“Social Distancing” Policy:

Analysing Cross-Cultural Responses Using the “Action Insights” Method

Action Insights (AI) offers a framework to understand the complex social dynamics of current “social distancing” policies being introduced to respond to the global pandemic of COVID-19.

Action Insights (AI) uses a simple coding strategy derived from sociology and complex social system analysis to offer an efficient way to categorize and link socio-cultural and ethnographic unstructured data. In addition, the coding allows statistical data epidemiological public health data to be linked and analysed in combination with social network analyses(SNA) geographic and spatial (GIS)data as well as with text (semantic/linguistic/word) data, time stamps, Linking these different data layers creates a highly contextual and culturally relevant “socio-scape” that offers unique insights into any social issue. To better understand the “who, what, where, when” and impact of the “social distancing” policies introduced to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, research will use Action Insight methods to study the impact of social distancing policies on individual, group and institutional actions,
How “Action Insights” Works

At the foundation of Action Insights is a simple social taxonomy that shows the interplay of the key components of all human societies: Actors, Actions and Artefacts in Time and Place, or “AAAPT”. “AAAPT” is:

- **Actors** --- people, groups and institutions
  Actors take on specialized ways of acting, or “roles” that help organize the “why”, “what”, “where”, “when”, and “who” of any social context. Roles help maintain the patterns of interaction because they create the culturally accepted rules that give form to relationships. These rules help negotiate how power, authority and legitimacy are to be organized. Roles that actors use in relationships help create the repeated patterns of social interactions.

- **Actions** --- activities, programs, projects, initiatives, etc.
  A fundamental concept in the study of human behavior and the basic building block of human social systems is “action”. The term action can represent the action of an individual, the collective activities of a group or the complex activities of groups that form organizational activities. Action (no matter at what level of complexity) that occurs between actors is labeled “social interaction”. Social interaction between actors creates a “relationship”

- **Artifacts** --- material objects derived from the links between actors and actions.
  They represent tangible manifestations of social interactions; therefore, they are fundamental source of information for all social research activities.

- **Place** --- geographic location

- **Time** --- historical moment
Using a “social contextual frame” as the foundation of Action Insights means that “geo-spatial” variables are an essential component of understanding all human activities. All human activity has to be studied within specific “place” (geography) and “time” (history) dimensions. Taken together, space and time are the basic parameters of human culture (how specific people define their life actions within any given “space and time”). An understanding of culture has to be at the foundation of any research focused on social change and development.

The “3x5” and “3xX” Lenses
Once the AAAPT template is used as a preliminary categorization and tagging of the data, the next step is to identify characteristics of the actors and actions. That is, what is the form and content of actors’ actions and interactions. What are they “doing”. Working from a structural perspective, 5 key patterns of human action are understood to be fundamental building blocks of any human society. These five repeated forms of social interaction that occur over time, are labelled as “social institutions”. Social institutions constitute a “macro level” of social action, as they are the complex sets of repeated and linked social interactions that form the foundation of all human cultures. To create the social taxonomy used for the Action Insights framework, a model was used that assumes that although each human society has a unique culture, all humans are engaged in actions in five basic priority areas of human focus that have evolved to support the survival of human beings. ¹

The five priority domains of human action are:

- Family--- bonding, sexuality and reproduction
- Economy----production, distribution and exchange of goods and resources
- Education --- learning and sharing of knowledge
- Polity --- authority, roles, status and social order
- Religion---beliefs in the unknown

Finally, in addition, human action can be classified by the “level” at which an activity occurs. In this sense the terms “macro”, “mid”, and “micro” are used to explain the complexity of the action that is being investigated. For example:

- Macro is at an organizational/national/international/global level

¹ Basic introduction to “institutions”: http://www.sociologyguide.com/basic-concepts/Social-Institutions.php
• Mid is at collective/group/department/regional level. This level constitutes a bridge between “micro” and “macro” levels, thus creating a continuum
• Micro is at individual/personal/local/operational level

Once all the materials that have been gathered are viewed from an AAAPT lens, the a 3x5 view, it is clear that there are human activities that seem to fall outside of the 3 x5 lens. From an AI perspective, all other domains of human action, such as “food”, “health” or “transportation” are viewed as both derived from and influencing the way the 5 priority domains are organized and intertwined to define any culture. The 3xX matrix, as a component of human day to day life, has unlimited sectors and made up of those social domains viewed as important to the members of any culture.

All human activity can now be described as being focused on an area of human survival as well as at a level of complexity. A “family” for example can be studied at a micro level as the role of the individual with respect to siblings, at a mid level with respect to roles in the family and at a macro level with respect to the structure of the family such as in an extended patriarchal clan. All information is then coded and loaded onto some form of data storage. Currently Excel spread sheets are used.
Coded data can be transformed into dynamic visuals that are needed for analyses. The use of dynamic visual tools allows the recognition of themes, patterns and trends to be easily shared, discussed, synthesized and communicated between multiple cultural contexts and diverse human populations.
Dynamic visualization techniques and tools allow data to be understood from a variety of dimensions. Instead of a one-dimensional list of items, or rows of numbers in a spreadsheet, a chart or graph or some form of illustration allows for other dimensions to be added. Visualizations may help expose patterns or gaps much more clearly than the raw data.