

Editorial: Cultural Differences and Migrant Mental Health in the Age of COVID-19

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2023 has become a worldwide tragedy. According to official data collected by WHO alone, the disease had claimed nearly 7 million lives by the end of May 2023; however, these data are clearly incomplete. *The Economist* estimates that between 17 and 31 million people could have died from new coronavirus infections since then [1].

For scientists, the pandemic was also a unique scientific experiment that placed all of humanity under extraordinary conditions of existence. It gave a rare opportunity to examine and clarify our ideas about many different spheres of human society, including various social groups in a range of countries and regions. In some areas of knowledge, the pandemic helped scientists to reach completely new frontiers in terms of understanding the social processes and phenomena under study. There is no doubt that analysing and making sense of the data obtained during the pandemic will occupy the minds of researchers for decades to come.

Indeed, in the economy, the pandemic, with its quarantines and broken supply chains, caused the biggest global crisis since the Great Depression, with an unprecedented surge in unemployment and falling production. For the first time in history, the financial systems of many countries were faced with the need to support many people forced to stay at home instead of working. In many parts of the world, such as the EU, the shock was so great that it even led to a paradigm shift in public financial management.

The social impact of the pandemic has been enormous. Numerous quarantines have provided researchers with the greatest opportunities to study a variety of phenomena related to social exclusion. Remote work schemes have become widespread among white-collar workers, seriously altering the very way of life of workers and their families. Many such schemes have proven effective since the end of the pandemic. This should lead to long-term changes in the lifestyles, culture, and psychology of large segments of the population, especially in developed post-industrial countries.

The same cannot be said of the widespread use of distance learning in schools and universities during the pandemic. Numerous studies have repeatedly found that this approach was the main reason for the sharp decline in the quality of education at the turn of the 2010s–2020s, as confirmed by the OECD's 2022 Global School Performance Survey [2].

There is no need to elaborate on the fact that the pandemic was a severe test of the effectiveness of national health systems in the context of extreme overstretching of resources.

Far more serious, complex issues requiring special attention from scientists is the role of social media during the pandemic. The proliferation of social networks is a revolutionary



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phenomenon, opening up a completely new and controversial era in human history. They have radically changed the way information (and misinformation) is disseminated in human society, giving rise to the phenomenon of impenetrable information bubbles in which an increasing number of people now live.

The crisis caused by the pandemic coincided with the beginning of the era of social media dominance. It is the influence of this phenomenon that can explain many of the social and psychological phenomena of the pandemic era, such as the extraordinary spread of the anti-vaccination movement or the upsurge in racial and geographical discrimination.

At the same time, it would be wrong to blame all of the negative phenomena that occurred during the pandemic era solely on social media. After all, social networks are only a catalyst for the spread of many social phenomena, not their cause. It is obvious that the roots of, for example, the anti-vaccination movement should be sought in the deeply rooted distrust of the ruling elites in a significant part of society at the beginning of the 21st century, connected with the painful transition of developed countries from the industrial to post-industrial phase, with globalisation and with the severe economic crisis of 2008–2009 and its consequences.

2. Content

In this Topic, researchers from different countries and regions of the world share their achievements in the study of various social and psychological phenomena accompanying the pandemic. The impact of this crisis on the scientific understanding of modern society cannot be overestimated.

Researchers led by Alexandra Ioana Mihăilescu [3] have endeavoured to study the complex influence of socio-demographic factors and personal traits on the general perception of the quality of life of Bucharest medical students. Their work in this area continued throughout the two worst years of the pandemic (2020–2022) and led to the discovery of some curious patterns.

Researchers led by Doris Yuet Lan Leung [4] explored the fascinating phenomenon of cultural racism and ethnic stigmatisation in a pandemic. They focused on the attitudes of Canadians towards the large Chinese diaspora in the early phase of the crisis (winter–spring 2020). The study's source base was interviews with representatives of the vast Chinese community in the 6-million-strong Toronto metropolitan area, conducted in the wake of the first wave of the pandemic. The work makes a strong case that, at least in the early stages of the pandemic, racist prejudice and prejudice against members of the Chinese diaspora was very widespread in Canadian society due to the fact that the new disease originated in China and spread around the world from there. Large segments of Canadian society perceived their fellow Chinese citizens to be the main carriers of the disease. As a result, many members of the Chinese diaspora were widely distrusted and socially isolated.

A study by Yi-Lang Chen and colleagues [5] explored the impact of cultural differences on social distancing during a pandemic. They compared the behaviour of Taiwanese youth and students who came to Taiwan from Southeast Asian countries (Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand). Both groups of subjects had long lived in the same social environment. The researchers made a number of interesting observations that speak more in favour of the gradual erosion of cultural differences between these social groups.

An interesting review of the scientific literature on positive mental health among migrants in England during the pandemic is presented by Yasuhiro Kotera and colleagues [6]. Positive mental health is interpreted by the authors as focusing on human performance, quality of life, wholeness, fruitfulness and well-being, social inclusion, and the prevention or limitation of negative symptoms (depression, anxiety, obsessions). The authors of the ar-

title come to interesting conclusions, in particular, about the apparent positive relationship between mental health and religious faith.

Jonathan Adrián Zegarra-Valdivia and colleagues [7] set out to investigate attitudes towards a new disease in Peruvian society during the early period of the pandemic (March 2020). Commodity-exporting Peru is infamous for having the highest number of COVID-19 deaths per 1 million inhabitants. All the more interesting is the level of knowledge about the new coronavirus infection that characterised Peruvians at that time. The authors chose to use an internet survey to achieve their goal, which largely limited the study participants to fairly affluent, educated, and young segments of society. However, it turned out that, even in this environment, not everyone had the correct knowledge of how the new disease was contracted and how to follow the precautions prescribed by the authorities. People were more inclined to blame the government rather than themselves for not being prepared for the disaster.

An extremely interesting study by Taiwanese scientists Ling-Hsing Chang and Sheng Wu [8] used Geert Hofstede's typology of cultural dimensions to assess how different societies reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic and how national governments responded to the new disease. They examined how attitudes to the disease and governmental measures were influenced by societies' differing degrees of commitment to individualistic or collectivistic values, detachment from authority, avoidance of uncertainty, orientation towards short- or long-term goals, etc. There is no doubt about the particular theoretical and practical importance of this research. It is obvious that no fruitful health policy can be built without taking into account the prevailing cultural values in a society.

Jian Li and colleagues [9] studied the adjustment of international students to Chinese culture during the pandemic period (2021–2022), an already complex process that was compounded by the isolation of heavily quarantined study participants from their friends, parents, teachers, and local society. The study included students from Japan, South Korea, England, the USA, and New Zealand studying at six universities in Shanghai, Beijing, Tianjin, Guangzhou, and Hangzhou.

The study by Miri Sarid and her colleagues [10] of the psychological state of different religious groups in the Jewish population of Israel during the pandemic is extremely important. This work was a new confirmation of the well-known hypothesis that religious faith is a powerful source of psychological resilience in times of social crisis and upheaval. The most religious Jews demonstrated the highest level of emotional stability, resilience, peace of mind, and well-being during the pandemic. This excellent state of their psyche was facilitated not only by religious faith, but also by the feeling of support and care from their spiritual leaders and co-religionists. However, the reverse side of such a high state of mind was the fact that, among the most orthodox Jews, the level of morbidity and mortality from COVID-19 was significantly higher than among other population groups. Orthodox Jews make up approximately 10 per cent of Israel's population. However, they accounted for a third of all COVID-19 cases and 60–70% of hospitalisations in 2020. This was fuelled by the large overcrowding of the environment, large families, and the strict adherence of extremely religious Jews to their prayer practices. All of this led to a failure to observe the rules of social distancing and a rapid spread of infection.

An important contribution to the development of research on the social psychology of the pandemic era was an article by Jennifer Contreras and colleagues [11] examining the role of the social capital of the US Hispanic community in the fight against the new disease. This role turned out to be twofold. On the one hand, the strong social ties within the Hispanic community and the mutual support of family and friends helped those affected by the pandemic to cope more easily with physical and mental suffering. Moreover, the pandemic strengthened social ties within that community. On the other hand, the enormous social

capital accumulated in the US Hispanic community hindered its interaction with the rest of the population and contributed to the spread of misinformation about the vaccination campaign. The widespread belief among Hispanics that vaccines are harmful has slowed vaccination in this community, thereby contributing to the spread of disease and mortality.

The study by Shuo Wang and colleagues [12] takes us back to the busiest days of January 2023, when the pandemic in China saw a spike in COVID-19 morbidity and mortality following the authorities' decision in December 2022 to abandon their outdated policy of strict quarantines and "zero tolerance" for the disease. The authors investigated the prevalence of symptoms such as chronic fatigue, insomnia, and post-traumatic stress disorder among Chinese people during this period.

Shanu Shukla and colleagues [13] used India as a case study to examine the stigmatisation of COVID-19 patients in the early stages of the pandemic. The authors conducted a study among Indian college students, focusing on gender differences and the degree of proximity of the interviewees to the patients.

3. Research Perspective

Despite the vast amount of evidence on the COVID-19 pandemic, we are only in the very early stages of understanding it. Scientists around the world have long and extensive work ahead of them. In doing so, it seems to us that particular emphasis will be placed on the impact of the social network phenomenon on the social sciences in the age of the pandemic. The further development of humanity is likely to make this aspect increasingly topical. In all likelihood, another main direction of pandemic research will be the study of the dependence of society's reaction to the emergence of a new disease and related crisis phenomena, as well as the authorities' policies to combat them, on the value and other cultural characteristics of individual countries and regions of the planet. This will undoubtedly be of great practical value in helping governments to deal more skilfully with such shocks in the specific contexts of their respective social systems.

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