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## Article

# Introduction to the special issue "transnational and transdisciplinary lessons of COVID-19 from the perspective of risk and management"

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Editorial

# Introduction to the Special Issue ‘Transnational and Transdisciplinary Lessons of COVID-19 from the Perspective of Risk and Management’

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Rarely has scientific research been as solicited as in the past two years, as societies struggle to cope with the coronavirus. The questions raised by COVID-19 are germane to the medical and the social sciences. From an International Relations perspective, COVID-19 gets to the heart of what comprises a common good—the global commons. From a public policy perspective, COVID-19 is the wicked policy problem par excellence, requiring inter-agency collaboration. From a comparative politics perspective, COVID-19 provides a vast living dataset to engage in multi-level comparisons and real-time experiments. In the medical research field, the pandemic has provided advancements in medical science that would not have been possible without access to a living laboratory. The huge advances in medical science have themselves been filtered by societal dynamics such as trust and transparency, or risk and resilience, themes that feature in several papers in this Special Issue.

Responding to existential dilemmas, the COVID-19 pandemic calls for a major transdisciplinary research effort that necessarily combines several levels of empirical analysis and methodological tools and bridges distinct academic and scientific traditions. Such was the ambition of the conference Transnational and Transdisciplinary lessons from COVID-19, organized at Hong Kong Baptist University on 20–21 May 2021, which forms the basis for many of the articles in this Special Issue. Participants included presenters from a range of Hong Kong institutions—Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong University, City University of Hong Kong, the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. The international dimension of the conference was reflected in the conference themes, as well by the participation of overseas speakers from the United Kingdom (Cardiff University, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Queen Mary’s, University of London); France (the Institutes of Political Studies of Paris, Aix-en-Provence and Lyon, and from the University Hospital of Clermont Ferrand); Australia (Griffith University, Monash University, Queensland University) and Singapore (National University of Singapore), as well as a range of stakeholders from outside of academia (for example, Bruegel, Water Futures Pty Ltd., European Union Office of Hong Kong and Macao). The conference organizers invited communications which addressed cutting-edge issues at the transdisciplinary and/or transnational intersection on the COVID-19 pandemic. The resulting Special Issue is focused on distinct clusters of articles, each concerned with discrete dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first cluster of articles centers on the physiological, psychological and psychophysiological implications of COVID-19 (Baker et al. 2021a, 2021b; Dutheil et al. 2021, 2022; Liang et al. 2021; Nasir et al. 2021). In their paper, Baker et al. (2021a) refer to the cross-national evidence from lockdowns and confinements that COVID-19 has presented a serious challenge to the psychological well-being of individuals, especially in terms of their primary networks (friends, family) and practices (as a result of social distancing). Even

within these tight personal networks, evidence from scholars working on psychological indicators points to an increase in indicators of social tension, such as divorce, gender violence and isolation as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Increases in social violence and violation by communities in relation to social distancing measures are major concerns in relation to public perceptions and information provided by respective governments and their representatives. Findings converged in the sense of developing new protocols based on tele-exercise, moderate physical exercise, the selective use of Chinese medicine in a restorative capacity and focused diet.

The problem with the disease is that it effects both psychological and physiological parameters in infected populations. While the physiological parameters are easier to deal with in response to medication, psychological problems may be more of a long-term problem. This is particularly true in individuals with a history of depressive illness. Depression affects all in society, inclusive of all ages and gender. The physiological and psychological effects of COVID-19 in the long-term are currently unknown. Medical trials have been underway since the onset of the pandemic and different combinations of medication have had some beneficial effects. Drug regimens that relate to boosting the immune system and decreasing inflammation have a particular role to play. However, the treatment of depressive symptoms and illness is more complicated. There have been many medical interventions employed including pharmaceutical and medical treatments. Of course, the most successful to date has been vaccination. Interestingly, the general population's physical activity levels were recoded as low in most cases. Physical activity increases immune function, decreases symptoms associated with depressive illness and contributes to euphoria and increased well-being. Therefore, increased physical activity levels pre- and post- the pandemic may have contributed to better outcomes for patients suffering from COVID-19.

The conference keynote, on "COVID-19 and top athletic performance", was delivered by Huw Wiltshire, SFHEA, Former National Performance Director with Welsh and Russian Rugby Unions. In his speech, Dr Wiltshire stressed the importance of specific types of training for elite-level athletes—essential to avoid injury through rapidly losing fitness in the event on inactivity—or "de-training". Specific sets of issues arise for this type of actor and the COVID-19 pandemic raises more general issues about the survival of whole sports (avoiding mass contact), as well as consequences for top athletes at the individual level (Wiltshire et al. 2022).

The second cluster of articles are concerned with the related issues of trust, transparency, civil society, and governance and adopt a broad comparative perspective. Chaney and Sophocleous (2021) discuss the case of welfare trust and delivery in the four nations of the United Kingdom: England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a number of trends in the administration of welfare policy and involvement of voluntary sector players. Each administration (the three devolved governments and the UK government operating for England) adopted a distinctive approach towards the provision of social care, undertaken by the local government tier in each respective country. Insofar as the four administrations reacted in distinctive manners, the case of COVID-19 could be considered as a natural experiment.

There are distinctive territorial ideologies in relation to welfare. In Scotland, the principle of free provision at the point of delivery is one of the binding articles of faith of Scottish devolution, and Wales follows in a broadly similar manner. In England and Northern Ireland, there is less faith in civil society or state provision, and the private sector is called upon to deliver most adult social care services, albeit under regulation from local government. In each case, there is a strong argument that COVID-19 strengthened forms of territorialization of public policy, underpinned by distinctive party systems in each of the four countries. There was a surge in volunteering action as a result of the pandemic. However, the argument prevailed in Wales and Scotland that "like-trust-like", whereby local volunteers were welcomed because it was felt they shared the same characteristics as those who needed care. A form of welfare nationalism could be observed within the

UK, setting the four nations against each other, strengthened by travel bans from entering different parts of the country.

In their paper, Cole, Baker and Stivas engage with the relationships between Trust, Transparency and Transnational lessons from COVID-19. International health crises require efforts to rebuild trust, understood in a multi-disciplinary sense as a relationship based on trusteeship in the sense of mutual obligations in a global commons, where trust is a key public good (Cole et al. 2021). The most effective responses in a pandemic are joined up ones, where individuals (responsible for following guidelines) trust intermediaries (health professionals) and are receptive to messages (nudges) from the relevant governmental authorities. Hence, the distinction between hard medical and soft social science blurs when patients and citizens are required to be active participants in combatting the virus. Building on the diagnosis of a crisis of trust (in the field of health security and across multiple layers of governance), Cole, Baker and Stivas renew with calls to restore trust by enhancing transparency.

COVID-19 raises important issues that ought to fall within the scope of international law: these include, *inter alia*, the lack of a common response across countries, uncertainty over vaccines and the civil responsibility of politicians in the context of a risk culture that emphasizes precaution. In fact, international health law is mainly of the soft variety. It is highly fragmented across political systems. There are competing types of law—hard and soft—but also competing standards. One conclusion of the COVID-19 pandemic might be that the crisis will push for more global norms. On the other hand, articles in this Special Issue emphasize more the zero-sum and competitive nature of international relations, far from a mutually respected and transparent legal order. Indeed, the pandemic is likely to have implications for the international power structure. Some countries, especially China, emerge relatively unaffected by the pandemic, while the majority of the other countries of the world are struggling to keep their economies running.

According to Cabestan, in his article, it is important to keep a sense of proportion. The reshuffling of the international power structure predated COVID-19 and China has been attempting to position itself as the leader of the Global South for decades in order to enhance its planetary influence (Cabestan 2022). Of course, there has been very little international cooperation over COVID-19, which has formed part of the battle of narratives between China and the West (the US in particular). However, Cabestan argues that China has engaged in “overkill”. The “empire du milieu” is suspected by many of attempting to use the world Health Organization for its national interests. China’s actions antagonized countries, especially as the EU, US and UK had offered substantial support to deal with the early phases of the pandemic. As captured by the Pew survey, public opinion has moved against China in most European countries, though less so elsewhere. The controversy over the vaccines also rebounded against China, as the quality of the vaccines it delivered (and that of medical material such as masks) was not up to standard. All in all, Cabestan used the example of COVID-19 to illustrate broader trends of competition between China and the West in an increasing zero-sum environment.

Tran and Tseng, in their article, continue the discussion on China’s health diplomacy (Tran and Tseng 2022). Combining critical juncture theory and (dis)trust in international relations, they examine how facemasks became a politicized object, both between states and between Mainland China and its overseas population, as the epidemic unfolded throughout Europe. Their interdisciplinary and mixed-methods approach (international relations, framing analysis, semi-structured interviews, and digital ethnography) unveils how the COVID-19 outbreak impacted China–Europe relations, comparing two European settings: France and the United Kingdom. They argue that the common denominator appears to be the reduced trust, if not outright distrust, between individuals and communities in the French and British contexts, and in Sino–French and Sino–British relations at the transnational level.

A selection of the conference papers is presented in this Special Issue, along with some other cognate contributions produced by the call for papers.

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