

# How People Interpret Sickness: An American Model of Sickness

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## Introduction

Sickness is a topic that expands beyond simple definition, especially how people act while sick. Many people interpret sickness in varying ways, especially after the COVID pandemic.

Existing research from 2014-2015 establishes perceptions of illness pre-COVID such as American tendency to be individualistic when sick and believed that sickness was their responsibility. Many individuals also believed that it was up to them to prevent and combat sicknesses, especially ones that involved the respiratory system.

Even though previous research has been established on American perceptions of sickness, not much has been researched about post-COVID perceptions. This research intends to discover how the American interpretation of sickness changed after the COVID pandemic, if at all. Additionally, we will be investigating whether American's day-to-day lives while sick changed drastically post-COVID.

## Methodology

The participants in our study are Florida State University undergraduate students with ages ranging from 18 to 24 of varying genders. We plan to collect 30 interviews and have completed 9 so far.

We are using flyers, social media, and presentations to find participants. All of which include a QR code linking to a survey asking for an email address for communication.

After completion, we send out an email to schedule a time to have a semi-structured interview which is followed by a 142-question survey. Some of the questions we are asking:

- How do you define illness?
- Did your experiences during the COVID pandemic change how you think about sickness?

We will analyze the interviews and surveys and compare them to pre-COVID data. We will search for discrepancies in day-to-day life, ideals such as individualism, and beliefs about who is responsible for preventing sickness.



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## Preliminary Results and Discussion

We conducted 9 out of 30 interviews and surveys. The preliminary results from the interviews suggest that participants changed their perceptions of sickness after the COVID pandemic. Participants have indicated that they:

- Are more likely to avoid others when they are sick
- Have greater awareness of how their sickness may impact others
- Have greater awareness of cleanliness to avoid being sick

If these findings continue, it would highlight how a world-wide pandemic affects the individual and their beliefs about sickness. After this study, more research will be needed to see how this can be used in real-world situations.

One of the strengths of this research is the use of interviews, which allow an in-depth view of how participants interpret sickness and their reasons why. This project also enables comparison of survey and interview results, allowing better understanding of their beliefs and perceptions on sickness.

The limitations of this study are that the participants are undergraduate students from FSU and the results may not represent other populations. Additionally, we are unable to collect pre-COVID data from the participants for direct comparison, which limits the ability to make causal claims.

## Future Directions

- Study the application of this research for healthcare workers.
  - Why do healthcare workers feel the need to go to work sick?
- Research on how healthcare in general can be adapted to better protect citizens.
  - What government policies would best support public health?
- Repeat the study with a more diverse population.
  - Do people in different demographics interpret sickness differently?

## References

