


## COVID-19 and social psychological research: A silver lining

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COVID-19 has changed the world in profound ways. It has changed not just how we live, work, and travel, but also how we conduct research, and this has been particularly evident in the field of social psychology. This is because COVID-19 has not only influenced our ability to do research, but the management (or mismanagement) of COVID-19 has spoken to the importance of many classic topics in social psychology: compliance; leadership; equality; attitude change; and above all, social connectedness. As a result, COVID-19 has provided social psychology researchers with a naturalistic context in which to test theories in real time, and often in novel and ground-breaking ways.

Here, we will focus on four changes to our—social psychologists’—practices and research that we have observed in our field since the onset of the pandemic. Specifically, we will discuss how COVID-19 has affected the focus of our research, the theorising we draw on to address research questions, the way we work with others to answer those questions, and the importance of engagement with policymakers and the public to disseminate our findings. We conclude with the observation that, despite the destruction and pain that COVID-19 has caused, out of that horror, some silver linings have emerged: groundswells of community support, global scientific collaboration, and some shining examples of good leadership. For social psychologists too, this sudden and expedited awareness of the importance of understanding collective behaviour holds much promise when considering the future of our field.

### The Importance of Context and Socio-Structural Conditions

One of the important lessons that COVID-19 has taught us is that our world is always in flux, and the contextual factors that determine outcomes today may not be in play—and hence relevant to the determination of outcomes—tomorrow. The notion that determinants of behaviour are timeless and universal is thereby challenged, and this may have important consequences for

questions of replicability. Indeed, COVID-19 has opened our eyes to the possibility that the primary value of good research may not necessarily lie in being able to replicate particular findings in another context and time, but in being able to understand how specific outcomes are shaped and determined by the unique constellation of situational and contextual forces at play when the original research was conducted. Understanding COVID-19 outcomes therefore involves not so much determining *whether* X leads to Y, but *when* and *how* X leads to Y.

To give an example, in many countries around the world, it appears that compliance with social distancing guidelines was not the same (and was determined by different factors) in the lead-up to a peak in infections as it was throughout periods when the rate of new infections started to dwindle. Likewise, in many contexts, compliance with such guidelines was not the same in April 2020 as it was in December 2020. These contexts were often completely different in terms of perceived individual and collective threat, perceived collective control, trust in leaders, and expectations as to how the virus would affect the world in the months to come. This observation shows quite clearly that there is not one single psychological state of compliance, but rather multiple states of compliance that vary as a function of the context in which social psychological processes operate.

What is more, the observation that countries and communities differed so widely in the effectiveness of their attempts to control the virus has also led to a renewed recognition that deep-seated socio-structural factors hinder or facilitate an effective response to curb disasters. Indeed, the extent to which societies were deeply divided politically and morally before the pandemic (e.g., polarisation in society, Crimston & Selvanathan, 2020), and the extent to which they were characterised by high levels of economic inequality (Jetten, 2020), determined the effectiveness of responses to the pandemic. Quite clearly, the more polarised and the larger the gap between the poor and the wealthy, the greater the harm that COVID-19 brought to a society (see Jetten et al., 2020).

### The Importance of Collective-Level Processes

In addition to highlighting the importance of taking contextual and socio-structural conditions seriously, COVID-19 has taught us another lesson: It has shown us

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how important collective-level processes are in understanding individual-level attitudes and behaviours. In our book *Together Apart: The Psychology of COVID-19* (Jetten et al., 2020), we started with a very simple observation: To stop the spread of the virus, we need to change not only individual behaviour, but also collective behaviour. That is, because of the contagious nature of COVID-19, it is not just “my” behaviour that matters, but the behaviour of all of “us”—of the groups that we belong to, of our communities, and of society at large—that needs to change so that we can effectively control the spread of the virus.

More generally, COVID-19 has made very clear that, on its own, an individual-level analysis is of limited practical utility and that an effective response requires a psychological understanding of the collective dimensions of human behaviour. Fundamentally, what this requires is an appreciation of people as group members, rather than just as individuals. It also requires an in-depth understanding of how to manage, lead, and coordinate people *as* members of the groups and collectives to which they belong (see Haslam et al., 2021). Specifically, getting the virus under control requires coordinated action at the collective level. It requires that everyone engages in physical distancing, that everyone washes their hands more frequently, and (in some areas) that everyone wears a mask. In our book, we argue that it is only by understanding both the individual-level and collective-level determinants of the spread of COVID-19, and by developing and translating those insights into tangible behaviour change interventions, that we have been able to respond effectively to the most significant world event of our lifetime.

### **The Need to Work Together**

Worldwide, it was clear that effective responses to COVID-19 were found where leaders and their followers managed to build a sense of “we-ness,” which allowed them to unlock the power of the group and to come together in solidarity against the virus. Notably, the same can be said for the way social psychologists study COVID-19. From the early days of the pandemic, many research groups (including our own) engaged in large-scale national and international data collection. Others combined forces to write accessible reviews, drawing on social psychological knowledge and theorising about how to counter the infection rate (e.g., Van Bavel et al., 2020; Haslam et al., 2021; Jetten et al., 2020). As a number of collaborations have shown, COVID-19 has shone a light on the importance of collaboration, whereby researchers and research groups combine their expertise and knowledge to communicate in an integrated fashion with policymakers and the public (for a

similar point, see Ellemers, 2021). Moreover, these combined efforts have had considerable impact. For example, the major review article in *Nature Human Behaviour* by Van Bavel et al. (2020) on “Using social and behavioural science to support COVID-19 pandemic response” was compiled early in the pandemic and subsequently accessed over 130,000 times in the first three months following publication. It was also cited by the World Health Organization, and the publication led to invited presentations to U.S. congressional staff and the American Psychology Association.

### **Connect with Questions for Which the World Needs Answers**

Combining forces has been important and it has led to more unified discussions about the way that social psychological insights can contribute to an effective COVID-19 response. It is hard to imagine a time when social psychological knowledge about compliance, leadership, communication, group processes, and intergroup dynamics have been more directly relevant to the lives of so many. This was not just understood by social psychologists, but also by policymakers at large. Since the start of the pandemic, there has been more demand for social psychological knowledge than ever before, and that knowledge has also proved far more useful than ever before.

In this, governments have recognised the importance of psychology not only as a means of understanding individual-level outcomes (e.g., the effects of the pandemic on mental health) but also as integral to an understanding of societal-level outcomes (e.g., the maintenance of social cohesion). Because social psychology (and in particular the social identity approach that is central to most of our work) speaks to both levels of analysis, as a research group, we have been sought out extensively since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, advising a range of bodies on how to best support the COVID-19 response. We have provided input on topics including communications and messaging, adherence to lockdown and physical distancing, the mental health impact of physical distancing measures, trust-building, leadership, public order, how to motivate people to download the COVID-19 tracing apps, as well as privacy concerns relating to contact tracing. In particular, we have advised the Australian Government's Behavioural Economics Team (BETA) in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and have also been members of a number of bodies and task forces including the G08 Australian Roadmap to Recovery, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's COVID Monitor project, the Science Board of the Office of National Intelligence, and the Rapid Response Information Forum on COVID-19 tracing and privacy protection in Australia. Throughout

this engagement with policymakers and government bodies, it has become clear how psychological theory—and the social identity approach in particular—can help us better understand, and respond to, crises.

### A Silver Lining

Although COVID-19 has—and continues to—pose significant challenges to the world at large, as well as to the academic and research community, here, we chose to focus on some of the positive outcomes that have emerged in the wake of the pandemic. Among other things, these positives relate to shifts in the way in which we do research and include (a) a greater emphasis on the context-dependent nature of human behaviour as well as the socio-structural conditions that shape this, and a move away from the search for timeless universals; (b) a greater emphasis on the way that collective-level processes shape responses; (c) more cooperative and collaborative research practices; and (d) greater engagement with policymakers and the public on questions that matter to them. Looking forward, we hope that these “silver linings” give us insight into how better to harness the knowledge that social psychological research can provide us with today, and more importantly, insight into the way that such knowledge can fruitfully evolve and be cultivated in the future.

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### Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

### Author Contribution

JJ drafted the article. SVB, CRC, HPS, and SAH provided critical feedback which was incorporated in the final draft of this manuscript.

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