



Kari Nixon

Medical Humanities Professor, specializing in anxiety about epidemic diseases and public [health](#) adoptions

Kari Nixon is a professor specializing in social reactions to infectious diseases. She works at Whitworth University, where she teaches about social responses to contagion and quarantine in medical humanities and Victorian literature courses. Her work on public health has been published for lay audiences in HuffPost, YES! Magazine, and CNN. Her academic book, *Kept From All Contagion: Germ Theory, Disease, and the Dilemma of Human Contact*, was published by SUNY University Press, and tracks the social history of humankind's responses to disease in Victorian literature and popular culture.

Kari's biography

About Kari Nixon

Guiding empathetic development as a method of conflict resolution in public [health](#), epidemic outbreak, and public health adoption resistance.

With knowledge of history, [culture](#), psychology, and society, Kari Nixon is great at providing non-partisan ways to community growth as a team across the world. Her talks assist in fostering transformative insight into how various elements of modern life—particularly health and wellness culture, parenting expectations, and digital and visual media—can provide indications about where and how to live a meaningful life.

Adept at pairing qualitative and quantitative data into moving narratives that guide audiences through difficult conversations and social dilemmas, Kari Nixon's expertise in public health adoption and debate came into broader relevance than ever in March 2020, when the COVID-19 Pandemic swept the globe. Originally a data [scientist](#) studying for her doctorate in clinical psychology with a specialization in psychometrics, Nixon left the field after placing out of introductory statistics courses and making a 4.0, because she felt that numerical data was only part of the equation for understanding human psychology. For the past decade, Nixon has conducted scholarly research on how society reacts to developing scientific information. Her dissertation and first book addressed this topic in response to the growth and popularization of germ theory in the 1880s. Her research seeks to understand the [science](#) at hand, but

then to understand how this science affects the lay public, including what science “says” versus what the public “hears.” In the wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic, she turned her work more and more to the lay public, with a new book from Simon and Schuster about what pandemic arguments and uncertainties teach us about our day-to-day life.

Her ability to comprehend quantitative data and then to delineate its qualitative, societal impacts make her a unique and transformative speaker.

She has also co-edited books on the use of contagion as a cultural concept (such as in computer viruses) and the effect this has on society and on syphilis and how patient status in any disease affects self-image. Her most recent public-facing articles have been in CNN about [climate change](#) conversations (2021), and xenophobia in COVID-19 discourse (2020), and the value of mourning culture and grief rituals in YES! Magazine (2019 and 2020), and employing productive empathy in vaccine hesitancy for HuffPo (2019).

Academically, she remains a leader in her field, as the series co-editor of the Lexington series in Health [Communication](#), which has published 12 titles to date, while also maintaining publications in the realm of Victorian public health ethics. She stands on local ethics committees working to provide the most ethical response to COVID-19, and has been featured in numerous podcasts and news stories as an expert voice discussing present-day public health difficulties and their historical precursors. She acts as a consultant for a team of scientists working to develop communications for the lay public about antibiotic resistance as a public health crisis.

Kari's talks

- **Vaccine Hesitancy Across the Centuries: What are We Really Fighting About?**

This overview of the history of vaccination in the west from 1720 onward reveals surprising truths about human biases and instinctive fears. By de-familiarizing these debates by tracking them 300 years in the past, Nixon is able to demonstrate that what feels like a very new debate has always been about the same basic human concerns—and that understanding this is the means to productive, persuasive discussions going forward.

- **Who's Afraid of an Asymptomatic Carrier?: What Typhoid Mary's Story Can Show us About Public Health Recommendations in the Age of COVID-19**

This talk begins with the surprising explanation about why subtle diseases are more dangerous than obvious, horrifying ones. By tracking the history of Mary Mallon, known through the ages as Typhoid Mary, an anti-communitarian woman who didn't care that she was an asymptomatic carrier of Typhoid, Nixon reveals instead the very comprehensible reasons Mallon acted the way she did. In so doing, Nixon reveals how comprehending the subjective position of those we disagree with—especially in regards to understanding the huge “asks” presented by our Pandemic public health protocol—is the path toward better public health adoption.

- **We were Never Normal: Using the Pandemic to Facilitate Radical Envisioning of the Future**

We all want to go back to normal, but Nixon reveals how epidemic disease outbreaks have historically been understood as a moment of radical reconsideration of everything we thought was a given. By presenting historical examples of these norms that are easy for modern-day audiences to recognize as problematic, and then moving to points where we might reconsider our own values today, Nixon invites audiences to see the pandemic as a tragedy indeed, but one we can use to invent a less-tragic future in a surprising array of social realms.

- **It's Not About the Data: What the Science of Science Communication Can Teach us About Changing Hearts, Minds, and Practices**

Quantitative research in science communication has a surprising amount to say about how unimportant data is toward persuading skeptical recipients of controversial scientific information (data for instance, about climate change, or mask-wearing). Instead, Nixon reveals what science itself has to say about the social—not the scientific—being our path forward toward unifying against global threats.

- **Why you Should Have the Hardest Conversation of your Life: Ending the Pandemic through Empathetic Discourse and Motivational Interviewing**

We are social creatures at our core, and Nixon argues in this talk that the social realm—not one of pure statistical data—will be our way out of a pandemic in highly polarized times where there seems to be very little shared ground. How might engaging in vulnerable discourse and “giving an inch” toward the views of the opponent allow us to “gain a mile” in persuasive ground and public health adoption? How can the idea of “validating the valid” in our opponents’ perspective allow us more productive discourse than the age-old Debate Team method of “stand your ground”?

- **Public Health Versus Private Liberties: Bioethics in 2021**

Nixon reveals the history of bioethics beginning with vaccination policies in the 1700s to demonstrate that the core of public health as always been a temporary abeyance of personal liberties. Acknowledging this fundamental basis of any public health recommendations can help prevent us from re-hashing old ground and beginning our persuasive efforts from more productive points along the path to public health adoption.