

Social representation and identity processes in relation to COVID-19 reactions: an introduction

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Abstract: The articles in this special issue enable us not only to reflect upon changes in representation, identity and human reactions during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to anticipate the effects of future health crises. More generally, they demonstrate the multitude of ways in which research can and should be conducted, but also the value in ensuring a coordinated research effort that seeks to synthesise research findings. It should be noted that in all the articles in the special issue there is a strong focus upon social psychological theory. This is based upon the premise that evidence-based policy approaches to risk reactions that are grounded in robust, testable theory are more likely to be effective. The social sciences have a crucial role to play in enhancing future pandemic preparedness. This special issue presents some key foci for research that seeks to do so.

Keywords: COVID-19, health, research, social psychology, pandemic preparedness

Note on the author: Professor Rusi Jaspal is Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Knowledge Exchange) and Professor of Psychology at the University of Brighton. He has produced over two hundred peer-reviewed publications, including six books, which mainly focus on aspects of identity in the context of social change.

COVID-19 was designated a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 and went on to affect virtually every country in the world. By November 2020, 1.2 million people in the United Kingdom had been infected with COVID-19 and over 50,000 had died of the resulting illness. In the same year, 52 million people had been affected globally, of whom 1.3 million lost their lives (WHO 2020). The COVID-19 global pandemic represented not only a significant risk to physical health but also to psychological health (Lopes & Jaspal 2020; Rajkumar 2020; Torales *et al.* 2020; Wang *et al.* 2020). It precipitated significant changes to people's identities, including the reordering of work and family life, social behaviour and travel. It seemed difficult to imagine a return to normality.

Risk perception was central to how COVID-19 and its mitigation strategies (such as social distancing, the wearing of face coverings and vaccination) were considered and acted upon. Scientists, governments and the general public all struggled to understand the risks associated with the virus and continually put into place actions, strategies and tactics to manage these risks. Most governments imposed lockdowns of varying degrees on their populations. Scientists attempted to communicate the science of COVID-19. Many people decided to be vaccinated. There was no uniformity in the management of COVID-19 when it struck. Moreover, there was a great deal of change in reactions to COVID-19 over the course of the pandemic, which in turn gave rise to uncertainty and, in some cases, mistrust.

In order to understand how people will react to crises such as pandemics, an integrative social sciences approach that brings together individual, social and institutional perspectives is necessary. This special issue attempts to address this need. It includes four articles that examine reactions to social representations of COVID-19 risk and its mitigation at an individual level, how people's sense of identity may change as hazards and risks arise and the individual and collective actions that come about through social representational and identity processes. The articles in this special issue are based largely on results from social surveys on beliefs and behaviours related to COVID-19. However, they are intended to inform future pandemic and other crisis preparedness by collating evidence and indeed the lessons learned from the most significant global pandemic in over a hundred years.

Theories from the social sciences and particularly from social psychology play key roles in enabling us to develop evidence-based approaches to pandemic preparedness. The first article, entitled 'Identity resilience, uncertainty, personal risk, fear, mistrust and ingroup power influences upon COVID-19 coping', by Glynis M. Breakwell, introduces a theoretical model based upon identity process theory (IPT) (Jaspal & Breakwell 2014; Breakwell 2015), focusing upon how people attempt to cope with COVID-19. Coping is important because it reflects not only how people think and feel about the pandemic, potentially affecting their psychological well-being, but also

how they will behave (e.g., whether or not they will adhere to preventive measures). Breakwell outlines the interactions between the concepts of identity resilience (defined in IPT as a product of an individual's levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, positive distinctiveness and continuity), uncertainty, perceived personal risk, fear, mistrust and ingroup power (the perceived influence that one's ingroup has in key spheres of life) in determining how people will cope when faced with a hazard such as COVID-19. In particular, the significance of psychological constructs, such as identity resilience, is shown to be central to determining the extent to which people will react to uncertainty and risk and experience fear, mistrust and ingroup power. To that extent, Breakwell argues that, in addition to individual psychological variables, group processes are key: social representation, group identification processes and intergroup relations can all have effects on individual coping (see also [Jaspal & Lopes, 2021](#)). Although the model focuses upon COVID-19 as a case study, social scientists would benefit from considering the implications of the model for enhancing future pandemic preparedness.

To strengthen preparedness, there has been a major effort to produce social sciences empirical research that can shed light on attitudes and behaviours in the context of COVID-19. Many research teams from a multitude of social sciences disciplines, using many different methods, have been involved in this research effort. One of the unintended consequences of this enormous research effort has been an uncoordinated approach that has resulted in divergent ways of measuring the same concepts. Behavioural intention is a case in point ([Wright *et al.* 2022](#)). The second article, entitled 'Methodological considerations and assumptions in social science survey research', by Daniel B. Wright, describes the considerations and assumptions used when conducting survey research in the context of the pandemic and when analysing the resulting data. The focus is upon data from a recent British Academy project on differences between the United Kingdom and the United States, and between ethnicities, with respect to COVID-19 beliefs and behaviours, by the authors of the articles in this special issue (see [Jaspal *et al.*, 2022](#)). Wright shows that the scales used appeared to measure the psychological constructs (e.g., identity resilience and trust in science) as intended and that these did seem to influence reports of COVID-19 preventative behaviours. This article provides valuable insight into the methodological considerations that should be central to any social science survey-based study of future pandemic preparedness, including how existing methods must innovate and be bridged in order to yield meaningful policy implications in relation to risk reactions.

The third article, entitled 'Public uncertainties in relation to COVID-19 vaccines in the United Kingdom', has an empirical focus upon one of many challenges that occurred and continues to occur in relation to the pandemic: vaccine hesitancy. Vaccination was central to reducing disease incidence and the mortality rate associated with the virus ([Watson *et al.* 2022](#)). Yet not everyone was willing to be vaccinated when the

vaccines finally became available. In their article, Rusi Jaspal and Glynis M. Breakwell note that uncertainties about COVID-19 vaccines and variants have been associated with vaccination refusal on a significant scale. They argue that only an understanding of the substantive nature of people's uncertainties can allow policymakers to address these and thus reduce vaccination refusal. To that end, the study presents a qualitative thematic analysis of a corpus of written texts from 324 participants from the United Kingdom, focusing upon the uncertainties people have about vaccines and vaccination. They draw upon tenets of social representations theory (Moscovici 1988) and, in particular, Breakwell's (2014) concept of personal representations in order to elucidate the individual concerns that people in the United Kingdom appear to have about the COVID-19 vaccines. The study describes five major public uncertainties regarding COVID-19 and argues that policy responses must be informed by an understanding of the factors that instigate and maintain uncertainties in individuals and in wider society. Qualitative insights of this kind can enable researchers and policymakers to anticipate opposition to novel prevention measures in future pandemic contexts.

In seeking to understand COVID-19 reactions, researchers and commentators have acknowledged differences by key demographic features, such as ethnicity (e.g., Jaspal & Breakwell 2023). The final article in the special issue, entitled 'Psychological influences on COVID-19 preventive behaviours and vaccination engagement in the United Kingdom and United States: the significance of ethnicity', by Glynis M. Breakwell, Julie Barnett, Rusi Jaspal and Daniel B. Wright, presents the findings of two studies conducted as part of the aforementioned British Academy project on COVID-19 beliefs and behaviours in the United Kingdom and the United States. The first study reported in the article describes a mapping review of literature on the effect of ethnicity on psychological influences upon COVID-19 responses. Despite the acknowledgment of apparent ethnic differences in relation to COVID-19 reactions, the review reveals that very few empirical studies conducted during 2020–2021 actually examined differences by ethnicity on the psychological influences upon COVID-19 preventive behaviours. Furthermore, it is shown that the few studies that did examine differences provide some evidence that ethnic groups vary on various key social psychological factors (e.g., levels of trust, perceived personal risk) associated with COVID-19 choices. The second study describes the cross-sectional survey conducted in the United Kingdom and the United States by Breakwell *et al.* to examine differences by ethnic group in levels of, and in relationships among, identity resilience, social support, science trust, COVID-19 fear, COVID-19 risk and vaccination likelihood. On the basis of these studies, Breakwell *et al.* suggest that a single model of psychological influences on vaccination decisions may be applicable across ethnic categories.

The articles in this special issue enable readers not only to reflect upon changes in representation, identity and human reactions during the COVID-19 pandemic but

also to anticipate the effects of future health crises. More generally, they demonstrate the multitude of ways in which research can and should be conducted, and also the value in ensuring a coordinated research effort that seeks to synthesise research findings. It should be noted that in all the articles in the special issue there is a strong focus upon social psychological theory. This is based upon the premise that evidence-based policy approaches to risk reactions that are grounded in robust, testable theory are more likely to be effective. The social sciences have a crucial role to play in enhancing future pandemic preparedness. This special issue presents some key foci for research that seeks to do so.

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