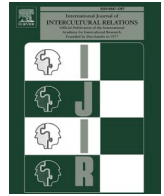




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Editorial

Re-examining intercultural research and relations in the COVID pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The authors provide an urgent call for cross- and intercultural scholars to re-examine many of the related themes and classic or contemporary study areas of “intercultural communication” and “intercultural relations” in light of the impacts that the novel coronal (COVID-19) pandemic is having on human interaction both across and within our social-cultural contexts. As scholars focusing on intercultural communications/relations, education, management, psychology, and social issues, the global COVID-19 pandemic has revealed a range of intercultural problems or issues that need to be researched to better understand related aspects of human suffering, social disruption, and economic inequalities. New research projects/papers need to address how these impact key intercultural theme/topic areas like cultural attributions/expectations, values/beliefs, identities, perceptions/stereotypes/prejudice, language/speech codes, cultural systems/patterns, acculturation/adaptation, intercultural effectiveness/sensitivity/competence, and conflict (Kulich et al., 2020, Table 3.7). Some research areas and applications potentially affected by COVID are highlighted, including our sense of national/international identity and cooperation, our mediated or actual social networks, our ways of framing or carrying out intercultural or cross-cultural cooperation, new issues emerging in inter-group contact, how we apply cross-cultural taxonomies or dimensions to analyze data, and how these ultimately affect our relationships with each other across all levels of culture (from dyads, to groups, sub- or co-cultures) or express and affirm interculturality at such times. Each area is highlighted by calls for specific types of intercultural research to address these challenges and opportunities.

Introduction

This journal, along with the affiliated International Academy for Intercultural Research (IAIR), is committed to focusing on cutting-edge scholarship related to intercultural communication, relations, education, management, psychology, and social issues. Notwithstanding the unique emphases of each of these arenas, the global COVID-19 pandemic has brought aspects of human suffering, social disruption, and economic inequalities into sharp focus and has revealed a range of unique intercultural issues or problems that need to be researched. As Kitayama (2020) notes, “psychological scientists must join forces in the fight against the pandemic. In particular, ...[to note how] massive variation in countries’ vulnerability to the virus might shed light on the core mechanisms underlying its transmission.” For all others in the panacea of inter-disciplinary intercultural research directions, the same agency and responsibility to aid the world exists.

Reconsidering human needs and intercultural variations in trying times

From the first news of a novel coronavirus in December 2019, media reports have questioned the place, policies, and people assumed to be responsible for the spread of the virus, and these varied perceptions of the pandemic have greatly challenged intercultural relations. On February 11, *The Lancet* published correspondence on “2019-nCoV, fake news, and racism” (Shimizu, 2020). By March 2020, a dozen leading international relations scholars (Allen et al., 2020) expressed concern in their subtitle, “The pandemic will change the world forever.” On April 1, *The Lancet* featured an editorial entitled “Racism and discrimination in the COVID-19

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responses” (Devakumar, Shannon, Bhopal, & Abubakar, 2020). Overall, the concerning consequences of COVID-19 have figuratively and actually led to blocked borders and intensified internal divisions and discord among cultural groups on a global scale.

International relations specialists devoted a special issue of *Foreign Affairs* to the “World after the Pandemic,” addressing issues of political order, democratic unity, and “the costs of global dysfunction” (Patrick, 2020). Rose (2020) notes in that issue:

In country after country, politicians unable to defend their own records have tried to deflect attention onto scary, evil foreigners, helping drive an emerging conviction that the real culprit in the crisis is globalization... In truth, what is killing us is not connection; it is connection without cooperation. And the cure is not isolation but deeper connection, the kind that can support collective action. The doctors and scientists around the world have acted differently: reaching out to one another, pooling their talents and resources, and showing what a true global community could look like.” (p. 8)

In a similar spirit of collaboration, we join colleagues from the many related streams or branches of cross- and intercultural research (Baldwin, 2017; González, 2010; Kulich, Weng, Tong, & DuBois, 2020) to call for “using social and behavioral science to support the COVID-19 pandemic response” (van Bavel, Baicker, & Boggio, 2020). This journal aims to publish cutting-edge work that clarifies conceptualizations and consequences of how intercultural relations can be a cure for, rather than an aggravation of, the fallout of COVID-19.

We acknowledge that different cultural groups worldwide are confronted with differing situations and sets of responses intricately linked to the study or practice of human and intercultural relations in those contexts. As Dr. Mike Ryan (2020), Executive Director of the World Health Organization (WHO) Health Emergencies Program noted, “Viruses know no borders and they don’t care about your ethnicity or the color of your skin or how much money you have in the bank.” UN Secretary-General António Guterres (2020). Title, online source lamented, “It is shameful to see increasing acts of racial discrimination and prejudice as we fight the COVID-19 pandemic.” These are sentiments also highlighted in our “Statement of Solidarity” (Kulich & IAIR Executive Council, 2020) on the IAIR website. These are times when we need to step beyond our personal, group, or national interests and express empathy, solidarity, and attitudes fostering mutual support and cooperation for the programs that our own country or others have implemented.

“With these intense and unprecedented global challenges in mind, what does intercultural research offer to the world at this time?”

This question raises issues that both necessitate the ongoing need for seminal articles (or “special issue” segments) about intercultural relations that address new approaches and/or analyses that inform new perspectives and practices in the context of this pandemic. As *IJIR* Editor-in-Chief Seth Schwartz (2020, p. 52) asked, “What are the implications of these rapid changes for intercultural relations? As we distance from each other in an effort to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, what is happening to our thoughts and feelings about others who are different from us?”

Since “intercultural communication” was first conceptualized (by Glenn, 1957, or more widely noted, by Hall, 1959) and formalized as a set of interrelated fields in the 1970s (Kulich, 2012; Kulich et al., 2020), cross- and intercultural scholars have sought to understand both the inner workings of specific cultures and the interactions between or across them. COVID-19 is most certainly affecting each of these longstanding intercultural theme/topic areas: cultural attributions/expectations, values/beliefs, identities, perceptions/stereotypes/prejudice, language/speech codes, cultural systems/patterns, acculturation/adaptation, intercultural effectiveness/sensitivity/competence, and conflict (Kulich et al., 2020, Table 3.7). More importantly, we must seek to better understand what these effects are. For example, van Bavel, Baicker et al. (2020) urge research that focuses on threat perception, leadership, individual and collective interests, scientific communication, social context, and stress and coping responses during this pandemic. Kitayama (2020) further argues that the collective-level dynamics of (a) how people in a culture are able or willing to assess risks or adopt “pluralistic ignorance”, (b) whether they engage in self-protection or prosocial community-protection motivations, and (c) the relative openness (or closedness) of interpersonal relationships or social networks powerfully influence the spread of an infectious disease like COVID-19.

COVID’s Potential Intercultural Impacts on International Issues and Identities

Key international organizations such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe have noted significant cultural implications of the COVID crisis that transcend physical health and well-being. Mansouri (2020) emphasized the need for increased intercultural dialogue to build the necessary solidarity to effectively address global pandemics. Recommended or enforced measures of social distancing, “stay at home” isolation, or travel restrictions might turn into new forms of international political isolation, elite empowerment, social fragmentation, ethnic marginalization, and rights infringement if not managed consciously. For example, the Council of Europe warns of “threats to equality due to an increase in social inequalities; threats to positive interaction through the temptation of privileging individual solutions to processes that require collective solutions; threats to diversity through increase in racism, prejudice and stereotypes, and discriminatory practices; restrictions of human rights and fundamental freedoms” (Intercultural Cities, 2020). The international community of intercultural scholars is well suited to research and address these concerns.

Cross- and intercultural research has historically sought to avoid fundamental attribution errors (Ross, 1977) and ecological fallacies (or the reverse, Hofstede, 1980) by seeking to carefully analyze data at the level of nation, individual (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz, 2017), and more recently group (e.g., Smith & Bond, 2019; van de Vijver, 2009). Humans yearn for groups with which to identify (Abrams, Hogg, & Marques, 2005) and culture-oriented social scientists have sought to understand variations in national identity (whether situated as actual, Emerson, 1960, or constructed “*Imagined Communities*,” Anderson, 1983), socio-cultural patterns (Park, 1967; Parsons & Shils, 1951), cultural syndromes (Triandis, 1996), and national-level cultural dimensions (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Schwartz, 2017) for explaining cultural differences.

Recent research suggests national identities form around shared ethnic identities or social contracts (known as “civic” national identities) including participation in democratic institutions (Komisarof & Leong, 2020; Yogeeswaran & Dasgupta, 2014). Under uncertainty or threats like those precipitated by COVID-19, people either cling more strongly to national identities, amplifying their exclusivity by excluding “outsiders,” or strengthen identity associations with those who are similarly threatened, adopt just causes, or support strong leaders daring to push back against the mainstream (like the Black Lives Matter movement, cf. the IAIR Executive Council, 2020). Attention drawn to social inequities in certain contexts underscores the need to study intercultural issues highlighted by the pandemic’s impact on disadvantaged or vulnerable cultural groups like the elderly, those with prior health conditions, front-line workers, laborers in certain industries, poor communities, migrants, or the homeless. How do these issues affect inter- or multicultural approaches to health care, cross-cultural counselling, refugee services, and other aid, development initiatives, or interventions offered by religious, public, or non-government organizations?

How might COVID also be affecting the role or construction of social identity or a sense of belonging or affiliation with nations or groups? The Common Ingroup Identity Model predicts recategorization, or the cognitive representation of one’s ingroup membership from two distinct groups into one inclusive category. Research shows this results in reductions in intergroup prejudice and conflict through the extension of the pro-ingroup bias to former outgroup members (Dovidio, Gaertner, Hodson, Houlette, & Johnson, 2005). Can this recategorization be drawn around the broader boundary of our shared humanity to empower the level of cooperation that is essential to combat the COVID-19 pandemic?

COVID’s Potential Impacts on Intercultural Social Networks

Recent research employing a social network perspective also suggests both psychological and policy implications are related to integrated social networks (Repke & Benet-Martínez, 2019; Smith, 2013). For instance, dual ethnic identification among immigrants, including both heritage and host cultures, results in beneficial, integrated networks. These networks in turn result in access to social capital and tangible resources that facilitate acculturation satisfaction and well being in the new environment (Repke & Benet-Martínez, 2019; Smith, 2005). A key aspect of acculturation satisfaction that COVID-19 has laid bare includes access to healthcare, and sharing of health guidelines and protocols during crisis situations. It is becoming clear that immigrant and other minority communities are being disproportionately affected by COVID-19 (Clark, Fredricks, Woc-Colburn, Bottazzi, & Weatherhead, 2020; van Dorn, Cooney, & Sabin, 2020; Tai, Shah, Doubeni, Sia, & Wieland, 2020). Intercultural network research can inform policy adjustments in neighborhood and housing planning, communication infrastructure, community education, and cultural programming within healthcare settings that facilitate connections among distinct community networks. The resulting social contagion of identification, behaviors, and resources that is foundational to overlapping networks has been shown to produce positive societal effects (Repke & Benet-Martínez, 2019; Smith, 2013).

COVID’s Potential Impact on Interculturality and Cross-cultural Cooperation

Research that recognizes the structural constraints and affordances of interculturality may become increasingly important as we grapple with socially distanced environments. By redrawing our fight against the virus along the lines of cross-national cooperation rather than competition and conflict, we can more effectively pool the human, intellectual, and material resources necessary to stem the tide of COVID-19, whether through joint research and cross-fertilization of findings or material investment in critical efforts toward vaccine development and distribution.

Such cross-cultural cooperation is not just feel-good window dressing – it is necessary to eradicate the virus (as noted above by Rose, 2020). No one individual is truly safe unless the global community is safe, as even notions of eventual global herd immunity can only be achieved through coordinating our efforts to combat the pandemic. Research in our field can show not only why some world leaders and citizens have responded as they have (or have not), but also clearly delineate alternative paths of co-identification and mutual cooperation leading to more effective global responses.

COVID’s Potential Impact on Understanding Cultural Needs, Values, and Emotions

The national and group responses noted above generally tap into culturally-constructed and historically transmitted solutions proposed for satisfying human needs (whether in the form of values, beliefs, social axioms, etc and emic social patterns, personal attitudinal preferences, e.g., Kulich, 2011). The circumplex model of universal values (e.g., Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987) assumes that value variations arise from our individual needs as biological organisms, requisites of coordinated social interaction, and survival and welfare of groups. Lawrence and Nohria (2002) expanded this idea to four drives that guide human choices: the need to (1) acquire, (2) bond, (3) learn, and (4) defend. How are the regular COVID-19 pronouncements and practices influencing us, our own, and other groups at these levels?

Michael Bond, in his closing address of the Asian Association of Social Psychology in 2011 in Kunming, China, noted that psychology has not yet adequately addressed how basic human needs (such as security, association/belonging, satisfaction, and significance) are correlated to the cross-cultural constructs that we study (cf. Bond, 2013). COVID-19 may require a re-examination of Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs or Schutz’s (1958; cf. Hofstede, 1974) fundamental individual relation orientations (FIRO-B) to understand felt or expressed levels of our needs for inclusion, affection, and control. The pandemic’s impact on the ongoing work on the cross-cultural communication of emotion (Matsumoto, 1989; Matsumoto & Hwang, 2011) could be an important area for understanding intensified aspects of social reactions, or (mis-)reading facial expressions and feelings behind protective masks. The different

cultural motivations or perceptions of non-verbals in a pandemic like using disinfectants, observing social distancing, or wearing masks are also important research areas, especially regarding why some cultural groups/individuals refuse to observe such behaviors, suspect, or show aggression to those who do, and why other groups are compliant, and with what intercultural effects.

Whatever epistemological approach to research we each pursue (social science, interpretative-constructivist, or critical cultural approaches), this is a key time to re-examine many of our lines of study with new eyes, new samples, and potentially new or updated theories. For those whose national or regional pandemic control measures mean being pulled back within city/state/national borders or to confinement with “at home” in-groups, new research and initiatives on virtual cross- and intercultural interactions can help fill the gaps felt in both knowledge or relationships, or new forms of inter-connectedness.

COVID’s Potential Impacts on Intercultural Education and Training

For those examining intercultural education, diversity, and inclusion training or programming, what issues need to be examined regarding new aspects of intercultural competence development, multiculturalism, plurality, cross-cultural teamwork, communities of practice, leadership, or motivation? Further, what are the varied impacts on participants of different types of virtual meetings/classrooms, online teaching, self-learning portals, apps, or Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs), home-office, at-home schooling, or hybrid blends of these or other forms of culture learning, information sharing, or collaborative work?

COVID’s Potential Impacts on Inter-Group Contact

Research on inter-group contact also takes on new significance under the consequences of COVID-19. How do people interacting with different cultural others now process perceived cultural threats, media representations, stereotypes, biases, and/or macro- and micro-aggressions? In what ways are they responding to new forms of prejudice, discrimination, conflict, isolation, marginalization, stress, anxiety, depression, or violence? For each critical issue or potentially contentious contact, people now need more hope and know-how to develop meaningful relationships, and discover and implement recommended solutions.

One example of such inter-group contact research is examining how sociocultural ecologies facilitate or inhibit social contact. Relational mobility (cultural openness to engage with strangers and freely choose friends) has been shown across 39 countries to predict the speed of the spread of COVID-19 (Salvador, Berg, Yu, San Martin, & Kitayama, 2020). What does related research on adaptation, perceived cultural distance, types, motives, and trends of migration, social network formation, person-culture fit, relational maintenance, or ecological factors suggest? How can new studies inform applications to this new COVID-19 context: from societal attitudes toward strangers, acculturation orientations/outcomes, to dealing with stress, primary/secondary coping strategies, ethnic/group identification, or social and institutional support?

COVID’s Potential Impacts on Cross-cultural Taxonomies (or visa-versa)

Further, how do cross-cultural dimensions such as individualism and collectivism, cultural tightness and looseness, holistic or analytic thinking, or other measures affect the way that policies are being implemented in cultural contexts and how is each populace adhering to them (maintaining social distancing, work-from-home measures, wearing masks if they are available, taking or reporting body temperatures, maintaining testing procedures, or border closures)? In preliminary research, the Multilab network (230 authors worldwide) of van Bavel, Cichocka, Capraro, et al. (2020) distinguishes general ideas of national identity from national narcissism and political ideology to consider what may be “healthy” elements of national identity during a pandemic as it relates to limiting contact, physical hygiene, and policy support. English (2020) and the SII Institute lab provide another example of ongoing collaborative work with 90 researchers from more than 35 countries collecting data from more than 10,000 respondents regarding the impacts of culture (and issues between majority and minority groups) on the early lockdown days of March and April 2020. More studies like these that examine both macro and micro aspects or interactions of intercultural domains are needed to help us understand varied responses to perceptions and threats during this pandemic.

COVID’s Potential Impacts on Intercultural Relations

Almost all of our broad range of intercultural research areas impact aspects of how we approach or reject others, form or react to social groupings, and seek or give up on meaningful (inter)cultural contacts. L. Robert Kohls (1979/2001) cautioned against not developing frames that judge or place the status of one society over another. Maslow’s (1959) hierarchy might be flipping over during such crises, pushing people/groups back toward social insensitivities or survival instincts, letting desires for self-actualization put “our needs” over others. As he warned, “The ultimate disease of our time is valuelessness....The cure for this disease is obvious. We need... values that we can believe in and devote ourselves to” and “principles of choice” to relate across cultures (Maslow, 1959, 1970 p. 52).

Conclusion

“Culture is the means by which a community communicates” (Steele, 1990, p. 4). What can we as a community of intercultural relations researchers contribute and how can we bring our research-rooted message to others? How can we better serve within our societies and across them to bring informed hope and practices to help in this time of need? As colleagues from Canada suggested in their “Why Does Culture Matter to COVID-19” Fact Sheet:

The pandemic, along with the measures taken to combat it, is shaped in important ways by culture.... At a minimum, policy-makers, healthcare workers, and the public at large should keep in mind that the pandemic experience may be very different for different people. These differences are shaped by the society in which one lives, the communities of which one is a part, and culturally-shaped individual variations. Complicating matters, appreciation for difference does not mean treating all responses equally when it comes to effectively mitigating a pandemic. Clearly, some cultural patterns are more effective than others.... At the same time cultural traditions can be a source of resilience, as sources of wisdom about how to make sense of and prepare for uncertainty for example. (Ryder, Berry, Safdar, & Yampolsky, 2020)

This is a crucial time for intercultural scholarship to show how humans can cross borders with knowledge, agency, and care!

Kitayama (2020) urges psychological scientists to “explore ways to preempt human misery and possibly enhance human welfare... [by identifying] principles of cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes in collectives, whether nations or local communities... to offer empirically based, practical recommendations for the fight against infectious diseases” (citing Habersaat et al., 2020).” As IJIR Editor-in-Chief Seth Schwartz (2020) noted in his March 18 (published April 10) editorial, “This pandemic is a historical moment that will have a lasting effect on the ways in which people, communities, and nations relate to one another.” Therefore, we welcome your scientifically-solid submissions to help us address these ongoing COVID-related intercultural issues.

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