, fame, reputation, or the exchange of goods. (Abada, 2016, p. 289)

Pandemic:

In pre-Islamic Arab culture, a pandemic was defined as a calamity, a disaster, and a great affliction that eradicates health, wealth, and crops. A calamity that befalls a person's property or health, and its sublime example is provided by environmental and climatic calamities and social strife. (Abu Tawfiq, 2020, p. 4)

A pandemic has several technical definitions, including: "something that cannot be prevented." A pandemic can be divided into two categories:

A pandemic not caused by humans: This is called heavenly, meaning that humans have no connection to it, such as hail, drought, wind, snow, floods, earthquakes, locusts, birds, pests that destroy crops, and epidemics such as the plague, viruses, and others.

A pandemic caused by humans: This is the action of a ruler, an army, and the like, and the destruction and devastation they cause to property. (Qandouz, 2020, p. 10)

Corona virus:

The epidemic disease that has spread throughout the world since late 2019 is the coronavirus known as Covid-19. It has a dual scientific name: the abbreviated acronym SARS-CoV-2, derived from the initials of a longer phrase: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2, and its Arabic equivalent: "Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus-2." (Abu Tawfiq, 2020, p. 2)

Coronavirus (Covid-19) is a novel virus, a new strain of coronavirus. The danger of the virus lies in its ability to infect the human respiratory system, and there is currently no known cure. It is also a large virus that can remain on surfaces for long periods. Due to its large size, it can remain in the air for no more than three hours, which is sufficient time to catch the virus unless we follow preventive and safety measures. (World Health Organization, p. 1)

Daily Life:

The concept of daily life was first used in English in the seventeenth century to refer to various aspects of ordinary life, such as routine work, interactions between individuals, and elements of material culture such as clothing and decoration. The word "daily" appeared in English in the fourteenth century, and its early roots go back to Old French and Latin usage. In the sociology of ordinary life and routine, it denotes the everyday material and "lifeworld," referring to the sphere of life in which individuals experience the culture of their society. (Al-Qammas, 2021, p. 81)

2- Methodological Foundations of the Study:

Study Methodology:

The descriptive-analytical approach: The descriptive-analytical approach focuses on describing and analyzing the phenomenon. The process of describing and analyzing sociological phenomena in our social reality does not emerge from nothing. There are data resulting from an accurate description, expressed qualitatively and quantitatively, using various data collection tools. This provides the researcher with a basis for constructing a scientific and objective analysis. The descriptive-analytical approach is appropriate for addressing the phenomenon of violence against service workers because it allows us to collect sufficient and accurate data and information, and then study and analyze what has been collected objectively, arriving at the factors that led the worker to become a victim of violence by stakeholders. By following this approach, the researcher can analyze and describe the phenomenon, highlighting its various causes and factors, and arrive at conclusions related to the previously proposed hypotheses. (Obeidat et al., 1997, p. 48)

Research Tools:

Interview:

An interview, in general, involves the researcher visiting the respondents in their homes or workplaces to obtain information they believe the respondents already possess.

Interviews are commonly used as a data collection tool in case studies, and sometimes in survey studies. Interviews are important in gathering information if the interviewer handles the respondents appropriately. Many people tend to provide information orally rather than in writing, and interviews become even more important with illiterate people and children.

Interviews are usually conducted with people directly connected to the research topic. For example, when studying a political party, the party leader and its founders can be interviewed, or a group of prominent members. When a researcher wants to conduct research on Arab brain drain abroad, they conduct interviews with a number of these migrant talents, as well as with a number of specialists in researching the phenomenon. Thus, in general, the researcher resorts to interviews to investigate. (Abrash, 2008, pp. 265-266)

Study Sample:

Random Sample: A random or probability sample gives each member of the group from which the sample is drawn a definite and equal chance of being selected. Therefore, a sample of 50 students from a total of 500 students can be randomly selected by placing the names of each group in a box and drawing 50 names from it. (Abdul Jawad, 2011, p. 112)

Areas of Study:

- **The human domain:** This represents a group of individuals or groups that will be studied. In this research, we relied on interviews directed at six individuals from Algerian society who lived through the outbreak and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the post-pandemic phase.

- **Timeframe:** From March 30, 2025 to April 20, 2025.

- **Spatial scope:** Aïn Defla Province was established following the 1984 division, having previously been part of the province of El Asnam (currently Chlef). It is located 150 km west of Algiers, bordered to the north by Tipaza Province, to the south by Tissemsilt Province, to the southeast by Medea Province, to the east by Blida Province, and to the west by Chlef Province. It consists of 36 municipalities, the most important of which are Aïn Defla (the provincial capital), El Abadiya, Miliana, El Amra, El Attal, Rouina, Djendel, Khemis Miliana, Bourached, El Mokhataria, Boumdefaa, and Hammam Righa. Its population was 821,320 in 2012. It is characterized by its agricultural nature, producing 50% of the national potato production and about a third of the national apple production. It is famous for growing fruit trees, and its area is 4,165 km². (Wikipedia)

3- Results of the Study

First: General Data

The study sample consisted of six (6) cases, ranging in age from 20 to 40 years, with an average age of 30 years. This means that most cases were young adults.

We adopted equal chance allocation when selecting the sample with regard to gender. Therefore, the sample was divided equally between males (3 cases) and females (3 cases).

University level represented the predominant level in the sample, as most of the respondents (4 out of 6) stated that their educational level was university, while the remaining (2 out of 6) stated that their educational level was secondary.

Most of the respondents adhered to the various health prevention protocols, including sterilization, wearing masks, and physical distancing (4 out of 6 cases), while the remaining (2 out of 6) adhered to the lower levels of these preventive protocols.

Second: Data related to the hypothesis

Cases presented:

- Case No. 1:

The interview took place in the university campus on April 10 at 1:00 PM. Interview duration: 30 minutes. A 20-year-old, single, second-year university student, he does not believe that the pandemic has affected people's daily lives, or at least, as he puts it, his personal life. He also believes that social relationships between individuals are the same as those before the pandemic, both in terms of the nature of these relationships and their strength. The subject adhered to physical distancing measures at their minimum levels, meaning that he only adhered to this protocol while studying, attending offices that enforce physical distancing, and continuing his normal daily life, including socializing and daily presence in public places.

The respondent does not believe that physical distancing has any repercussions after the pandemic, as he believes that individuals are practicing what they normally practice in their daily lives. **Empirical Findings:**

Qualitative Case Narratives

Case No. 2

The interview was conducted on April 12 at 10:00 a.m. within the central library of the university campus and lasted approximately 40 minutes. The respondent is a 30-year-old single woman with a university education (third-year level) who is employed in an administrative department.

According to the interviewee, the COVID-19 pandemic generated profound repercussions on individual and collective life, both during and after the crisis. She emphasized that social relationships were particularly affected, especially at a time when many individuals suddenly lost close relatives and loved ones. From her perspective, interpersonal relationships after the pandemic no longer resemble those that existed prior to it. The respondent highlighted that the pandemic enabled her to reassess the value of life, arguing that it should not be consumed by conflicts over trivial matters.

She reported strict adherence to preventive health protocols, particularly physical distancing, which led her to avoid family gatherings and refrain from participating in social events, including moments of shared joy and grief. She described this withdrawal as "compulsive," reflecting the intensity of fear and social pressure experienced during the pandemic. According to the researcher's interpretation, this behavior contributed significantly to the weakening of interpersonal ties. Nevertheless, the respondent expressed optimism, suggesting that the negative social consequences of the pandemic could gradually be overcome through renewed efforts to strengthen social bonds, particularly among relatives and neighbors.

Case No. 3

This interview took place in a mosque in Defla Province on April 11, following Tarawih prayers, and lasted approximately 40 minutes. The respondent is a 40-year-old married man with two children, holding a secondary education certificate, and employed in the military sector.

The respondent stated that the COVID-19 pandemic had a substantial impact on daily life, particularly by restricting freedom of movement and disrupting routine social practices. He emphasized that the pandemic created exceptional social conditions, including unemployment and diminished job opportunities, which disproportionately affected vulnerable social groups.

From his perspective, social relations before the pandemic differ markedly from those observed afterward. He argued that the crisis revealed opportunistic behaviors among certain individuals, despite the expectation that collective crises should reinforce solidarity and social cohesion. He cited examples of price monopolization and exploitation during quarantine periods as evidence of moral decline in social relations.

The respondent adhered strictly to preventive measures, including sterilization and physical distancing, by limiting visits to relatives and friends and avoiding family gatherings. He believes that physical distancing has produced lasting repercussions on post-pandemic social relations, observable in everyday practices such as the reduction of physical greetings and the limitation of family ceremonies to a small number of participants. These changes, in his view, reflect a broader transformation in social interaction norms.

Case No. 4

The interview was conducted on April 17 in the fruit and vegetable market of El Abadiya and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The respondent is a 35-year-old married man with one child, holding a secondary education certificate and employed as a municipal worker.

The respondent reported that the pandemic deeply affected his family life, particularly because his marriage occurred shortly before the outbreak and his wife was in the early stages of pregnancy. Due to heightened health

risks associated with pregnancy, he adhered strictly to physical distancing measures, even within his immediate family. His occupational role in the civil registry further increased his exposure to the public, intensifying his fear of transmitting the virus to family members.

He noted that his family relationships underwent significant changes during and after the pandemic. As an only child, he had previously maintained close emotional bonds with his parents; however, fear of infecting them led him to distance himself physically and socially. Even two years after the pandemic, he reported that these relationships have not fully returned to their pre-COVID state.

The respondent complied with all preventive measures, including quarantine, physical distancing, and continuous sanitization. He believes that physical distancing has fundamentally altered social relations and daily life, contributing to a decline in social gatherings and workplace interactions. He attributes these changes to individuals' gradual adaptation to a new mode of living, suggesting that prolonged exposure to pandemic conditions has normalized these behaviors.

Case No. 5

This interview was conducted on April 19 at Djilali Bounaama University at 9:00 a.m. and lasted approximately 35 minutes. The respondent is a 28-year-old single woman, a first-year master's student, and currently unemployed.

Unlike other respondents, she asserted that COVID-19 did not fundamentally alter social relationships within society. She attributed this perception to the absence of a strong health culture in Algerian society, noting that many individuals did not fully adhere to quarantine measures or preventive protocols due to socio-economic constraints.

The respondent admitted that she only complied with mandatory measures, such as wearing a mask when entering the university, while largely ignoring sanitization and physical distancing in her private life. She maintained that life continued largely as it had before the pandemic.

From her perspective, physical distancing will not produce lasting social repercussions, and social life will eventually return to its pre-pandemic form. She described individuals who experienced lasting social changes as overly anxious or obsessive, indicating a divergence in subjective interpretations of the pandemic experience.

Case No. 6

The final interview was conducted on April 17 at 10:00 a.m. on the university campus and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The respondent is a 24-year-old single female university student in her third year of study.

The respondent emphasized that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected her social life, particularly her relationships with university peers, due to academic disruptions and intermittent lockdowns. She reported that her commitment to physical distancing, reduced study hours, and frequent commuting home led her to avoid gatherings and social interactions.

She adhered strictly to all preventive protocols, including physical distancing in classrooms and at home, continuous sanitization, and abstention from attending social and religious events. She relied primarily on phone communication to maintain contact with relatives, which she identified as a major factor contributing to the weakening of family and social relationships.

Despite these challenges, the respondent expressed hope that social relations would gradually normalize once the effects of acquired distancing habits diminish.

Discussion of Results

Based on the analysis of the presented cases, which reflect diverse attitudes toward physical distancing and its social consequences, the findings provide qualitative support for the study's central assumption: that physical distancing, initially imposed as a preventive health measure, has evolved into a new logic of social practice with enduring effects on interpersonal relationships.

Although the limited sample size prevents generalization to the broader population, the data offer meaningful sociological insights into post-pandemic social dynamics. Four out of six respondents acknowledged a clear link between physical distancing and the weakening of social relations, while two respondents denied any lasting impact, a position largely associated with their limited adherence to distancing measures.

The findings indicate that physical distancing contributed to the erosion of traditional social practices, including physical greetings, frequent family visits, and large communal celebrations. These changes reflect a reconfiguration of social space, consistent with Edward T. Hall's concept of proxemics, whereby individuals renegotiate personal and social distance to preserve physical safety. Furthermore, the persistence of distancing behaviors aligns with Erving Goffman's notion of *civil inattention*, suggesting a normalization of interactional avoidance even in familiar social contexts.

Overall, the study demonstrates that physical distancing has not merely interrupted social relations temporarily but has reshaped interactional norms, trust mechanisms, and collective rituals within daily life.

Conclusion

The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic extend far beyond economic disruption and health outcomes, penetrating the most fundamental dimensions of everyday social life. One of the most significant social consequences identified in this study is the decline and transformation of interpersonal relationships resulting from prolonged physical distancing.

The findings suggest that the intensity and duration of physical distancing measures are directly correlated with the degree of social relationship erosion. The stricter and more prolonged the distancing, the greater the difficulty individuals experience in restoring pre-pandemic social bonds. Moreover, the disappearance or weakening of long-standing customs and traditions—such as large wedding celebrations and frequent family gatherings—has hindered the recovery of social cohesion.

The persistence of these changes indicates that physical distancing has contributed to the normalization of new social habits that continue to shape post-pandemic life. While some respondents remain optimistic about a return to previous social norms, the study highlights the challenges involved in reclaiming traditional patterns of interaction after prolonged disruption.

Ultimately, this research underscores the need for further sociological investigation into the long-term transformation of social relations in post-crisis societies and the mechanisms through which communities can restore social cohesion while adapting to new realities.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for social science research. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their participation. Informed consent was obtained prior to conducting the interviews. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were strictly preserved, and no personally identifiable information was collected or disclosed. The research involved no physical or psychological risk to participants.

Author Contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. Abdelrahmane Fekir was responsible for data collection, fieldwork coordination, and initial data analysis. Mohammed Elbaa contributed to the theoretical framework, interpretation of findings, and manuscript drafting. Both authors reviewed, revised, and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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