Special Section Paper

Collective resilience in times of crisis: Lessons from the literature for socially effective responses to the pandemic

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Most countries worldwide have taken restrictive measures and called on their population to adopt social distancing behaviours to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. At a time when several European countries are releasing their lockdown measures, new uncertainties arise regarding the further evolution of a crisis becoming multifaceted, as well as the durability of public determination to face and contain it. In this context, the sustained social efficacy of public health measures will depend more than ever on the level of acceptance across populations called on to temporarily sacrifice daily freedoms, while economic insecurity grows and social inequalities become more blatant. We seek to develop a framework for analysing how the requirements of 'social distancing' can be reconciled with the conditions that allow for the maintaining, or even strengthening, of social cohesion, mutual solidarity, and a sense of collective efficacy, throughout the crisis. To reach this goal, we propose a summary of relevant findings and pragmatic policy principles derived from them.

Most countries worldwide have taken restrictive measures to limit face-to-face contacts and called on their population to adopt social distancing behaviours, in order to curb the progression of the COVID-19 pandemic. As we are writing, by the end of May 2020 – a time when millions have been diagnosed as infected by the virus and hundreds of thousands have died of it across all the world – most of the world population has experienced weeks or months of life under curfew, lockdown, or similar stay-at-home orders.[1] While several European countries have started easing lockdown measures after reaching the declared objective of 'flattening the curve', the continent (and the world) is on its way into new uncertainties: Are first waves of infections only the start of a longer, multifaceted, crisis? Will public determination to face and contain the pandemic remain or vanish after the first battle? Is solidarity with the most vulnerable enduring, or does it turn out to be short-lived?

Many countries are more polarized today than during the initial response phase. Under certain conservative anti-science leaderships, as in the United States and Brazil, the implementation of protective policies had to be fought for by the public since the

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[1] *https://ig.ft.com/coronavirus-lockdowns/*

outbreak of the pandemic.[2] The overcoming of the first epidemic wave is now bringing politics back to most European nations as well, even where there was initially a broad national consensus on the need for determined public action. Political disagreement is growing notably over how to weigh public health risks against economic risks, while 'corona-sceptic' protest movements are emerging in German or Swiss cities.[3] In this context, whatever public health measures are upheld by governments, their sustained social efficacy will depend more than ever on the level of acceptance across populations called on to temporarily sacrifice precious goods, ranging from common daily freedoms for all, to basic economic security for those living already in precarious situations.

The speed with which the political handling of the crisis is creating new social facts calls for a socially responsive science, even before the many empirical research initiatives launched during the pandemic have generated new conclusive evidence. In line with Van Bavel *et al.* (2020), we therefore rely on a review of previous research that helps to shed light on the psychosocial mechanisms at play, and to extrapolate relevant policy principles for the handling of the current crisis. Different from Van Bavel *et al.* – who draw on a very broad variety of empirical and theoretical sources – however, we focus primarily on research conducted in concrete crisis situations and seek to develop a consistent theoretical framework for analysing the core problem of the current crisis handling: How can immediate goals of effectively mobilizing public compliance with protective health behaviour be achieved without undermining the social roots of collective resilience? In other words, how can the requirements of 'social distancing' be reconciled with the conditions that allow maintaining, or even strengthening, social cohesion, mutual solidarity, and a sense of collective efficacy, throughout the crisis?

The first audience we had in mind when addressing these issues are the different actors involved in coordinating public action during the crisis. However, at a time when states are progressively moving beyond first-response emergency policies, it is also critical that grassroots politics, democratic debate, and public scrutiny of the way governments handle the crisis all regain their place. The paper therefore aims not least to help identifying a relevant knowledge base to inform these broader public debates, and does so by highlighting 10 key lessons from the literature and by proposing policy principles that can be derived from these.

The malleability of social behaviour increases with accelerating speed in times of crisis

In periods of relative social stability, social behaviours are often overdetermined by a set of factors: personal values, material constraints, laws, social norms, etc. This implies that a change in one of these factors is often absorbed and compensated for by the stability of the other factors (Tankard & Paluck, 2017; Vallacher, Read, & Nowak, 2002). However, the resulting intuitive understanding of the steadiness and predictability of social behaviour cannot be extrapolated to what happens in times of crisis. When a population is faced with a major upheaval in their daily lives, the shock may simultaneously affect several, or most, determinants of social behaviour. Interactions between multiple factors no longer temper

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[2] *https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/22/brazilians-protest-bolsonaro-coronavirus-panelaco#maincontent; https:// www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/03/25/trump-bolsonaro-see-coronavirus-more-political-hassle-than-public-threat/*

[3] *https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/21/germany-braced-for-more-protests-against-coronavirus-polices; https:// www.swissinfo.ch/eng/pandemic-politics_demonstrators-defy-ban-to-protest-against-lockdown/45748938*

change; they actually accelerate it (Elcheroth & Reicher, 2017; Matthes, 2015; Vallacher *et al.*, 2002). The extreme malleability of the resulting behaviours is sometimes seen by the authorities as a source of potential disorder in times of crisis (Drury, Stott, *et al.*, 2019). However, this malleability also facilitates the adaptation of behaviours to new imperatives, on a scale and at a speed that would be inconceivable in normal circumstances.

Derived policy principle (1): Anticipate that everything can change rapidly
When the context and social behaviours change in an accelerated and often unpredictable manner, it is fundamental to preserve room for manoeuvre to adapt actions to the course of events. Communicating about the necessary evolving nature of the measures taken helps to preserve serenity when the social conditions and goals of collective behaviour change quickly.

Perceived social norms play a critical role in accelerating change

Among the various factors at play, perceived social norms play a particular role in the dynamics of accelerated change. Faced with new obligations, most people will adapt their behaviour in line with the prevailing reaction in the communities to which they belong (Paluck, 2011; Portelinha & Elcheroth, 2016; Tankard & Paluck, 2016). While it might be possible to observe directly how neighbours or friends adapt their behaviour (Bruine de Bruin, Parker, Galesic, & Vardavas, 2019), information on how most people react across larger communities of belonging ('my nation', 'my generation', 'my profession', etc.) is necessarily brought to them through the media. Information provided by the authorities on the prevalence of certain types of behaviour, together with coverage of events by key media, is likely to rapidly reach a larger number of people, as few other sources of information do – all the more so as in a climate of uncertainty people tend to refrain from sharing their personal position on issues perceived as sensitive (Bodor, 2012; Matthes, Knoll, & von Sikorski, 2018). As a consequence, information from the authorities or mass media on what other people do or value, can have a disproportionate impact on common perceptions of social norms and shape behavioural change.

Derived policy principle (2): Make constructive behaviour visible
Millions of people who adapted their own behaviour virtually overnight to comply with new public health recommendations provide as many opportunities to communicate positive stories, which can inspire others to change. Conversely, naming and shaming those who do not comply can backfire, as it can give the (false) impression that unconstructive behaviour is frequent and hence 'normal'. Ways to avoid this pitfall, while at the same time pointing out what is problematic, include communicating a trend, varying reference groups, or contextualizing observed behaviours by emphasizing their malleability (see Tankard & Paluck, 2016).

Impractical regulations are likely to produce counterproductive effects

Public prohibitions are only effective if they are applicable in practice; otherwise, they can trigger paradoxical effects. Formal orders that are systematically and visibly transgressed can generate unfortunate cascades: Ambiguity created by norm violations may spill over to

other norms and facilitate the spread of incivility or law-breaking behaviour (Keizer, Lindenberg, & Steg, 2008, 2011). However, the reverse also seems to be true: In social environments where effective behavioural norms are largely congruent with prescribed norms, compliance with rules is also likely to spread from one domain to another (Tankard & Paluck, 2016).

Derived policy principle (3): Favour clear and practicable instructions

When new instructions are issued to the public, it is crucial to ensure that the behaviours requested are clearly identifiable and workable. Ambiguous instructions or double binds, such as contradictory pressures to stay at home and go out working (or consuming), without a clear sense of priorities, risk blurring norms and thwarting the dynamics of collective change.

Adherence to public health guidance is reinforced by the perception of a common identity with the persons issuing or relaying the guidance

Instructions to change behaviour and make sacrifices are more likely to generate an intrinsic motivation to comply when they are perceived as coming from 'one of us' (Drury, Carter, *et al.*, 2019; Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2010). In a large population, feelings of belonging are generally varied; they differ across individuals and situations. The same source may therefore generate strong support for the message with one sub-section of the population at a given time, while being perceived as an outsider's voice for other people or in different circumstances (Augoustinos & De Garis, 2012).

Derived policy principle (4): Mobilize inclusive role models

The persuasive power of public guidelines can be significantly enhanced when they are relayed by a range of people who are likely to be accepted as 'one of us' across the different target groups, and to credibly embody the respective common identities. It is also important to avoid having law enforcement agencies being placed in situations that make them appear antagonistic to the group identities involved (see Drury, Stott, *et al.*, 2019), either by their attributes or by their actions (e.g., avoid a group of adolescent girls being dispersed by older male officers and avoid armed agents intervening at a religious site). More generally, identification and effective cooperation of the public with the authorities handling the crisis can only be sustained if the authorities refrain from disproportionate authoritarian measures like blanket surveillance, or drastic punishment.

The search for a sense of collective continuity is a powerful source of social motivation

Membership in social groups bears the promise of being part of something more long-lasting than our own finite existence: Collective continuity provides solace and orientation to individuals, especially when faced with existential threats (Elcheroth & Spini, 2014; Sani, Bowe, & Herrera, 2008; Sani, Herrera, & Bowe, 2009). The way in which communities mobilize to deal with a current crisis depends on how they relate the challenges posed by the crisis to a common understanding of their history and collective trajectory (Wohl, Squires, & Caouette, 2012).

Derived policy principle (5): Recall the ordeals overcome

It can be empowering to highlight past and present experiences that testify to the collective capacity to respond to the challenge, and effective to show that what is required is in continuity with cherished everyday roles and identities (e.g., helping loved ones, caring for the sick, providing food, and communicating creatively). When relevant and meaningful historical narratives are accessible in the collective memories, their invocation can serve to inspire and encourage.

Even in life-threatening emergencies, many ordinary social roles and relationships are preserved and continue to guide social interactions

Research on behaviours during life-threatening emergencies – such as terrorist attacks, fires, or earthquakes – shows that even in these extreme circumstances, selfish or irrational 'panic' behaviour is much rarer than spontaneous helping behaviour (Cocking & Drury, 2014; Cocking, Drury, & Reicher, 2009). In most cases, people who suddenly find themselves in a situation of great danger, either to themselves or others, will continue to respect ordinary social codes. They will, for example, be altruistic towards their loved ones, help people perceived as vulnerable, such as the elderly or children, even when they are strangers, and display general cooperation (Drury, 2012; Drury, Cocking, & Reicher, 2009; see also Drury, Reicher, & Stott, 2020).

Derived policy principle (6): Avoid perpetuating the myth of 'collective panic'

It is most reasonable to rely on shared values of civic-mindedness and to address other people as bearers of responsibilities and loyalties within the fabric of everyone's social relationships. Media coverage and over-interpretation of certain unusual behaviours (e.g., looping coverage of empty shelves) can cause concern in a context of uncertainty and, at worst, reinforce the behaviours in question through a cascade effect. It is therefore important to contextualize such information systematically and proactively, for example, by recalling the range of responsible behaviours adopted elsewhere, by insisting on the anecdotal nature of over-publicized behaviours and/or by explaining how their impact can be contained.

New communities of solidarity are likely to emerge out of the crisis situation

Studies of people exposed to emergencies and disasters have revealed that people who did not know each other before can develop a strong sense of belonging to an emergent group, created by the common experience of the dangerous event itself (Drury, Brown, González, & Miranda, 2016; Drury, Carter, *et al.*, 2019). The feeling of all being 'in the same boat' gives rise to a sense of common identity, which motivates and makes possible mutual support during the crisis. Under certain conditions, the common identity is maintained over time and facilitates long-term solidarity (Drury & Reicher, 2000; Ntontis, Drury, Amlôt, Rubin, & Williams, 2020).

Derived policy principle (7): Let spontaneous solidarity express itself

As the crisis can hardly be overcome without a broad mobilization of public solidarity, spontaneous initiatives should primarily be treated as manifestations of goodwill which

can lead to new solutions, even when they appear to be potential sources of disorder in the eyes of public authorities. It is vital to allow spontaneous self-help initiatives to express themselves, give them visibility, and acknowledge their contribution to the management of the crisis.

The momentum of solidarity can be fragile when crisis management creates or reinforces inequalities

The main obstacle to the emergence or maintenance of a sense of common fate in the face of danger stems from an unequal distribution of risks and burdens (Penic, Elcheroth, & Morselli, 2017; Spini, Morselli, & Elcheroth, 2019). When certain sub-groups feel invulnerable, the sentiment of all being in the same boat is reduced. When part of the population escapes the effort required of all or, worse, exploits the crisis to profit from it, the social incentives for making sacrifices tend to erode (Abramowitz, 2005). Sometimes, the wave of spontaneous solidarity fails to materialize because the political management of the crisis divides people whom the danger could have brought together (Drury, Carter, *et al.*, 2019). Sometimes, it declines when the majority is striving to return to a state of normality, leaving those still affected by the danger increasingly isolated (Kaniasty & Norris, 2008).

Derived policy principle (8): Show that vulnerability is shared
The feeling of togetherness is a strong source of energy and flexibility in times of crisis, but it is also a fragile resource. It is therefore critical to recognize and mitigate the impact of social inequality, while highlighting at the same time that some forms of vulnerability are shared. Leaving poorer people with no real alternative to continue working under any conditions makes the situation worse for all, as it undermines effective containment of the epidemic. It very likely makes a difference when public administrations avoid undue privileges when the call is for sacrifice, show firmness towards attempts to exploit the crisis for individual gain, and display sensitivity towards communities of effective solidarity formed on the ground, even when they transcend administrative or political borders.

Confusion and lack of information are more difficult to manage than shared truths

Faced with situations of existential uncertainty, most people redouble their efforts to preserve a shared and coherent vision of social reality (Echterhoff, Higgins, & Levine, 2009; Kopietz, Hellmann, Higgins, & Echterhoff, 2010). Not being able to receive consistent information or to share it with significant others can be the cause of a distressing loss of one's bearings and will increase the volatility of social behaviour (Centola, Willer, & Macy, 2005; Ostertag & Ortiz, 2013; Portelinha & Elcheroth, 2016). Not being able to share alternative viewpoints or constructive criticism can lead to either disengagement or hostility, especially among committed citizens (Packer, 2008).

Derived policy principle (9): Preserve information and communication channels
It is vital to keep public media functional, and not to take any measures that hinder social interaction beyond the need to guard physical distance. As a primary source of information, the role of public authorities can be guided by three principles: sharing

available information, communicating about the limits of current knowledge, and admitting that citizens are better equipped to live with difficult but shared truths than with isolating confusion.

The preservation of social ties is a critical determinant of resilience in stressful times

It is well established that social isolation negatively affects mental and physical health. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that social isolation affects longevity at least as strongly, if not more, than key somatic factors like smoking, alcohol consumption, physical activity, or obesity (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). People who are well integrated in a cohesive community are less likely to be impaired even when they have to face extremely stressful events (Abramowitz, 2005; Diez-Roux, 1998; Hikichi, Aida, Tsuboya, Kondo, & Kawachi, 2016; Iwasaki, Sawada, & Aldrich, 2017; Kaniasty & Norris, 2008; Noel, Cork, & White, 2018). However, not all types of social contacts are similarly beneficial to health: The critical factor seems to lie in people's capacity to preserve social relations that matter for their feeling of belonging and purpose, and which provide them with existential security trough a sense of shared identity (Jetten, Haslam, Haslam, Dingle, & Jones, 2014).

Derived policy principle (10): Allow for the continuity of social ties
In order to preserve collective capacities for solidarity and resilience, it is important to avoid, as much as possible, situations of social isolation that may arise from stay-at-home orders. To clarify the objective of calls for physical distance, they may be accompanied by a call to keep in touch by other means. It is important not to hinder well-intended initiatives when they are compatible with the objectives of protection, and to help everyone to differentiate between staying at home and retreating, or feeling helpless.

Conclusion

In a comprehensive treatise on the impact of calamities on social life, written in the midst of World War II, Sorokin (1942) noted that one calamity seldom comes alone. While he was mainly concerned about how great diseases pave the way for great poverty, war, or revolution, from a contemporary perspective environmental destruction and climate change add to the list of Sorokin's 'monsters'. Once the current health crisis is contained, the big questions to remain will be whether humanity is condemned to be in a less favourable situation to fight poverty, war, or global warming after the pandemic than it was before. However, if sufficiently resilient social dynamics are put in motion during the pandemic, these might eventually even *facilitate* effective action in face of other global threats. In the most optimistic of all scenarios, policies consistent with the research-derived principles outlined in this paper then bear a potential not only to preserve social fabrics here and now, but also to trigger positive spillover effects (see Solnit, 2010).

One thing for sure: Rarely has the rich adaptability of social behaviour in face of existential threat been demonstrated on such a scale. Emergent solidarities do not only bring closer people facing the threat locally but also globally; they could potentially result in increased 'identification with all humanity' (McFarland, Webb, & Brown, 2012), a sense of global identity likely to facilitate effective action against climate (or other) disasters (Loy & Spence, 2020). However, day-to-day observations from the unfolding crisis also convey

a more sobering message, as the crisis appears to reveal and exacerbate chronic inequalities, again, locally and globally. Across the Southern Hemisphere, strict lockdown bears the risk of starvation for countless day labourers.[4] And even in an affluent country such as Switzerland, thousands of informal domestic workers have been queuing for free food bags after their employers stopped paying them.[5] It has become obvious that if health protection is performed without social solidarity, it will fatefully divide us further from one another (see also Drury *et al.*, 2020). Eventually then, the only way to come out of the pandemic more resilient than we entered into in is to build fairer arrangements to share the burden of the crisis across nations, generations, and classes, and to reaffirm our joint humanity while facing tremendous challenges.

Acknowledgements

Conflicts of interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

Guy Elcheroth (Conceptualization; Project administration; Writing – original draft); John Drury (Conceptualization; Validation; Writing – review and editing).

Data availability statement

Not applicable (review paper).

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