

# The societal relevance of communities in the COVID-19 era

The COVID-19 pandemic represents an unprecedented and truly global social threat in recent human history. Understanding the impacts of the pandemic on our communities, as well as investigating and fostering effective responses, represents a genuinely interdisciplinary challenge, which deeply involves psychology. Social and community psychologists are working to understand the psychological processes characterising individual, familial, institutional, and communities' reactions to the pandemic worldwide. The present special issue consists of 15 articles from three continents (Europe, North and South America, and Asia) on the COVID-19 pandemic, how it is affecting various communities, and how communities are coping with the various local and societal dilemmas stemming from this dramatic health event. The articles make use of different methodologies, including correlational and longitudinal quantitative examinations as well as qualitative analyses. The studies consider a high number of participants (approximately 14,000) across a wide range of participant types, including older adults, women victims of violence, politicians, community samples, and representative samples. We hope that the special issue can help academics and practitioners to understand the phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic and how to foster active and supportive responses from individuals and communities at all levels, both societally and globally.

During the first month of 2020, the whole world was hit by the catastrophic SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, which is now simply known as the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the World Health Organization (2022), as of 26 March 2022, 476,374,234 cases of COVID-19 have been reported, causing 6,108,976 deaths. Scientists have been incredibly fast in developing vaccines, and to date, an impressive number of 10,925,055,390 vaccine doses have been administered. Nonetheless, there have been considerable inequalities in vaccine coverage, whereby in the first year high-income nations achieved vaccination rates of up to 89% (now much higher) and many low-income nations achieved rates of less than 10%, though these rates are now rising (Pilkington, Keestra, & Hill, 2022). This situation is a reflection of the inverse care law by which more affluent groups who experience better health, in general, consume a disproportionate quantity of health resources when compared to less affluent groups, who in general experience more need (Hart, 1971).

Understanding the impacts of the pandemic, as well as investigating and fostering effective responses to it, represents a truly interdisciplinary challenge. This challenge also involves psychology, given the uncertainty that people must face, as well as the coping strategies and support systems that they and their communities have to draw upon in the face of this worldwide threat (Jetten, Reicher, Haslam, & Cruwys, 2020). COVID-19 is an unprecedented biological and social threat to humankind (Banerjee & Rai, 2020) that impacts all levels of human life, from the personal and familial to community, societal and global. This sudden emergency has deeply impacted human communities, forcing many to change or adapt various social behaviours and to comply with the inevitable restrictions imposed by governments in order to preserve human lives (de Ridder et al., 2021; Roblain et al., 2022).

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Research has shown that communities often respond to disasters with increased social cohesion and solidarity (Cadamuro et al., 2021; Drury, 2018; James & Zagefka, 2017; Vezzali & Stathi, 2021, chapter 8). However, this unity and reciprocal support can be short lived (Hawdon & Ryan, 2011) and difficult to reconcile with the characteristics of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, COVID-19 is an atypical traumatic event with unique features. In contrast to other disaster events such as earthquakes and floods, the COVID-19 pandemic has blurred boundaries in space and time (Yong, 2020), contributing to heightened levels of anxiety and uncertainty for many. It has also disrupted social identities by requiring increased physical and social distance, for example, between the vaccinated and unvaccinated. Thus, the examination of such a dangerous and relevant phenomenon requires extensive research that can integrate, but also significantly extend existing literature.

Even today, the pandemic is far from over and communities continue to engage in preventive measures and mitigate its damaging consequences (Zagefka, 2021). This necessitates deep changes to community lifestyles all around the world, which will likely change the very nature of social relations (Passini & Speltini, 2022). In line with the person  $\times$  situation approach, in such circumstances, it is of paramount importance to consider individual-level aspects (Kanazawa, 2021), as well as relational dimensions within and across communities at micro-, meso-, and macro-levels (Lalot, Abrams, & Travaglino, 2021; Resta et al., 2022; Zagefka, 2022). Social and community psychologists can play a central role by advancing knowledge of the social-psychological processes that characterise communities' understandings, assessments of, and reactions to the pandemic worldwide.

The present special issue focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic, how it affects communities, and how communities are coping with and reacting to it. We have collected 15 articles presenting studies from three continents (Europe, North and South America, and Asia). The contributions make use of different methodologies, including qualitative analyses as well as correlational and longitudinal quantitative examinations. Importantly, the studies were conducted with very diverse samples of participants, including women victims of violence, politicians, older adults, as well as community-based and representative samples, for a total sample of almost 14,000 participants.

It is worth noting that, consistent with JCASP policy to be of support to communities, 11 out of 15 articles also include a social impact statement. Such statements can help practitioners better understand the implications of the results and use them in designing effective interventions and responses that enhance the collective resilience of persons and groups, and may speed up community recovery from the pandemic.

We can identify three broad themes emerging from the articles comprising the special issue. The first encompasses studies that examine the negative individual and community consequences of the pandemic, and how individuals and communities faced the unprecedented situations in ways that demonstrate considerable resilience.

Marzana et al. (2022) adopted an ecological perspective and consider the interdependence between individual and community dimensions in responses to disasters. Using a longitudinal approach, the authors analysed both individual dimensions related to emotional responses to the pandemic (e.g. anxiety and fear) and community dimensions concerning relationships at the community level (e.g. connectedness and solidarity) at two time points (during and after the first lockdown) amongst students in Italy. Results revealed that, after an initial 'honeymoon phase' where the themes of emotional sharing, connectedness to others, and solidarity emerged, many participants in this study entered an emergent depressive phase characterised by emotional ambiguity. This study highlights the problems that can emerge in the reconstruction phase and the relevant individual and community aspects that need to be further considered to foster resilience.

Maji, Bansod, and Singh (2022) explored the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted domestic violence as experienced by Indian women. The study analysed the incidents reported in newspapers over the last 5 years. Results revealed an unprecedented impact of the pandemic, showing a sharp increase in domestic violence episodes corresponding with the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during the first phases, predominantly as a consequence of home containment with abusive partners.

Trifiletti, Shamloo, Faccini, and Zaka (2022) applied the theory of planned behaviour to identify predictors of engagement in preventive behaviours, including frequent handwashing and social distancing. The authors found that Italian adults' attitudes, social norms, and perceived level of behavioural control correlated with the

above-mentioned protective behaviours. Associations amongst these factors and actual self-reported behaviour (assessed with a follow-up 1 week after the first data collection) were indirect and occurred via greater intentions.

Wang, Yang, Xin, Wu, and Qi (2022) used a person-oriented approach to understand whether heterogeneous community identity profiles emerged in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and how these differed. Using a correlational design with Chinese participants, latent profile analysis revealed evidence of four community identity profiles: the larger group was represented by strong identifiers, followed by function-dominant identifiers, emotion-dominant identifiers, and weak identifiers. The most resilient response was provided by the strong identifiers profile, in terms of community management attitude and social participation. Such findings provide relevant indications that can inform interventions with regard to whether and how to strengthen identification with the community.

Zhang, Wang, Zhou, and Ke (2022) explored community resilience and anxiety related to the COVID-19 pandemic in China. The authors conducted a correlational study, administering measures of community resilience, anxiety, and trust in local government to older Chinese participants. Results revealed that community resilience emerged as a protective factor, being negatively associated with anxiety. Importantly, this protective function was weaker when trust in the local government was low, highlighting the relevant role played by institutions and social contracts in resilience processes.

O'Dwyer, Beascochea-Seguí, and Silva Souza's (2022) study focused on the examination of mutual aid groups as relevant sources providing support to vulnerable community members. The study, conducted using a correlational design, employed the 'social cure' lens and evaluated the associations of mutual aid group identification and perception (like perceived group politicisation) with anxiety and coping self-efficacy in COVID-19 mutual aid group members in UK. Results showed that whilst identifying with the group was associated with more positive perceptions of the group and better psychological outcomes, opposite associations emerged for group politicisation. Evidence also emerged for social support and collective efficacy as mediators of the associations between social identification and coping self-efficacy (but not anxiety); group politicisation acted as a moderator, strengthening the indirect effect of identification on higher coping self-efficacy via greater perceived support and collective efficacy.

Drawing on social identity and community approaches, Landmann and Rohmann (2022) focused on social connectedness as a means of coping with the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors employed a longitudinal approach to explore the association of contact with specific groups with variables related to well-being in a German adult sample. Results revealed that feelings of connection with family were associated with lower perceived stress and greater well-being during the lockdown; similar, albeit weaker, associations were also found for a sense of connectedness with friends and neighbours. The study highlights how relevant social connections may assist groups and individuals in coping with and recovering from the pandemic.

Ballada et al. (2022) explored factors that can foster national resilience in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Israel, the Philippines, and Brazil. The correlational study was conducted amongst adults and used the crisis in context theory to explore both individual and ecological factors shaping resilience. The authors also analysed how the different countries responded to the pandemic whilst maintaining their core societal values and institutions. Results revealed that Israeli participants displayed the greatest national resilience, followed by participants from the Philippines and Brazil. In addition, both individual and ecological variables contributed to shaping national resilience in all countries, with community resilience, quality of life, and perceived threat as especially relevant factors.

The second theme refers to factors that can promote prosociality as a means of actively providing support to individuals within communities. This set of articles also points to the role of prosociality in fostering well-being and more general community recovery.

By relying on appraisal theories and ecosystem theory, Yue and Yang (2022) tested compassionate goals and prosocial emotions as predictors of prosocial behaviours directed at supporting in-group and out-group members during the pandemic. The authors conducted two correlational studies in two distinct cultural contexts (United States and China). Results revealed the important role played by compassionate goals in predicting intentions to assist people suffering because of situations of hardship caused by COVID-19 (for instance through donations).

Results from the two studies also provide evidence for sympathy and solidarity as the underlying psychological processes.

Aresi et al. (2022) examined the emerging patterns of prosocial behaviours during lockdown related to the COVID-19 pandemic by conducting a correlational study with Italian adults. Participants were asked to report both offline and online prosocial behaviours, community resilience perceptions, and sense of community responsibility. Results obtained with latent class analysis revealed the emergence of four classes of prosocial behaviours: online and offline helpers (the most frequent), online health information sharers, neighbour helpers, and money donors. A sense of community responsibility was associated with belonging to the online and offline helper class, which was the category that was also associated with experiences of greater community resilience. These findings are relevant to the design of social policies aimed at increasing prosociality as a basis for effective responses to the negative consequences of the pandemic.

Tse, Lau, Hong, Bligh, and Kakarika (2022) conducted a cross-sectional investigation in four countries in North America (United States), Asia (Hong Kong), and Europe (Germany, UK). The study investigated prosocial and self-interested hoarding behaviour that has detrimental impacts on the well-being of others. The authors also tested situational (threat perceptions) and individual factors (moral identity in terms of benevolence) as potential predictors of anti-social and prosocial behaviour. Results revealed that higher levels of perceived threat and moral identity indirectly predicted greater well-being via prosocial behaviours; threat also revealed negative indirect effects via anti-social hoarding behaviours. The findings also highlighted cultural differences between the studied countries, with effects generally being stronger in individualistic (UK and United States) than in less individualistic countries (Hong Kong, but also Germany). The study, thus, shows that different types of reactions to the pandemic may have differential and even opposite effects on well-being.

Bowe et al. (2022) explored the relevant issue of voluntary helping during the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on insights from social identity and disaster perspectives. Using a sample of UK adults, the authors found a significant indirect effect of coordinated helping at the level of the community on participants' well-being via sense of community identification and community unity. This study provides evidence for the benefits of prosocial helping as a healthy response to the pandemic for community members.

Lalot, Abrams, Broadwood, Hayon, and Platts-Dunn (2022) investigated the social cohesion that emerged during the pandemic in six UK local authorities that prioritised investment in social cohesion at a time when they were emerging from the first lockdown. Results revealed that, compared with individuals from other areas, participants from these local authorities expressed higher levels of social cohesion across a wide range of indicators. These included social activism, close interpersonal relationships, interpersonal and political trust, and positive attitudes towards immigration. In turn, higher levels of social cohesion were associated with positive outcomes in the form of subjective well-being and optimism. This study illustrates the importance of structuring social cohesion programmes at the community level to facilitate recovery from the pandemic and coping with its detrimental effects.

The final theme reflects the political dimension of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. This institutional level is a relevant aspect that characterises community understandings as well as actual community responses. This is a key element to consider when extending present understandings of community processes.

Drawing on representations of the COVID-19 pandemic at the institutional level, Andreouli and Brice (2022) analysed the UK government's discourse on citizenship during the first phases of the pandemic. Using a sociocultural approach to citizenship, these authors analysed over 100 briefings and other material produced by members of the Cabinet and the Prime Minister's office. Five constructions of the good citizen emerged: the confined, heroic, responsible, sacrificial, and unfree. These constructions were mapped onto the ideological dilemmas of individualism/collectivism, freedom/control, and passive/active. Broadly speaking, the political discourse at play challenged the dominant model of the neoliberal citizen by relying on the rhetorical notions of gratefulness for shared responsibility and sacrifice. This political discourse also allowed government politicians to abdicate their responsibilities for public health by shifting responsibility to citizens at the individual level.

Capella (2022) presented a case study of early responses to the COVID-19 pandemic provided by the government and by local communities in Ecuador. In so doing, Capella underscores the ethical-political dimension of academic as well as professional praxis directed at promoting healthier societies. Results highlight the risks of neoliberalism and issues of democratic legitimacy, with official discourses blaming local communities for their inadequate response to the pandemic and attributing to them the responsibility for the spread of the virus. From this context, the author demonstrates the importance of a better understanding of diverse forms of local and global community resistance.

These two final articles highlight the difficulty of managing the containment of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the politicisation of response strategies. These processes may in some instances lead to governments shifting the responsibility for their own inefficiency to local communities and individual citizens.

In conclusion, this rich special issue provides insights into the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for individuals and communities, as well as their resilience and ability to cope with dynamic situations that have resulted from this global health crisis. The collection of articles also highlights relevant factors, at the individual, community, institutional, and societal levels, which can foster community support, prosociality, and ultimately individual and community well-being. Also important are contributions that consider institutional level processes and associated discourses within political systems in national responses to the pandemic.

Our hope is that this special issue assists academics as well as practitioners to better understand the COVID-19 pandemic and provides new insights into how to promote population well-being and foster active and supportive responses by individuals and communities.

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