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# The new normal of social psychology in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic: Insights and advice from leaders in the field

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The COVID-19 pandemic has hit the world hard. At the time of this writing (20 January 2021), there have been over 94 million confirmed cases globally, including over 2 million deaths (World Health Organization, 2021). These numbers are still climbing; in the past week, over 580,000 new cases were recorded per day. The massive worldwide impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has led some world leaders to liken it to World War II. Whether these historical comparisons hold true is debatable, but they do speak to the scale of the challenges that humanity is currently struggling to overcome.

Revisiting the history of social psychology, one noticeable trend is that the agenda of social psychologists is interwoven with events that happen in society and the world (Ross et al., 2010). For example, the Holocaust during World War II stimulated social psychologists' interest in ethnocentrism, aggression, and obedience, just as increasing globalization became one of the impetuses for investigations into the role of culture in human behaviour, and hence the emergence of cultural and cross-cultural psychology. Considering its immensity, we believe that the COVID-19 pandemic will likely be a trigger for profound and consequential changes in social psychology (Khazaie & Khan, 2020). We thus organized this special forum in order to initiate a discussion regarding the potential impacts of the pandemic on our field.

In this forum, six leading social psychologists (Dolores Albarracin, Michael Bond, Jolanda Jetten, Yoshihisa Kashima, James Liu, and Sander van der Linden) guide us in taking a step back and reflecting on how social psychology scholarship is being and will be influenced by the pandemic, and what social psychologists can and should do to serve humanity during this crisis. They consider how human systems are being transformed by the pandemic and anticipate what these systems will look like in the post-pandemic world, and thereby share their views on the new normal of social psychological research, teaching, and practice. They also offer some advice as to how social psychologists can contribute their expertise and establish real-world

impacts; their advice is particularly useful for students and early-career social psychologists.

Specifically, Albarracin and Jung (2021) lay out a research agenda for the post-COVID-19 world. The agenda highlights the need for social psychologists to identify contents for public health messages based on a systematic assessment of theories and findings, to understand self-regulation of behaviour in social contexts, and to investigate people's understanding of health statistics, diffusion of health information and behaviour within social networks, the role of prosociality in the containment of the pandemic and people's adaptation to its impacts, as well as group and intergroup dynamics triggered by the pandemic.

Bond (2021) proposes two major lines of inquiry for social psychologists, particularly those in Asia. First, considering the variations both within Asia and between different parts of the world in terms of nation-level resilience against the pandemic, there is a need to explain these variations and explore the role of culture in them. Second, in understanding the general public's responses to the pandemic, it is useful to develop locally and indigenously sensitive measures. This is because existing measures originally developed in mainstream societies in the scientific literature may not suffice to capture the pertinent phenomena.

Liu (2021) echoes Bond's call for attention to the role of culture by presenting correlations between the epidemiological data (total cases per million and fatalities per million) and Schwartz (2004)'s cultural dimension scores. With this observation as the point of departure, he elaborates how collectivism (or embeddedness) can potentially serve as an effective cultural basis for the public's adoption of safety measures and compliance with advice from authorities, thereby possibly reducing infection and fatality rates. Liu (2021) further points out that globally oriented social psychologists should be very careful about generalizing findings regarding collective behaviour from research based on European and American populations to other societies. Relatedly, they should refrain from holding any single culture as the gold standard for conjecturing solutions to crises and social problems, and recognize that the future of humanity will be multipolar.

Kashima (2021) exposes a limitation in conventional social psychological theorizing: negligence regarding institutions. He critically points out that although social psychology is a research area that explicitly examines human

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behaviour as embedded in society and social contexts, institutions are very often left out of the inquiry and relegated to other social sciences. Considering humanity's struggle against the pandemic, the role of institutions (including national, international, and nongovernmental ones) in behaviour cannot be overstated. Obviously, containing a crisis at the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic requires timely strategies and responses from various institutions. Thus, questions such as how people cooperate with institutions, how institutions are designed and formed, and how the balance between institutions' control and the public's freedom is negotiated in society are issues that social psychologists should not shy away from.

Jetten et al. (2021) take a positive note by discussing several silver linings for social psychology emerging from the pandemic. These positive shifts of our field include a greater emphasis on context dependence in human behaviour and the questioning of "timeless universals," a stronger focus on processes happening at the collective level, and a higher level of awareness of the necessity of collaborative research efforts and the need for engagement with policymakers and the general public to achieve greater real-world impact.

Concurring with Jetten et al.'s point regarding real-world impact, van der Linden (2021) offers several incisive recommendations based on a personal reflection of his career, citing examples from some of his recent works. Relating to the ramifications brought about by the pandemic, he speaks of the importance of choosing questions that people truly care about, reaching out to audiences outside the social psychological circle, and looking for collaborations with people from diverse backgrounds who share a common vision.

To conclude, with this special forum we call for fellow social psychologists to reflect on the potential impacts the COVID-19 pandemic has on our field and consider how we can move the discipline towards a more informed understanding of this pandemic as well as many other global grand challenges humanity is facing.

# Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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