

# TOGETHER APART

THE  
PSYCHOLOGY  
OF COVID-19

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## Author biographies



This book provides a broad but integrated analysis of the psychology of COVID-19. The book is the product of the combined effort of four social psychologists: *Jolanda Jetten* (top left; Professor of Social Psychology and Australian Laureate Fellow at the University of Queensland), *Stephen (Steve) Reicher* (bottom left; Wardlaw Professor of Psychology at the University of St. Andrews), *S. Alexander (Alex) Haslam* (top right; Professor of Psychology and Australian Laureate Fellow at the University of Queensland) and *Tegan Cruwys* (bottom, right; Senior Research Fellow at the Australian National University).

What these four social psychologists have in common is that over the last decades their research has inspired, and been inspired by, research and theory around the topic of social identity. In this, they have shown how the social identity approach helps us to understand processes as diverse as leadership, health, well-being, emergency behaviour, risk perception, stigma, inequality, stereotyping, collective action, crowd behaviour,

intergroup violence, social cohesion and solidarity, populism, political rhetoric, obedience, and the psychology of tyranny.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors have been advising a range of bodies on how to best support the COVID-19 response. They have provided input on topics including communications and messaging, adherence to lockdown and physical distancing, trust-building, leadership, public order, how to motivate people to download the COVID-19 tracing apps, and the mental health impact of physical distancing measures. They have advised the U.K. Government and the Scottish Government, the U.K. police force, and the Australian Government's Behavioural Economics Team (BETA) in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. They have also been members of a number of bodies and task forces including the G08 Australian Roadmap to Recover, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's COVID Monitor project, the British Psychological Society COVID Coordinating Group, and the Rapid Response Information Forum on COVID-19 tracing in Australia. In this engagement with policy makers and governments it has become clear how psychological theory — and the social identity approach in particular — can help us better understand, and respond to, the COVID-19 crisis. This book is an attempt to put what they and their colleagues have been talking about over the past three months into print — so that insights from the social identity approach can contribute to public debate around the most significant world event of our lifetimes.

**Contributors**

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Elif G. Ikizer *University of Wisconsin-Green Bay*

Jonas R. Kunst *University of Oslo*

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## **Acknowledgements**

The idea for this book emerged in early March, 2020 when it was clear that COVID-19 was going to affect the lives of a large proportion of people on our planet in profound ways. Starting from the premise that an effective response to the pandemic depends upon people coming together and supporting each other as members of a common community, the aim of this book is to use social identity theorising to provide a comprehensive and integrated analysis of the psychology of COVID-19. This is a big task and it is not one we could have undertaken alone. Accordingly, as the list of contributors above indicates, we needed to approach a large number of researchers at the forefront of social identity theorising to help us develop and flesh out this analysis. The result is a book which is a hybrid between a monograph and an edited book. Although this is an unusual format, we believe that this structure allows us to showcase the power and excitement not only of social identity research but also of the collective processes this research involves. We hope you agree.

The way this book developed was also somewhat unusual. First, we not only experienced considerable time-pressure to write the book within the time frame we set ourselves (less than two months), but also, given the rapidly evolving nature of the COVID-19 crisis, we needed to re-evaluate and re-think our analysis on an almost daily basis. We were studying a phenomenon that had not yet ended. Second, we wrote this book while self-isolating at home. Even though we are normally spread across the world in three different cities, and even though writing a book together would always have meant being physically distant, this somehow felt different. This was perhaps because it is the first time that we ourselves were not only researchers, but also participants and thus at the heart of the thing we were studying. Indeed, because we are still in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, it is very likely that aspects of our analysis will be somewhat outdated



and incomplete by the time the book appears and readers should be mindful of this. Nevertheless, we are confident that much of the book's content has enduring relevance — and indeed it was this that really motivated us to produce it.

What is clear is that both the time-pressure and the immersion in the focus of study made this a unique book to write. To meet the deadline and to understand the daily unfolding dynamics world-wide, regular Zoom meetings brainstorm sessions were essential not just to coordinate the writing, but also to get a grip on the reality that was taking shape around us. The truly collaborative nature of this project hopefully shines through in terms of the level of integration across sections and chapters. This is a project built around partnerships not personalities, and authorship (of both the book and the chapters) should be understood as a reflection of shared social identities ('we-ness') not of disconnected personal identities ('me-ness').

In the same spirit we would also like to draw attention to others who were invaluable in this collective endeavor. In particular, we are grateful to the team at SAGE, led by Amy Maher, who were enthusiastic about our plans from the start and have worked tirelessly to facilitate a rapid publication of this book. Thank you too to Christine McCoy and Joe Sheahan for their excellent support in proof reading and reference checking—all under a fair amount of time-pressure. We would also like to thank the funding bodies without whom much of the research that forms the basis of this book would not have been possible. Principal amongst these are the Australian Research Council, the National Health and Medical Research Council in Australia, as well as our respective universities; the University of Queensland, the University of St. Andrews, and the Australian National University. It is our hope that this book will form a solid foundation on which future analysis, intervention and policy relating to the COVID-19 crisis can be built, and that it can help pave the way for a future together.

## Foreword

Social distancing, really? When international organizations and the media initially reported about the spread of a new deadly virus spotted in China, governments took some time to react. As the tsunami of contaminations started to threaten other parts of the world, epidemiologists informed the public that, along with scrupulous hand hygiene, so-called social distancing was the weapon ‘par excellence’ in order to deal with a pandemic. Many social and behavioral scientists frowned and commented on the lessons of research stressing the critical role of social relations, especially when people face challenging events. As the various contributions in this book make clear, of all terms, ‘social distancing’ is probably as inappropriate as one can get. To be sure, keeping a distance between individuals and cutting society down into very small groups (families and work teams) that have no physical contact with each other offers an efficient means to slow down the spread of the virus. But from the perspective of social psychology in particular, what is key in times of hardship — and the COVID pandemic surely qualifies as a prime instance of a large-scale disaster — is to work towards more ‘social bonding’ between people.

By the end of February, the number of cases increased rapidly in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, and keeping the deadly virus at bay quickly became THE common cause., keeping the deadly virus at bay quickly became the common cause. Given the dearth of information about the evolution of the illness and its associated symptoms, all citizens were potential victims and the decision of most governments was to ask people to retreat securely in their homes. But how can you shut down thriving societies in an instant? How can you convince thousands of businesses to close? How can you get people not to go to work, children not to see their schoolmates, friends not to organize

parties, shoppers not to go to malls, fans not to attend sporting events or music festivals? Would people resist sudden restrictions of their freedom of movement? Would they disregard the recommendations, eventually jeopardizing the capacity of the health systems? Although contemporary political gospel has it that individual rationality and self-interest guide human behavior, the imminence and size of the danger changed things radically. A number of leaders did not take long to understand that the success of a radical lockdown would rest on their ability to create a sense of collective identity, connecting and coordinating citizens under one common banner. Political figures from various strands of the ideological spectrum changed gears entirely and came to realize that only creating shared identity would allow bringing millions of peoples to stay home willingly and to embrace the preventive measures with faith. And it worked...

Over the course of the last couple of months and in every single aspect of the fight against the pandemic, it has become clear that one should approach the issue in ways that stress the social over the individual, reinforce the sense of belonging as opposed to a feeling of independence, and acknowledge common identity in contrast to uniqueness. To be sure, it is individuals who carry the disease, contaminate others, and, in some cases, die. It is individuals who buy an excess of toilet paper, who prove reluctant to wear a mask because they fear ridicule or neglect to wash their hands for the twentieth time upon entering their workplace. And it is also individuals who stay inside in spite of the sunny weather, who work remotely and endure the burden of schooling their children, who run to the supermarket for their elderly neighbour of the 2nd floor. But what needs to be understood is that all these behaviors follow from perceptions, emotions, and decisions eminently shaped by social forces. More often than not, people self-define in terms of significant memberships, and all the more so when they feel uncertain. Behaviors are not the product of isolated souls but emerge in a socially

meaningful context, a context in which people make up their minds and undergo emotional experiences as part of larger entities.

The impressive number of research efforts assembled in the present contribution and generally stimulated by the so-called social identity approach make one thing very clear: nurturing the social in people's minds is not the problem but it is the solution. By capitalizing on appropriate social identities, often at the national level, group leaders can work and make people become more sensitive to specific messages. This is because the persuasiveness of a communication rests of the extent to which the audience sees the source as 'one of us'. By ensuring that people continue to feel connected with fellow members of significant social entities, one can avoid the perils of social isolation and lack of social support, two prime causes of deteriorating health and premature death. It is thus crucial that citizens are provided with opportunities to feel emotional support. This can take the form of close relatives talking over the phone or organizing drinks over social media, of heretofore-unknown neighbours dropping a warm note under the door. They also need to feel 'in touch', as when they see others applaud on their balcony to celebrate the dedication of nurses and doctors working in intensive care units. By promoting selected ways of delineating the social landscape, it is possible to create a sense of collective identity that then feeds into collective action. Indeed, in so many ways, fighting COVID-19 becomes a prototypical form of collective action. And research shows that successful collective action rests on the definition of a clearly defined common cause, hangs on a sense of collective efficacy, and capitalizes on the energy flowing from collective emotions.

This means that, more than ever, the current events require so-called 'entrepreneurs of identity'. There is a need for people who emphasize the shared cause while acknowledging different perspectives in order to keep everybody aboard. There is a

need for people who communicate clearly about those behaviors that ought to become the norm, about why these behaviors are important, and who are credible as they convey their trust in the population's ability to comply and who prove transparent about the progress but also the setbacks. There is a need for people who make room for emotional experiences, signifying that, while fear is normal and may even help increase vigilance, empathy and hope are key to getting us all through. Finally, by attuning communication to different groups in society and even more so, by addressing the specific consequences of the pandemic for different portions of the population, one should be able to prevent the dislocation of the collective.

The message is clear: social distancing is a real misnomer. While physical distance undoubtedly contributes to preventing contamination, this book provides ample evidence that the vital feature of any successful action against the virus is to capitalize on shared identity and group-based emotions, in short, on a common definition of 'who we are'. Only by embracing such a perspective can one hope to minimize the subjective costs of individual sacrifices and promote the aspiration for collective dividends that will eventually benefit all parties involved. In sum, the key to addressing large-scale crises as the outbreak of COVID-19 resides in our ability to stay away from individualistic interpretations of the events and to acknowledge the fact that what truly defines human beings is their inherent disposition for social bonding.

These are the various messages that this book communicates and consolidates. And this is why, in this most grave of times, this book is so important.

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