Psychological implications of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world: Introduction to the special issue

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A lthough psychological researchers have long studied the implications of major crises, the outbreak and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic have confronted the global community of psychologists and psychological researchers with new challenges. This special issue contributes to the growing empirical literature on the immediate psychological implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. We present and discuss diverse work from authors that followed our call for papers in May 2020, shortly after the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. The studies focus on the early phases of the pandemic by addressing (a) implications of the pandemic for psychological well-being and mental health, (b) psychological effects of lockdown scenarios as well as (c) individual compliance with COVID-19 prevention and intervention measures. We conclude by highlighting the need for new research efforts, with a special focus on low- and middle-income regions, international research collaborations and cross-cultural research designs.

Keywords: COVID-19; Coronavirus; Crisis; International psychology.

The global pandemic triggered by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (World Health Organisation, 2020) has raised the stakes for psychological research around the world. This is particularly relevant for psychological research on (a) clinical and health-related aspects of the pandemic (Freedland et al., 2020), (b) the implications of massive restrictions such as lockdowns and other physical distancing measures (Gollwitzer et al., 2020; Pillay & Barnes, 2020), and (c) the diversity of implications across regions, cultures, groups and individuals (e.g. cross-cultural and cross-national responses to the pandemic, individual differences in responses and vulnerabilities, Romano et al., 2021).

Over the past year, psychological scientists have engaged in the systematic study of a wide spectrum of relevant topics and research questions related to the pandemic itself, and related social and economic crises caused by the pandemic. Such varied psychological research efforts have been confronted with an unfolding pandemic that deeply affects societies and populations, disrupting essential aspects of public, economic, and private life (Jetten, 2020). Needless to say, this pandemic also disrupted the work of the estimated more than a million psychologists around the globe (Stevens & Gie lens, 2007) at the same time as demand for psychological research and evidence-based prevention and intervention has accelerated.

Psychological researchers have long studied the psychological implications of major crises in various regional and cultural contexts. They can rely on a toolbox of theoretical and empirical approaches and concepts that lend themselves as a starting point for addressing an emerging and unfolding crisis. Such research can immediately tap into fundamental questions such as how people perceive (Larson, 2018) and adapt and respond to crises (Thompson et al., 2017). Hence, in times of global risks and crises characterising modernity (Cutter et al., 2015), psychological research, as “essential science” (Kazak, 2020), has contributed to a better understanding of natural disasters (e.g. James et al., 2012), macro-economic shocks (e.g. Furnham, 2013; Lee et al., 2010; Schoon & Mortimer, 2017; Tomasik & Silbereisen, 2016), war (e.g.
Amone-P’Olak & Omech, 2020; Basnet et al., 2018), refugee crises (e.g. Obschonka et al., 2018), ecological crises (Stokols et al., 2009) and global health crises and pandemics such as COVID-19 (Van Bavel et al., 2020). Whereas the latter represents a “once-in-a-century” global crisis (Gates, 2020), implications of psychological research on COVID-19 are far-reaching by assisting a broader understanding of major crises and their complex and diverse implications for humanity.

**THIS SPECIAL ISSUE**

In May 2020, shortly after the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, we announced the call for papers for this special issue. We received an overwhelming number of submissions: 279 abstracts from 52 countries, highlighting the engagement of psychologists around the world in fast-track COVID-19 research. The purpose of this special issue was to encourage and publish new research on the psychological implications of the unfolding crisis for society, populations, groups and individuals, as well as prevention and intervention efforts.

The 11 papers in this first of two special issues (the second to be published later this year) can be broadly categorised into three groups. The first set of papers addresses implications of the pandemic for psychological well-being and mental health. For example, Menichetti Delor et al. (2021) examined grief management in 246 families that lost a family member to COVID-19 in Italy. The results highlight the traumatic circumstances and implications for families’ grieving. The research teams identified six themes of the bereavement process: without death rituals, solitary, unexpected, unfair, unsafe, coexisting with other stressors. Families’ needs ranged from finding alternative rituals to giving meaning and expressing different emotions. The authors also studied the supportive role of psychologists in the grieving process.

Wang et al. (2021) examined psychological implications of the pandemic in 1780 left-behind children and 1500 non-left-behind children in China during the national shutdown in the first months of 2020. Left-behind children refer to those under the age of 18 who have been left alone in their hometown and cared for by people other than their parents for over 12 months. During this period, the family situation of left-behind children had changed such that their parents could not go to work anymore and thus stayed with them at home, which brought changes in their family environment as well as parent–child bonds. The results identified issues with emotional and academic adjustment in these left-behind children during lockdown (e.g. more severe depression and anxiety symptoms and poor academic adjustment). The authors conclude that although left-behind children lived with their parents during the pandemic, parent–child bonds were still not stable. On the other hand, left-behind children reported lower levels of loneliness than non-left-behind children. In summarising their findings, the authors stress that left-behind children were indeed still at a disadvantage during the pandemic, even with their parents’ company. The authors thus put a special emphasis on addressing emotional and academic adjustment in left-behind children.

The study by Haft et al. (2021) examines xenophobic and racist incidents. The authors analysed data collected from Chinese American college students collected before the local outbreak of the pandemic in the USA (N = 134) and then also from February to March 2020, during the local outbreak (N = 64). The sample surveyed during the outbreak reported higher levels of perceived discrimination and anxiety than the sample surveyed in the months before the local outbreak. There was also a stronger relationship between perceived discrimination and anxiety in the outbreak sample, compared to the other sample. Mediation analyses indicate that negative media exposure partly accounted for the group difference in perceived discrimination. The study concludes that, among the manifold psychosocial implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, increased discrimination and its mental health consequences represent a pressing societal issue in our globalised world.

The longitudinal study by Meyer et al. (2021) examines implications of COVID-19 for employee psychological well-being in Germany. Data were collected right after onset of a national lockdown (N = 2900), during the lockdown (N = 1237) and again when lockdown restrictions had started to ease (N = 789). Women’s psychological health was more strongly affected by the pandemic than men’s, with a curvilinear effect of pandemic duration on working women’s exhaustion. The data also shows how the introduction and the easing of lockdown measures affected exhaustion, and that women with children who work from home while childcare is unavailable were especially exhausted. Job autonomy and partner support mitigated some of these effects. The study therefore illustrates the far-reaching effects of the pandemic on the occupational health of various groups.

The second set of papers focuses on countrywide lockdown scenarios during COVID-19. Gollwitzer et al. (2021) examined public acceptance of national lockdown scenarios in a large German sample (N = 14433). The authors put a special focus on the potential length, intensity and flexibility of distancing rules implied by different lockdown scenarios. The findings indicate that lockdown length is more important for public acceptance than intensity or flexibility.

Tomasik et al. (2021) examined how prolonged school closures affected school performance in mathematics and language of N = 28685 pupils in Switzerland, by comparing learning during a prolonged phase of school closure related to the COVID-19 pandemic with learning gains in the 8 weeks before these school closures. While older
pupils were able to sustain learning progress, younger children’s learning not only slowed down, with potential long-term repercussions for future development, but also became more heterogeneous. These developmental differences have important implications for the education systems in countries with COVID-related school closures.

The study by Mazza et al. (2021) focuses on psychological effects of lockdowns on the family context, highlighting the challenging nature of managing a family at home during a long and unexpected lockdown, while often working remotely from home. Parents in this Italian sample (N = 917) showed high rates of psychological distress, and greater distress was associated with being a mother, higher levels of education, neuroticism, child emotional and hyperactivity-inattention symptoms, lower extraversion, as well as a combination of child emotional problems and parent extroversion. The study illustrates some of the concrete risk factors and the challenges families are facing during such lockdowns.

Hoyer et al. (2021) assessed the immediate effects of an online behavioural activation intervention on positive and negative state affect in 3624 German-speaking adults. The intervention was particularly beneficial for participants with higher baseline depression and anxiety. Online psychological interventions prompting behavioural activation appear to improve state mood during major lockdowns.

The third category of papers is concerned with individual compliance with COVID-19 prevention and intervention measures. Kluck et al. (2021) examined individual compliance with physical distancing measures as an important factor in the fight against the spread of the pandemic. Integrating frameworks from psychology and communication science, the authors assessed whether and which type of technology-mediated communication fosters compliance with distancing measures (N = 301 participants of an online survey in Germany). Whereas the impact of audio-visual communication is limited, text-based communication appeared to indirectly foster willingness to adhere to physical distancing via increased feelings of social support and life satisfaction. Longitudinal data from those N = 180 that also participated in three follow-up waves showed that feelings of social support increased, while technology-based communication and willingness to adhere to distancing measures decreased. The authors stress the potential of text-based communication to generate and maintain social support in challenging times during a pandemic.

The study by Doerfler et al. (2021) targeted risky decision-making during the pandemic. The authors applied the framing effect (message framing) to hypothetical COVID-19 scenarios in their online study with US adults (N = 294), also examining personality differences. Both gain- and loss-framing influenced risk choice in response to COVID-19. Among the Dark Triad traits, psychopathy was a particularly important predictor of such risk taking. Framing of public health messages can have important effects on compliance with restriction measures.

CONCLUSION

This special issue presents important empirical insights into the various psychological implications of the early phases of the pandemic. While we witnessed increased research activity in this field, which is in line with the general agility academia demonstrated in earlier public health emergencies (Zhang et al., 2020), it is noteworthy to add that the studies included in this issue focus on countries located on three continents—Asia, Europe and North America, which reported higher case rates in earlier stages of the global pandemic than did other regions of the world. This—as well as the greater resources available to conduct psychological research in the countries represented in this issue—may in part explain the accelerated research efforts in these countries. Far more psychological research from other regions also affected by the pandemic is needed—particularly from low- and middle-income regions that are likely to be particularly affected by the pandemic and related socioeconomic consequences (e.g. De Sousa et al., 2020; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2020). While the papers in this special issue are important, they also exemplify the overrepresentation of WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic) populations in psychological research in general (Muthukrishna et al., 2020; Rad et al., 2018) and in early COVID-19 research in particular (Fry et al., 2020). More collaborative international/cross-cultural research designs are needed that transcend national borders as are those that compare countries and populations from various regions around the world (Cai et al., 2021).
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