Social Attitudes and Behavior in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence and Prospects from Research on Group Processes and Intergroup Relations

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Abstract

The impact of COVID-19 on our way of life is yet to be fully understood. However, social psychology theory and research offer insights into its effect on social attitudes and behaviors, and here we gather the views of a unique group of experts in group processes and intergroup relations. Group processes and intergroup relations are major factors in social resilience and change arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. This special issue was developed to foreground the crucial role of group processes and intergroup relations in the COVID-19 pandemic. This article provides an overview of the areas explored in the special issue. Firstly, we focus on the impact on societies, covering the evolution of intergroup processes during the pandemic, leadership, social connectedness, cultural differences in responses, and social development. Secondly, we turn to intergroup inequality and focus on gender inequality, ageism, xenophobia, and racial bias during COVID-19. Thirdly, we explore worldviews during the pandemic, specifically conspiracy theories, science skepticism, and existential threat. Finally, we focus on the pandemic's impact on behaviors, covering virtual working, social activism, virtual ostracism, and conformity and deviance. We finish with a discussion of the value of social psychology in helping us understand the impact of COVID-19 on social attitudes and behavior. As this special issue shows, group processes and intergroup relations are central to the ways that individuals and society is dealing with the challenges of this pandemic. (232 words)

This Special Issue draws together insights to show the key role of group processes and intergroup relations in the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. The first cases of the novel coronavirus COVID-19 were reported in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. From there, the virus spread rapidly across the globe, shutting down country after country, economy after economy, and most importantly, transforming life as we knew it. Within months, virtually every country around the world had imposed stay at home orders, choosing whether to wear a mask had become a political statement and *lockdown* had become Collins Dictionary's word of the year 2020 ("Collins - The Collins Word of the Year 2020 is...", 2020). While scientists around the globe are working tirelessly to develop cures and vaccines, people are adhering to new rules such as covering their face and keeping a distance from others in order to limit the spread of the disease. Parents are working from home while simultaneously home-schooling their children, people living on their own are finding themselves isolated from their loved ones, and conspiracy beliefs and mistrust in science are soaring. We are forced to confront our own mortality and economic precarity, find new ways of living and working virtually and confront inequalities laid bare by the pandemic.

All of the measures and restrictions imposed are necessary to limit the spread of the virus, but we are only beginning to understand their impact on us and our way of life. What impact have lockdowns and social distancing had on societies? How has the pandemic affected existing inequalities? How have our worldviews and behaviors shifted? In this special issue, we bring together a unique panel of respected experts in group processes and intergroup relations to address these questions, the scope of which reflects the dramatic and pervasive impact of COVID-19 on all aspects of human life.

First, we explore **impact on societies**, examining the evolution of intergroup processes during the pandemic (Abrams, Lalot, & Hogg, 2021), the crucial role of leadership

in helping societies navigate ambiguity and crisis (Antonakis, 2021), social connectedness and new collective behaviors (Templeton, 2021), the social psychological processes that shape differences between societies in responses to threat (Kashima, Dennis, Perfors, & Laham, 2021), and the impact of lockdown restrictions on childrens' social development (Cameron & Tenenbaum, 2021).

Second, we focus on **intergroup inequality** - how the pandemic has exacerbated gender inequality (Fisher & Ryan, 2021) and ageism (Swift & Chasteen, 2021), influenced xenophobia and attitudes toward immigration (Esses & Hamilton, 2021), and encouraged greater awareness of racial inequality (Maddox, Marshburn, Folberg, & Crittle, 2021). Third, we turn to **worldviews** during COVID-19, examining the flourishing of conspiracy theories (Douglas, 2021) and science skepticism (Rutjens, Van der Linden, & Van der Lee, 2021), and threats to the self, presented by the pandemic (Molinario, Kruglanski & Lemay 2021). Finally, we focus on the pandemic's **impact on behaviors**, looking at how a move to virtual working has impacted group processes in the workplace (Blanchard, 2021), how it has influenced engagement with social activism (Grant & Smith, 2021), issues of social ostracism and wellbeing in the virtual world (Hales, Wood, & Williams, 2021), and differing reactions to conformity and deviance (Packer, Ungson, & Marsh, 2021).

Impact on societies

COVID-19 has impacted everyone, regardless of status, power or even geographical location. What does this mean for societies and their functioning in this new era? Four articles in this special issue examine exactly this question, beginning with Abrams et al. (2021) who view this topic from a social identity perspective, commenting on how the pandemic has forced a shift in established identity. At the start of the pandemic, leaders presented short-term answers and united people around a shared identity. As time went on,

however, uncertainty grew and normality did not return, and these shared identities splintered into polarized factions as trust and confidence in leadership eroded and existing social divisions became increasingly apparent. Abrams and colleagues (2021) highlight the need for strong, inclusive leadership to build social identities that can confidently lead us into the future.

Antonakis (2021), describes the critical role of leadership during the time of COVID-19 as people look to their leaders for guidance and answers. For Antonakis (2021) strong leadership means above all charismatic leadership – leaders utilizing their platform competently and confidently to bring about true social influence and change, to guide people towards actions that will benefit all. Charismatic leaders can role model behaviors that encourage people to adhere to the rules and regulations necessary to protect society.

Most leaders across the globe, with notable exceptions, imposed early and strict restrictions on crowd events and large crowd gatherings, which were mostly adhered to. The slow reopening of entertainment sectors after months-long lockdowns presents new challenges in the implementation of social distancing and other strict guidelines on group behaviors. Templeton (2021) details how social connectedness remains part of physically distanced crowd events and discusses what organizers can learn from research into crowd behavior. Importantly, social connectedness can be present in a physically distanced group through feelings of group belonging and common purpose. Templeton (2021) urges organizers to look to social psychology to predict crowd behaviors to create safe, inclusive environments where social connectedness can flourish despite physical restrictions.

Group processes also inform Kashima et al.'s (2021) exploration of cultural differences during a pathogen threat, and their discussion of ingroup favoritism and narrowly prescribed behaviors as cultural adaptations that can help societies address pathogen threat.

They go on to propose a model through which collective emotion, cultural scripts and institutional legitimacy interact to determine national responses to the pandemic.

The pandemic has also had a significant, and potentially lasting, impact on younger generations. Cameron and Tenenbaum (2021) discuss the impact of the pandemic on children's social development, stressing the impact that prolonged separation from peers may have on the development of social, emotional and cognitive skills. A silver lining highlighted by Cameron and Tenenbaum (2021) is the potential of online communication tools that allow children to interact with others their own age and form and sustain friendships with minimal adult interference.

Intergroup inequality

Crisis situations can negatively impact groups already stigmatized and disadvantaged in society. Financial crises have been associated with subsequent increases in economic inequality (Atkinson & Morelli, 2011), and can exacerbate existing inequalities in terms of gender (Ficapal-Cusi et al., 2017), race (Masterson et al., 2019), and age (Neumark & Button, 2014). The unprecedented depth and breadth of the impact of COVID-19 may present a unique set of circumstances for intergroup inequality to thrive and deepen. Fisher and Ryan (2021) view the pandemic as entrenching gender role beliefs, negatively impacting women in terms of their health, labor at home, relational violence, and economic vulnerability. Swift and Chasteen (2021) explore how stereotyped views of ageing and old age have been strengthened during the pandemic, stigmatizing and devaluing older people and encouraging expressions of both benevolent and hostile ageism. Esses and Hamilton (2021) look at how the pandemic has also created optimal conditions for a rise in xenophobia and anti-immigration sentiment, through increased perceived threat and competition, heightened feelings of lack of control, and a rise in authoritarianism.

However, the pandemic also demonstrates the value of social psychological theory and research for informing our understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on intergroup inequalities and differences. Maddox et al. (2021) map the Confronting Prejudice Responses (CPR) model onto the current crisis in investigating the cumulative effects of COVID-19 and the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on awareness of entrenched racial inequalities, and the calculative decisions involved in confronting racial prejudice. The perspectives presented here illustrate the contribution of social psychology in understanding why COVID-19 has had such an impact on intergroup inequality. They also highlight paths for future research, including research that challenges binary notions of gender (Fisher & Ryan, 2021) and homogenous representations of older people (Swift & Chasteen, 2021), that tests messaging emphasizing the contribution of immigrants during the pandemic (Esses & Hamilton, 2021), and which positions the experiences of blacks and people of color as central in exploring anti-racism (Maddox et al., 2021).

Worldviews

Another challenge created by the pandemic has been a proliferation of unfounded and often contradictory conspiracy theories and anti-science beliefs about the virus. COVID-19 has been described as a hoax, or that it was deliberately created and released by either the Chinese or US governments, or that it was spread by 5G phone technology (Guardian, 2020). As mistrust of vaccines has been associated with lower willingness to receive a vaccine (Jolley & Douglas, 2014), endorsement of such beliefs could severely impede efforts to control the virus. A further set of challenges relates to how group and intergroup processes through the development of the COVID-19 crisis are implicated in the growth of conspiracy theories, anti-science beliefs and COVID-19-induced threats to self.

Douglas (2021) outlines the social psychology of conspiracy theories during COVID-19, exploring the aspects of the pandemic that have allowed them to thrive and the psychological needs they can satisfy during a time of crisis and uncertainty. A focus on group processes reveals an association with social identity processes that may make belief in conspiracy theories tenacious. However, it also suggests a potential for collectivist messaging to encourage people to look beyond conspiracy theories and engage with desired health behaviors.

Rutjens et al. (2021) focus on anti-science beliefs specifically, exploring the social psychological antecedents of science skepticism during COVID-19. The authors highlight the domain-specific nature of anti-science beliefs, and predict an association between COVID-19 science skepticism and right-leaning political ideologies, due to the restrictions to personal and economic freedoms that responses to the pandemic present. Finally, Molinario et al. (2021) explore COVID-19-induced threats to the self, and how acts of self-affirmation and significance restoration, actions determined by group identity and the shared reality of the ingroup, can influence the endorsement of conspiracy theories and anti-science beliefs. Together, these articles suggest that COVID-19 has had a powerful impact on how we view the world and our place in it, which in turn could influence our ability to manage the spread of the virus.

Behaviors during COVID-19

The pandemic has not only impacted how we view the world, but also how we act and behave within it. Whoever can work remotely now does so from the safety, and isolation, of their own homes, and there has been an intensification of the role of social media in mobilizing on-line action and street protest. However, social distancing and related regulations can cause

people to feel ostracized from society, and the safe execution of such rules also relies on people conforming rather than deviating.

Blanchard (2021) explores virtual working in the time of COVID-19, an adjustment that many of us have had to make. While video conferencing can be a wonderful tool for communication and feelings of belonging, a lack of informal exchanges between colleagues can create difficulty. Blanchard draws on her team's own experience with video conferencing during the pandemic to explore the effects of entitativity and Zoom fatigue on online group processes. Blanchard (2021) sees this as an opportunity for future research to focus on creating healthier virtual working environments.

Grant and Smith (2021) discuss activism during the pandemic, drawing on the SIRDE/IDEAS model of social change in their examinations of social justice and activist movements in the time of COVID-19. Highlighted among other issues in their paper is the importance of social media as a form of online activism and collective action, especially as people find themselves under strict stay at home orders with a large part of their contact with the outside world transacted through social media.

Hales et al. (2021) explore the implications of lockdowns and social distancing guidelines for mental health from the perspective of social ostracism. Restrictions on movement and behavior can result in people feeling ostracized. However, Hales and colleagues (2021) also offer some cause for optimism and find that people may be more resilient than they think in times of crisis, and that social norms are quickly shifting such that people may actually feel less ostracized and a greater sense of belonging as time goes on.

However, this shifting of social norms is reliant on people actively changing their behaviors and conforming to new standards of social behavior. Packer et al. (2021) identify the key questions in conformity and deviance highlighted during the pandemic and outline the messaging strategies informed by social psychology that could be best suited to promote

desirable behaviors. They also discuss how deviant behavior that puts people's health at risk can be effectively dealt with and which factors contribute to the strength of punitive reactions against in- and outgroup deviants.

In summary, these four articles explore different ways in which behavior has been affected throughout the pandemic and offer future avenues for research that can help create better virtual working environments and examine conformity and deviance in a crisis-context. Messages of hope are that social media can bring people together, and that as a whole, people seem to be more resilient in times of crisis than they might think.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic exploded across the globe at the start of 2020. At the time of completing this short article (December 2020) there had been close to 65 million cases and 1.5 million deaths, and there was a renewed exponential rise of new case in many countries. This special issue of *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations* explores, across 16 articles, the impact of this unprecedented global crisis on how people think about, interact with and influence one another within and between groups, and how people think about society more broadly. It also explores the converse: how the course of the pandemic is affected by these group, intergroup and social identity processes.

Drawing on research on the social psychology of group processes and intergroup relations, we know that the pandemic is a shared existential threat that profoundly affects our day-to-day lives (shopping, working and schooling, as well as traveling, recreation, entertainment, and being with family and friends) and leaves us in an acute state of uncertainty not only about the disease itself and how to protect ourselves and society, but also about our economic and cultural future and the very nature of society and who we are. People

seek social connectedness and clear and directive leadership to reduce this enormous stress and uncertainty.

However, the pandemic also accentuates existing fractures, inequalities and prejudices in society, and fuels populism and associated tribalism – people retreat into identity silos that provide solace in the face of chaos but also identify and vilify outgroups and further polarize society. Conspiracy theories, science skepticism and distrust of "experts" can become attractive – these belief systems work together as a worldview that allocates blame and seems, to those who subscribe, to explain the in-explicable.

Together the papers in this issue point to the societal and personal significance of group and intergroup processes for what we have all experienced and our prospects as we begin to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has transformed how we interact for work (endless online meetings in virtual space) and interact with friends and family, and has aroused mass public protests for both noble and ignoble causes and has energized identity politics. Where all this leads, and, once the crises have passed, what aspects of day-to-day and working life will have changed for the better remain to be seen.

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