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An Existential Analysis of Responses to the 2020 Coronavirus Outbreak

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Abstract

This essay examines people's responses to the 2020 coronavirus pandemic from the perspective of existential psychology. The existential anxieties associated with the pandemic, as well as people's responses to them, can be understood and articulated through Sartre's concept of *bad faith*. Using this existential lens, we examine the ways in which people's responses to the virus interact with long-standing societal patterns of interconnection as well as inequity, and how these processes are rooted within the cultural context of late modernity. This analysis reveals that our interconnection simultaneously constitutes the most profound challenges in our psychological response to the pandemic, as well as our greatest source of hope.

Keywords

existential psychology, modernity, global crisis

With the spread of the 2019 novel coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), threats of contagion, unreliable information, and general uncertainty give rise to daunting existential anxieties. The primal and intersubjective nature of these anxieties, as well as the responses they provoke, are not only harbingers of what we

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might become but also lightning bolts thrown into the long night of what we were. From the perspective of existential psychology, individuals' responses to the COVID-19 outbreak reveal humanity's most basic impulses, as well as how those responses are demonstrative of late modernity's cultural milieu.

Our aim in this article is to examine individuals' experiences of and reactions to the novel coronavirus as they occur at the intersection of existential processes and sociocultural systems (i.e., systems of norms, values, and beliefs that shape interactions among people). In particular, to understand individual psychological responses to COVID-19, we will utilize Jean-Paul Sartre's (1956) analyses of existential angst and corresponding defensive reactions—which he called *bad faith*. People's responses can range along a spectrum: from seeking refuge from the angst of possible contagion in defensive ritualistic behaviors and social scapegoating on one end, to denying the possibility of contagion and engaging in reckless acts of social exposure on the other. Embedding this existential analysis in its cultural context, we will also draw on theories of the contemporary "risk society" to understand how culture shapes local responses to this global threat.

A feature of the cultural shift in late modernity is the prevalence and apparent inevitability of threats such as pandemics (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). In a globalized world, disasters that are physically remote can have immediate, unpredictable social and psychological impact (Pfefferbaum et al., 2014). Interpretations of and responses to this globally distressing event require sense-making via local cultural meaning systems: networks of taken-for-granted beliefs that—within liberal democracies like the United States—include freedom of movement, desire, and expression in a stable, routine environment. Such worldviews are embedded within and buttressed by a complex and ultimately fragile political-economic system on which people do not typically reflect (Habermas, 1987). The interconnectivity of this system enables events that are both distant (i.e., potentially emerging in food markets far from American shores) and abstract (i.e., having to do with complex genomic developments; Andersen et al., 2020) to radically and concretely alter cultural systems across the globe. This responsivity is inherent to life in a "risk society" where threats can rapidly emanate in a manner that seems indifferent to borders or extant power structures. And yet people's responses to the COVID-19 outbreak, both the manner in which they respond, and their social and economic capacity for doing so, are thoroughly structured by (typically) obscured systems of social organization and power differentials.

These systems impart peculiar vulnerabilities (and perhaps opportunities) during large-scale disasters like a pandemic. Threats of illness, contamination, pollution, and contagion are characterized by ambiguity and invisibility (Douglas, 1966; Edelstein, 2004). We are not sure when and if we will be

affected. Compared with other kinds of salient threats—such as terrorist attacks—it is more difficult to visualize how we or our loved ones will be affected, to know the extent of the possible damage, or to attribute blame to specific, identifiable agents. Because pollution can spread over wide areas, and viruses can be swiftly carried across oceans, people's mental models during times of likely possible contagion become defined by *topological*, as opposed to *topographical*, forms of spatiality (Blum & Secor, 2014; Harvey, 2019). We are not rationally concerned with specified coordinates on a map or political borders, with the miles between us and the latest identified patient; instead, we develop our own psychological and subjective construal of the distance between our bodies, our families, and the amorphous, shifting threat. If not miles and leagues, what shapes our subjective construal of and responses to such threats?

Existential Threats and Responses to the Pandemic

From an existential perspective, construals of a pandemic like COVID-19 impinge strongly on two aspects of the human experience: (1) our embeddedness and connection to the material reality we inhabit and (2) our freedom to act in any way we choose. The personal problems associated with social isolation and pandemic-related adversity—depression, anxiety, and the worsening of many underlying emotional difficulties—are closely bound with these existential concerns. Every person is grounded in realities beyond our control, such as our physical bodies, our history, material resources, and social bonds. Sartre (1956) referred to this as *facticity*. These bonds notwithstanding, people also have radical freedom and responsibility of action. Sartre called this freedom *transcendence*. Both of these dimensions of human experience, the powerlessness before constraint and the uncertainty of choice, trace the contours of fundamental human anxieties in a way that is all the more visible during a pandemic.

According to Sartre (1956), the destructiveness of ecological risks lies in their capacity to rearrange the world in a way that negates envisioned human possibilities. Correspondingly, the taken-for-granted desires and freedoms typically experienced in our society (e.g., of mobility, of social engagement, of consumption) constitute the lacks we experience during quarantine and social distancing. The plans we have for our own future and our relationships to our loved ones, particularly the vulnerable among us, are the wellspring for the destruction caused by the coronavirus. Regardless of the level of overt constraint on our freedom of movement in our local environment (e.g., the presence or absence of a citywide "lock-down"), we are confronted by choice and ambiguity at every unfolding stage. Do we travel, wear a mask, or interact with elderly loved ones? Do we seek medical care or testing because of a

cough? The series of unexpected choices, risks, and responsibilities with which we are confronted during the pandemic generates the potential for a constant state of distress—what Sartre called "angst."

Patterns of Bad Faith

Sartre recognized the urge to resolve the angst associated with facticity and transcendence through a phenomenon he termed *bad faith*: denying either one or the other attribute of existence. Akin to cognitive dissonance reduction (Festinger, 1957), Sartre's conception of bad faith involves a dramatic, sustained attitudinal change aimed at reducing tension through denying distressing aspects of one's existence. Bad faith can take two forms (Martin, 2002; Sullivan, 2016): *flight from transcendence* or *flight from facticity*. In the former, the individual denies the fact of their own responsibility and perennial choice in the face of threat, seeking instead the "durability" of an "impenetrable stone" (Sartre, 1962, p. 18) by uncritically embracing social roles, regulations, or conventions. In the latter, individuals deny their grounding in the social environment and personal past, convincing themselves that these facts do not act as constraints on their freedom to malleably pursue any goal.

Individuals may adopt either form of bad faith as a psychological palliative against the threat of coronavirus, and we might see the emergence of two groups doing one or the other. Those fleeing the transcendence of choice and possibility look for refuge in talismans, rituals, and fetish objects: face masks, the ballet of social distancing, continual sanitary actions, and hoarding of household goods. This is coupled with the ardent hope that preparatory actions and adherence to social mandates might carry an almost supernatural potency. Others engage in the opposite form of bad faith: fleeing the reality of the pandemic by telling themselves they are above risk, that the world is foolishly overreacting. They continue to travel or go to restaurants and bars, almost as if to will the threat out of existence.

Importantly, it is not necessary for any of these actions to be technically irrational in order to be considered manifestations of bad faith; it is instead a question of the underlying motivations that promote these actions, as well as the defensive functions they serve (Sartre, 1956). When an individual behaves in bad faith, they engage in processes social psychologists call motivated reasoning (Kruglanski, 1990; Kunda, 1990): They undertake actions with minimal critical awareness and protect their beliefs against disconfirmation by selectively exposing themselves to certain information and filtering that information in light of what they already believe. So, from a certain vantage, it may be perfectly rational, and indeed ethical, to publicly promote extreme forms of prolonged social distancing; however, one is acting in bad faith if

one ignores its potentially devastating long-term impact or allows these guidelines to elide other forms of social responsibility, such as caring for the vulnerable. And, from a certain vantage, it may well be rational, perhaps even ethical, to go to work in order to support one's family despite stay-at-home mandates; however, one is acting in bad faith if one dismisses a cough as "probably just allergies" and purposefully flaunts distancing conventions to articulate one's disbelief of media messaging.

Individual Factors Influencing Forms of Bad Faith

From a Sartrean perspective, it is important to acknowledge that people may respond to the facticity of their body and personal history in divergent ways. It is broadly accepted by the medical and scientific community that age is a significant risk factor for severe impacts of COVID-19 (Jordan et al., 2020). Yet statistical risk levels do not unilaterally determine individual responses. Some older individuals may flee their facticity through bad faith, for example, continuing to deny the risk and venture from their homes despite the vulnerabilities posed by their bodies.

There is evidence that the degree to which people believe themselves susceptible to an ambiguous threat can affect the extent to which they think defensively about it (Palitsky et al., 2019). People who believe themselves to be the *most* and *least* at risk from coronavirus may be especially prone to responding in bad faith. Those of us who most believe we and our loved ones are at risk may deny transcendence in an attempt to reduce the uncertainty we experience. Those who do not perceive an imminent threat to themselves or their loved ones, who believe the risk to be "fake news," may primarily experience the social response to coronavirus as a limitation on their freedom, and so respond by denying the facticity of social embeddedness through making radically free (and unsafe) choices.

Responses to the Pandemic in Sociocultural Context

Individuals adopt different psychological responses to the pandemic, but these responses are largely informed by the cultural and sociopolitical environments in which they are enmeshed. Individuals are locked in a mutually constitutive cycle with their culture that is at least partly determined by sociohistorical, cultural, and ecological factors (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Oishi, 2014). The particular sociocultural landscape known as "late modernity" (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990), increasingly shared by denizens of a globalized world, involves deeply embedded ecological risks and co-occurring vulnerabilities to

these risks. As "social facts" (Durkheim, 1995), these risks contribute to the organization of social life even before their impacts materialize (Foucault, 2007; Rose, 2001). As such, culturally shaped responses to the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States reveal much about our society as it routinely functioned prior to the pandemic.

Relating to Expert Systems

Within a near-ubiquitous narrative of globalized risk and the waning of traditional meaning structures, it has become necessary for individuals to place trust in political authorities, scientists, public health officials, and other abstract systems that confer some measure of stability among inherently uncertain future possibilities (de Certeau, 2002; Girard, 1986). However, these systems are themselves not always experienced as reliable. Experts often have contradictory perspectives on things as complex as containing a pandemic. This, coupled with politically divisive news and public health messaging about COVID-19, forces individuals to choose which sources of information to trust, how to manage perceived risk, and how to construe the potential threats. One of the important casualties of prolonged ecological risk is people's basic trust in the expert and governmental systems that are supposed to protect them, and the erosion of this trust adds significantly to chronic stress (Edelstein, 2004). In fact, members of groups who have historically been exploited or oppressed by these very same systems may seek to mitigate uncertainty precisely through rejection of institutional responses.

Disparities and Responses Among Cultural Groups

As stated previously, individuals' level of actual or perceived risk may influence the way in which people construe and respond to the pandemic. However, the distribution of risk in the United States is not uniform across the population, and it instead follows hierarchies of power and privilege, such that people of color and people from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds are far more likely to face the brunt of threats that materialize from omnipresent risks (Blumenshine et al., 2008; Curran, 2013). As a result of this heightened risk, some may engage in bad faith by fleeing from their facticity (e.g., engaging in risky behaviors). Not only might members of these groups lack the resources to effectively respond to concrete and imminent risks, they are also disadvantaged within the very systems propagating information about the risk and its mitigation. These historical and ongoing inequities may add further motivation to take recourse in denying facticity (e.g., ignoring safety protocols) as a response to these systems. Of course, it is also the case that

members of disadvantaged groups stand to suffer the greatest portion of the economic fallout from social efforts to constrain the virus; thus, they are truly caught in the dilemma of choice between short- and long-term risks (Bonds et al., 2010).

On the other hand, removed and advantaged individuals may construe ecological risks as somewhat distant threats that will affect more abstract needs such as autonomy (Kraus et al., 2012; Rucker et al., 2018). Mandated forms of social distancing in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic may strike some advantaged individuals as unfamiliar and undesired restrictions on their freedom, but ironically, they do not fundamentally alter their basic modes of subsistence or of associating with others. If anything, such restrictions simply make the status quo more visible.

Many in the United States have been practicing social distancing for some time (Beck, 2002). It is common to stay within individual homes and make limited forays to similar work and shopping spaces, relying on electronic mediation in lieu of face-to-face interactions. Many access the same internet, use the same tech brands to telework, or utilize the same drive-through services to complete their daily routines. Although this homogenization of experiences may be representative of the broader American tendency to satisfy their needs and desires without sacrificing independence and mobility (e.g., Oishi et al., 2012), it can do so at the expense of interpersonal bonds (Kramer & Herbig, 1993; Simmel, 2011). The pandemic has thrown this distanced and electronically mediated lifestyle into sharp relief. Under normal circumstances (i.e., prior to COVID-19), many engaged in these practices with minimal attention to the dozens of neighbors engaging in the same activities. In the days of COVID-19, the existence of these same neighbors may become salient as a possible source of contagion or, in the most frightening scenario, potential competitors for scarce hospital beds and vaccines. This social environment can facilitate distinct responses that may depend a great deal on public messaging, as well as collective and institutional activity.

Implications and Broader Considerations

In a time of social distancing and pandemic, do we find ourselves coming together, or are we gradually fragmenting? Bad faith—whether through flaunting important protective norms and the bonds between people, or through unthinking conformism to social panics and unjust policies—can produce a splintered and dangerous social state. Examples from history, as well as social psychological research, suggest that when people experience existential threat, they may resort to behaviors like scapegoating, accelerated competition, and the blind justification of inequitable systems

(Jackson, 2002; Landau et al., 2012; Lindquist, 2014; Rothschild et al., 2012; Taussig, 1991). Therefore, considering the conditions that might lead to bad faith, and the ways to mitigate these responses if possible, is of the utmost importance.

The experience of severe and unjust constraints to one's freedom to act, without a clear sense of personal involvement, can provoke a flight from facticity. In a time when individuals are increasingly abstracted from their surroundings (Adams et al., 2019), it is conceivable that social bonds and concrete realities might be denied for the sake of personal freedom (ironically, new groups may be formed on this very basis). Correspondingly, it is important for people in the United States to understand coronavirus as a threat to vulnerable individuals with whom they feel a personal connection (Reicher & Stott, 2020), and for media, governmental, and organizational narratives to focus on and foster deep feelings of solidarity in combat against an adversary that can be defeated (i.e., through effective public health precautions and adequate medical remedies). This is already the case for much of society. Consider the extent to which people have quickly and profoundly changed their lives to safeguard the well-being of others they will never meet. However, to the extent that over time people from different socioeconomic and occupational strata (e.g., grounded gig economy workers vs. teleworking institutional administrators) differentially experience the secondary financial harms of extreme measures to contain the disease, and to the extent that prevalent narratives promote messages of fragmentation and interminability (e.g., news stories about scarcity-inducing hoarding, communication from scientists that the illness may never be effectively contained), these responses can lapse into competitively individualistic dissolution.

On the other hand, uncertainty about the nature of the danger facing oneself and others, and the attribution of grave consequence to one's actions, can lead to one's freedom being experienced as overwhelming. In a flight from transcendence to reduce this anxiety, people may adhere all too closely to social pressures. Scapegoating and system justification, attributing others' suffering to transgressive acts, and engaging in behaviors like panic buying and hoarding have in common a desire to stem the tide of uncertainty by turning to the seawall of social cohesion. If the underlying sense of uncertainty can be quelled through clear and noncontradictory messages, honest (if dire) public health announcements, and a sense of a clear and sequential plan (vs. day-by-day organizational reactions without a clear, sustained rationale), there is a greater chance for people to claim the responsibility of their freedom.

Sartre (1956, 2004) may illuminate society's best chance of emerging from the pandemic. According to the philosopher, when people feel united by a common threat, they can establish relationships that go beyond the

competitive isolationism of the contemporary risk society. People may become more aware of the direct impact of their actions on the survival of other individuals, in chains of reciprocal interdependence. Indeed, our hope is that we will not forget the truth the pandemic is forcing on us, a truth many of us previously did not conceive or actively sought to disregard. Although we did not bring about the outbreak, each of us throughout our lives, in small but significant ways, has contributed to a world where its risks are unequally distributed—and will contribute to its unfolding (Arendt, 1998). Offering responsibility as a counterpoint to bad faith, Sartre (1956) writes, "The peculiar character of human-reality is that it is without excuse. Therefore it remains for me only to lay claim to this [virus]" (p. 709). Perhaps, as we shelter in our homes and keep our loved ones close, the experience and surroundings of each person are incorporated more than ever before into every other's sense of their own experience and surroundings. Rather than antagonistically pursuing parallel projects, or blindly succumbing to social pressures and trends, our society can momentarily unite in pursuit of the immediate project of fighting for the lives of the vulnerable. Whether we succeed in this endeavor is not the real test of our solidarity. It lies in the admission that this fight should always have been all of ours.

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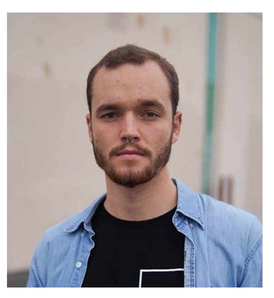

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