

In this spotlight issue of *Behavioral Science & Policy*, we present a broad set of articles in which behavioral science insights are used to confront myriad issues created by the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic has upended some of the most stable features of modern life—from social interactions with friends, to working in an office, to business transactions, to everyday rituals—which now cannot be undertaken without first donning a face mask. Decisionmakers in governments and organizations at all levels and individual citizens have had to adapt to the challenges presented by the pandemic's new normal. In March 2020, *Behavioral Science & Policy* issued a call for abstracts, asking for articles that would apply behavioral science to the public health and economic challenges posed by the pandemic. Our reviewers assessed well over 100 submissions and scrutinized articles in a streamlined peer-review process organized by Jehan Sparks (University of California, Los Angeles). Manuscripts were guest-edited by Gretchen Chapman (Carnegie Mellon University), Thomas D'Aunno (New York University), Jason Doctor (University of Southern California), George Loewenstein (Carnegie Mellon University), and Mitesh Patel (University of Pennsylvania), with assistance from *Behavioral Science & Policy* founding co-editor Craig Fox.

The articles were written by authors from a number of countries and tackle a variety of complex topics, including how to produce effective health messages, ways to increase preventive behaviors, actions organizations can take, the pandemic's effects on different social groups, mental health effects, and the importance of learning from the experiences of others. By addressing the multifaceted nature of the pandemic and amplifying diverse perspectives, this spotlight issue can help decisionmakers respond effectively to the current crisis, adapt as it evolves, and chart a way forward.

Four articles explore how policymakers can more effectively communicate health messages about COVID-19 to the public. Tyler Davis, Mark LaCour, Micah Goldwater, Brent Hughes, Molly E. Ireland, Darrell A. Worthy, Nick Gaylord, and Jason Van Allen apply insights from research on inductive reasoning to provide advice on crafting effective public health communications. The authors show that the way public health officials communicate about a disease's origin—for example, saying that it originates in an exotic species as opposed to a more common species—can affect how members of the public generalize from the information to assess the risks of contracting the disease from various animals. Understanding how people use inductive reasoning to draw conclusions about health risks represents a creative application of cognitive and behavioral science that can generate actionable policy solutions in response to the current crisis.

William Ryan and Ellen Evers present four studies suggesting that public communications involving graphs about COVID-19 should use linear scales whenever possible. Compared with viewing logarithmic graphs, viewing linear graphs leads people to express more support for policy interventions, report more intention to engage in protective behaviors, and make more accurate predictions of COVID-19's spread.

Jiaqian Wang and Angela Y. Lee report on their investigation into the persuasiveness of “stay healthy” (that is, health-promotion) messages versus “keep safe” (that is, disease-prevention) messages that encourage people to adopt social distancing measures. Drawing on regulatory fit theory, Wang and Lee show that the intention to social distance is maximized by messages that combine a health-promotion goal with an emphasis on benefits to the individual or combine a disease-prevention goal with an emphasis on benefits to a broad group of people, such as Americans.

Eugene Chan presents evidence that health announcements communicated in a low voice pitch are more persuasive than those delivered in a high pitch. In an experiment using a student sample from Australia, Chan found that health messages delivered in a low pitch increased participants' sense of power and perceived behavioral control, which ultimately increased their likelihood of using hand sanitizer.

A second set of articles focuses on how to encourage behaviors meant to prevent the spread of COVID-19—especially social distancing and mask wearing—using means beyond health messaging and communication. Stephen B. Broomell, Gretchen B. Chapman, and Julie S. Downs report that whether people practice social distancing, respiratory hygiene (such as handwashing and coughing into a tissue), or mask wearing is strongly predicted by the practice's perceived effectiveness in preventing COVID-19 (and moderately predicted by anxiety about COVID-19 and perceived behavioral norms). These findings imply that success at shifting perceptions of effectiveness may be critical for behavior change. The authors offer policy suggestions for how to boost perceptions of effectiveness, such as by highlighting that certain behaviors are the norm.

Hilde Mobekk and Laila Stokke tested two nudges to increase hand sanitizer use. One involved a strategically placed dispenser with a sign emphasizing that hand sanitizer use is the norm ("Here we use HAND DISINFECTANT"), and the other was identical except that it also included an altruistic motive ("Here we use HAND DISINFECTANT . . . to protect your relatives"). Both nudges increased hand sanitizer use compared with a control condition involving dispensers without a sign, although the altruistic motive did not boost compliance beyond the level generated by the sign emphasizing the norm.

Several articles highlight strategies that organizations and managers can apply to adapt to the current crisis. Nicole Gillespie, Rosalind Searle, Stefanie Gustafsson, and Veronica Hope Hailey draw on research into employee trust to outline how to preserve—or even enhance—employees' trust in their organization

during the COVID-19 crisis. Trust is critical during a crisis because it creates a climate for constructive problem solving, which helps build organizational agility and resilience. The authors identify practical ways organizations can shift employee mindsets so that employees who are feeling overwhelmed or worrying about losing their jobs can transition to feeling that they understand what is going on, can take action to navigate the crisis, and have a clear understanding of how these actions may help to build resilience for the future.

Isabel Bilotta, Shannon K. Cheng, Linnea C. Ng, Abby R. Corrington, Ivy Watson, Eden B. King, and Mikki R. Hebl examine research into perceptions of justice to offer behavioral science-backed policy recommendations that managers can use to buffer some of the negative effects that layoffs have on both employees and organizations. The authors recommend that organizations communicate clearly about how they will provide support and resources to their laid-off employees (distributive justice), deliver layoff decisions in a transparent and logical manner (procedural justice), and demonstrate concern for their employees' well-being (interactional justice).

Ellen Ernst Kossek and Kyung-Hee Lee argue that the COVID-19 crisis provides an opportunity to improve U.S. employment policy on work-life balance. The authors propose three evidence-based national initiatives to support work-life balance: paid sick leave and family leave, emergency backup staffing, and the legal right to request flexible work schedules. Matthew B. Perrigino and Roshni Raveendhran offer managers actionable insights into how they can assess, create, and support work-from-home practices that address employees' challenges in managing work-home boundaries.

In the final article relating to organizations, Vicki Whiting, Brian Wierman, and Phillip Whiting make the case that U.S. Air Force Special Ops Command (AFSOC) pararescue teams offer a model of best practices that could be adapted by other organizational leaders during the COVID-19 crisis. For example, AFSOC teams understand that operating effectively in situations of

uncertainty and complexity requires time for reflection and clear, accountable leadership.

A fourth subset of articles focuses on issues relating to racism, gender, and community. Mikki Hebl, Abby Corrington, Linnea C. Ng, Ivy Watson, Isabel Bilotta, Shannon K. Cheng, and Eden King describe the increase in discrimination that Asian communities have experienced since the pandemic's onset. The authors suggest policies that organizations can implement to protect their Asian employees and customers.

Irmak Olcaysoy Okten, Anton Gollwitzer, and Gabriele Oettingen present three studies demonstrating that women practice more COVID-19 preventive behaviors than men do. In Study 1, women self-reported engaging in more social distancing and hygiene practices. In Study 2, a greater percentage of women were observed wearing face masks in public. In Study 3, which presented correlational evidence, U.S. counties with a greater percentage of women exhibited greater social distancing as tracked by geolocation data from about 15 million GPS smartphones per day. The authors offer suggestions for targeting preventive health messages to men to maximize their compliance.

Timothy R. Hannigan, Milo Shaoqing Wang, Christopher W. J. Steele, Marc-David L. Seidel, Ed Cervantes, and P. Devereaux Jennings present a community-based sociocultural network approach to addressing COVID-19 contagion. The authors suggest that researchers and policymakers use social units (like households) as the unit of interest and conceive of the social units as being part of a larger community within a regional or national culture. Using this approach to modeling the spread of COVID-19, the authors present simulation results and offer suggestions tailored for analysts, policymakers, and practitioners.

Mental health during the pandemic is addressed by two articles, which approach the issue from different angles. Kelly A. Nault, Benjamin A. Rogers,

Ovul Sezer, and Nadav Klein review evidence on the negative effects of loneliness and offer behavioral science-based suggestions on how to build and enhance social connections despite social (or, as they put it, physical) distancing. The authors also discuss how governments and organizations can help motivate people to adopt these practices in ways that balance the risks posed by COVID-19 against those posed by loneliness.

Christina K. Zigler, Nicole Lucas, Debra M. Henke, and Ilona Fridman report results from a nationwide survey investigating how emotional factors, including anxiety, affect compliance with the protective behaviors recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The authors find a positive association between anxiety, perceived risk, and compliance with hygiene behaviors such as handwashing (but not with social distancing behaviors). They recommend that policymakers monitor emotional reactions toward communications to better understand when those reactions are helpful and when they are counterproductive.

The final two articles consider the importance of learning from the experiences of others. Christopher G. Myers argues that health professionals need to learn vicariously—that is, learn from others' experiences—to adopt best practices for pandemic care and avoid costly mistakes. Meyers outlines ways that leaders and policymakers can use technology and social media to improve vicarious learning among health professionals. Ning Zhang shares practices that China used to successfully contain COVID-19 to help other countries learn from China's experience.

The varied entries in this special issue speak to several critical aspects of the pandemic. We hope that decisionmakers can draw insights and ideas from the nuanced, complex picture that emerges and can use the tools that these articles provide to shape public policy and managerial responses to the pandemic and to adapt effectively as the outbreak continues to unfold.

**Jehan Sparks, Gretchen Chapman, Thomas D'Aunno,  
Jason Doctor, George Loewenstein, & Mitesh Patel  
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