

## **“The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on engagement in solving collective problems”**

Dr Katarzyna Jaśko, Institute of Psychology, Jagiellonian University

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a major threat to society in the domain of public health, but it is driving dramatic consequences for other pressing social issues, such as economic security, democracy, and gender equality. Within just a few weeks the pandemic brought about a soaring unemployment crisis around the world. It has disproportionately affected racial, ethnic, and religious minorities; led to acts of intergroup hostility; and worsened the situation of women. Under the threat of the pandemic, authoritarian governments are imposing new rules limiting democratic rights and freedoms, which is a source of fear that these rules will not be lifted even after the immediate danger ends. Finally, while the pandemic might have temporarily reduced the negative anthropogenic impacts on climate, pressure to restart the economy is likely to adversely affect the regulations that were put in place to deal with climate change. It is clear that the pandemic is much more than a public health issue and will have important ramifications in relation to other societal problems. The question of **how the COVID-19 pandemic will impact the long-term efforts to resolve those problems is an important one and it requires a close examination.**

The goal of the project is to address this question from a psychological perspective. On the surface, issues such as climate change, economic inequality, or authoritarian regimes might seem to belong to a sphere of macrosocial analyses, specific to economy or sociology. However, individual willingness to get involved and demand effective solutions to those problems vs. remaining apathetic and disengaged is a deeply psychological matter. Using my past experience in research on political activism and radicalization this project will examine **1) how the threat of COVID-19 pandemic affects how people think about pressing societal problems and 2) how this threat impacts individual willingness to get personally involved in solving those problems?**

On the one hand, the pandemic could result in people being more likely to get engaged in solving other important social problems. Because the pandemic puts those problems in the spotlight and at the same time increases the belief that people can successfully coordinate to overcome collective challenges, the eventual outcome would be an increased willingness to act. Alternatively, if a number of social problems compete for a common pool of attentional, social, and economic resources it could be that the more invested people are in solving one problem (e.g., pandemic) the less they are motivated to work toward solving another problem (e.g., climate change). While such a trade-off may occur even under normal circumstances, the scope of the pandemic and its potential to grab public attention might account for not only quantitatively but a qualitatively different situation. Given that there are plausible theoretical reasons for both directions, this project will also explore factors that may moderate this relationship. Three such factors will be examined: perceived connections between the pandemic and other social issues, trust in social coordination, and past activism.

The empirical work proposed in the project consists of two major parts. In the first part, longitudinal surveys will be conducted in three countries using representative samples. These surveys will track opinions, and behaviors related to the pandemic and the consequences of these factors for engagement in other societal problems. This part will also compare reactions of previously uninvolved individuals with those of political activists. The second part consists of experimental studies that will test the causal mechanisms between the variables. This part will also include an intervention that will measure the effects of issue interconnectedness on actual behaviors on behalf of the cause.

To sum up, in the project I will apply a motivational perspective to the analysis of social engagement during the times of the pandemic. By focusing on collective goals we can get novel insights into the individual underpinnings of collective action during the times of major social crisis. By investigating these relationships with regard to a variety of important societal issues, the results of this project might inform the way these problems are communicated during and in the aftermath of the pandemic in a way that facilitates constructive actions and prevents apathy and disengagement.