


COVID-19, societal threats, and social psychology's self-imposed constraint

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Human populations respond to the challenges arising from the natural environment by modifying their world through the process of niche construction (Kashima et al., 2019; Laland et al., 2000). The human-made niche then becomes the environment to which humans have to adapt, which includes not only the built environment and physical artefacts, but also social, economic, and political environments. After three and a half centuries of fossil-fuel-based niche construction since the start of the First Industrial Revolution, human industrialization and global expansion have gone very far in the 21st century CE. So much so, that the ongoing human activities are now threatening to irreversibly alter the biophysical processes that have maintained the Holocene Optimum, the planetary climate optimally suitable for human thriving. By now, humanity has become a dominant force in shaping the planetary ecosystem, even to the point where some have proposed that the current geological epoch should be renamed the Anthropocene (for brief discussions, see Kashima, 2020; Kashima, O'Brien et al., 2021).

Despite—or perhaps because of—the significance of these human activities, numerous challenges arise for humanity from the complex interplay within the planetary social-ecological system in which globalized humanity participates. The COVID-19 pandemic is an obvious example. Although numerous pathogenic microbes pass from non-human species to humans, thanks to voluminous and rapid human global mobility, there are greater chances of them spreading around the world than before. Not only microbial challenges, but macro-level extreme weather events such as super typhoons can threaten human populations thanks to the ongoing climate change. To many more challenges that are likely to come our way, humanity will have to respond by reconstructing our niche, using the material and energies available, and configuring and reconfiguring the human-made environment—that which we humans create and recreate in our daily activities.

Then, *how do and should we construct and reconfigure our niche to meet the challenges of the 21st century?* These questions set a perspective from which to critically reflect on social psychology today.

Social Psychology's Tacit Assumption: A Personal Reflection

Social psychology is obviously concerned with human individuals in social context. But, social psychology has a tacit assumption. The “social” in social psychology—at least psychological social psychology, rather than the sociological one—is not about *institutions*. What are institutions? By way of definition, let me quote Nobel laureate Douglass North, whose well known book *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* opens by observing that “Institutions are the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” (North, 1990, p. 3). Institutions would include family, laws, government, or even money and markets. By relegating these human-made artefacts to other social sciences such as anthropology, sociology, political science, and economics, social psychology does not so much ignore institutions as take them for granted, and rarely does it deal with them explicitly as an object of inquiry.

Put differently, social psychology typically examines human activities in interpersonal, small group, intergroup, or perhaps organizational (i.e., companies and businesses) contexts, while leaving institutional contexts in the background. Consequently, social psychology often brackets out from its analysis the role of national, international, and nongovernmental institutions that constrain human conduct.

Figure 1 is an attempt to further clarify what I believe is social psychology's tacit assumption about the social context. The contemporary human-made environment obviously includes not only the layer of our everyday activities, but also institutional layers, both national and international. In the 21st century, the institutional layer is structured by nation states. They claim most of the land and nearby waters and maintain their national territories and boundaries. Although we often take them for granted as part of the permanent fixture, nation states are only a few centuries old as institutions, whose origin is usually attributed to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648.

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Received 31 December 2020; accepted 10 January 2021.

Now that nation states are widespread and well established, national borders demarcate everyday human activities as a matter of course, often breaking up the potentially continuous flow of people, material, energy, and information.

Because social psychology leaves institutions out of its scope, the nation state is also left out as an explicit institutional context (for a prominent exception, see Billig, 1995). The upshot of this is that when social psychology deals with society and social context, what is most often assumed is a national society minus its institutions. The national border acts as a tacit boundary of a social psychological analysis of human activities in social context. To be sure, cross-cultural research in social psychology often takes nation states as units of analysis and attempts to describe and explain differences in psychological processes across national samples. Even then, national demarcations are treated as givens, and national institutions such as systems of governance and national characteristics such as GDP per capita are regarded as exogenous to the psychological processes under investigation.

COVID-19, Societal Threats, and the Self-Constraining Assumption of Social Psychology

The question, “How do and should we construct and reconfigure our niche to meet the challenges of the 21st century?”, brings out the limitations and self-constraining nature of what I just sketched out as a tacit assumption of social psychology.

Societal threat event and short-term responses

Suppose an event occurs which may challenge and unsettle a human population’s daily activities of living. COVID-19 serves as an excellent example to get our thinking going. There are numerous psychological experiences that diverse individuals in the population would

have—some are cognitive, but many are likely highly emotional. Social psychology has surely accumulate knowledge about stress and coping at the individual level, i.e., how individuals respond to a stressful life event. But can social psychology offer insights into how a human population responds to a societal threat event like COVID-19 that can adversely affect a sizable proportion of the population?

There are some pockets of research which can, when pieced together, offer theoretical insights into how individuals and groups may respond (e.g., Kashima et al., 2020). Broadly speaking, this research is concerned with *collective information processing*. It would touch on the circulation of rumour (or misinformation), emotion contagion, and collective emotion processes in society. A critical contemporary factor that needs additional consideration is *information technology* such as the Web 2.0 and social media, which enables anyone with a mobile phone to send out texts and images to a vast number of people in a flash. How can this technologically enhanced collective information processing be facilitated to optimally coordinate societal responses to the threat event? Can current social psychology provide an adequate answer to this question?

Beyond this, note that such a threat event often demands *institutional responses* (Kashima et al., in press). Even a cursory exposure to daily news gives the impression that institutional responses (e.g., governments’ public health policies) have made large differences in COVID-19 case numbers and mortality rates. Although some institutional responses do not require ordinary citizens’ public engagement (e.g., funding public hospitals, developing vaccines), many require some degree of public cooperation (e.g., COVID-19 testing, wearing a mask, social distancing) in order for them to be effective.

At this juncture, it seems to me social psychology should be able to answer a question like whether people would cooperate with a public policy so that a desired public outcome (e.g., reducing SARS-CoV-2 infections) can be achieved. At the very least, social psychology

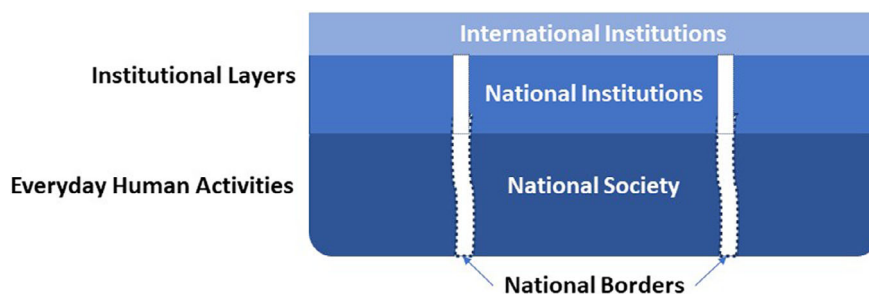


Figure 1 Social psychology’s tacit assumption about social context. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonline library.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

could have a theoretical framework with which to approach this sort of question. After all, it is all about human cooperation, and there is a voluminous work on cooperation in social dilemma contexts. But is contemporary social psychology equipped to answer the question about public cooperation with institutions when facing a societal threat event?

More specifically, effective institutional responses would need to be informed by principled predictions about public reactions to different policy instruments and likely consequences. Put differently, public administrations need to *forecast* what trajectories are expected if different policy instruments are implemented, and how effective they would be in dealing with the issue at hand. For example, to predict the effectiveness of a policy like a lockdown in reducing COVID-19 cases, a social psychological modelling (e.g., agent-based modelling) of public behaviours in response to the implementation of the lockdown policy is highly desirable; however, social psychology as it stands today would not have the requisite intellectual resources to provide this information to the best of my knowledge.

Societal threats and long-term responses

Societal threat events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and large-scale extreme weather events make up broader patterns of disruptions for humanity within the global social-ecological system. Microbial threats and macro-scale climate change can both constitute global societal threats, but growing wealth gaps around the world, and changing geopolitical power and international relations can also present global challenges to humanity in the 21st century. In my view, social psychology can and should contribute to long-term responses to such global societal challenges.

Take climate change for example. Effective long-term responses to this challenge would surely require a transformation of contemporary culture to mitigate and adapt to climate change. To begin with, people may need to invest more in renewable energy sources, turn to less carbon-intensive consumer goods, and change their lifestyles for greater sustainability. People may need to rely more on scientific information about the state of the climate system and adjust their behaviour in preparation for eventualities in the long-term future. All these require ordinary citizens' participation in the transformation of culture and society for a better world (Kashima, 2020).

One of the potential long-term consequences of societal challenges is a cultural shift towards tightness (e.g., Gelfand et al., 2011), namely, the strengthening of norms coupled with severe punishment of norm

violations. In addition, pathogen threats such as a COVID-19 pandemic can be associated with a tightening of group boundaries and outgroup avoidance (Fincher et al., 2008). Although cultural tightness may have been an adaptive societal response in the past, it is unlikely to be as adaptive for globalized humanity—we are highly reliant on global trade and the free movements of people, materials, and information. Furthermore, cultural tightening may stifle innovation and exacerbate the resistance to new ideas that can help humans thrive in the global social-ecological system. Can social psychology help us navigate the right balance between cultural tightness and looseness?

Equally important are institutional responses to long-term global societal challenges. If policy instruments need to be generated, selected, and implemented for a specific threat event, long-term policy orientations as well as national and international institutions need to be publicly debated and designed to meet societal challenges. Social psychologists have traditionally shied away from issues of institutional design and policy deliberation, leaving them to other social science disciplines such as economics and political science. However, I believe social psychology can and should contribute to these conversations. After all, institutions are there to enable ordinary citizens to thrive in their everyday activities. Social psychology should be able to say something about what the basic human needs are and to what extent they should be met by institutions, based not on ideological speculation, but on empirical research. Similarly, social psychology should be able to advise on how institutions and policies should be designed not only at the national level, but also in the international sphere, so as to ensure human autonomy and spontaneity while ensuring the sustainability of the global social-ecological system.

Concluding Comments

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised a critical research question for social psychology: How do and should we construct and reconfigure our niche to meet the challenges of the 21st century? This perspective brings out what I believe is a tacit assumption that constrains social psychological research and knowledge accumulation. It is the assumption that institutions are something that social psychology takes as a given. The domain of everyday human activities constituting the “social” in social psychology thus excludes institutions and how they interface with the daily business of living. By removing institutions from the domain of inquiry, social psychology removes the institution of nation state and institutional arrangements of governance from its scope of investigation as well.

This has two significant consequences for social psychology in my view. First, social psychology's "society" is typically a national society, and not the global civil society that globalized humanity is now beginning to embrace. It tends to parochialize its inquiry to a particular country and its institutional context. Nonetheless, there is an encouraging sign of improvement. Cross-cultural researchers have often gone beyond their national boundaries, and some are beginning to entertain the possibility of global human society (e.g., Chen et al., 2016; Leung et al., 2015; McFarland et al., 2012). Still, social psychology can do more to examine ongoing global collective information processing and public opinion dynamics. Second, social psychology has not tackled the psychological foundations of social institutions—how institutions are formed, maintained, or transformed in everyday human activities—and how social psychology can contribute to the designing and redesigning of both national and international institutions to help humanity address the challenges of the 21st century and beyond.

Social psychological research can create societally relevant knowledge. Social psychologists can then accumulate and share high quality science, and impart knowledge gained not only to our students, but also to the general public and myriad institutions that regulate our daily lives.

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