

Book review: Steven Taylor (2020): The Psychology of Pandemics - Preparing for the Next Global Outbreak of Infectious Disease

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Steven Taylor: The psychology of pandemics: Preparing for the next global outbreak of infectious disease

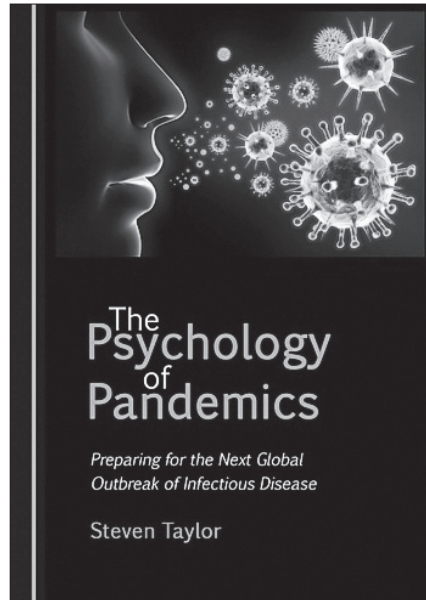
Reviewed by Konrad Goldenbaum and William Clark

In his book, *The Psychology of Pandemics: Preparing for the next global outbreak of infectious disease*, Steven Taylor discusses how pandemics should be managed with the psychology of the people affected in mind. Steven Taylor is a professor and clinical psychologist at the University of British Columbia. His work focuses on anxiety disorders, related clinical conditions and the psychology of pandemics. It is important to note that this book was published a few weeks before the outbreak of COVID-19. Now, two years later, after being used by government officials worldwide to guide us through the pandemic, we will discuss whether Taylor's psychological research and analysis remain a must-read for understanding the psychology of pandemics.

The book firstly covers the basics: why is a pandemic stressful to us? It discusses the fear of getting ill and the stress that measures like social distancing might put on us, and presents a scheme to understand why there might be so many different patterns of reaction to observe. It goes on to connect these questions with the reaction and adherence to methods for managing pandemics, thereby underlining this book's main message: The psychological factors play an essential role in the success or failure of fighting any pandemic. It then discusses the risks of a mental-health pandemic that usually accompanies a viral one, and how to react to it.

This book was meant to prepare the world for the next pandemic. It does so in four ways. It (1) analyses psychological and emotional reactions and maladaptive behaviours; (2) examines the research and theory relevant to understanding the psychological reactions at an individual and societal level; (3) discusses empirically supported methods to address these psychological factors; and finally (4), it describes the implications for public health policy. The psychological aspects of a pandemic are often overlooked or not given enough consideration, but a better understanding of how certain people or groups act and for what reason allows for more informed strategies to be developed; e.g. to improve vaccination rates or to reduce the risk of the hospitals/doctors being overly, and given this context often unnecessarily, overrun by people having a high level of health anxiety.

A core piece of research and theory of this book focuses on the topic of personality traits as emotional vulnerability factors. Individuals can usually be classified into two overarching personality types. The first is unrealistic optimism. Traits that accompany



this type are a sense of invulnerability and the utilisation of the blunting (avoiding threatening information and seeking distraction) cognitive style. Furthermore, this type usually results in the individuals having low levels of pandemic-related anxiety and therefore a lower probability of sticking to the recommended hygiene and other health recommendations. Such individuals would therefore be seen as people with a higher risk of being spreaders of the virus (Rood 2015). The second is classified as negative emotionality (neuroticism). People who fall into this category suffer from high levels of health anxiety and utilise the monitoring (the tendency to seek threat-relevant information) cognitive coping style. People in this category are more likely to worry excessively and often also follow restrictions beyond those

placed by the state (Rood 2015), e.g. continue to isolate even when lockdown measures are lifted or eased or excessive disinfection of hands and all surfaces. By categorising and describing both these starkly contrasting personality types, Taylor has provided us with important insight into the psyche of people affected by pandemics. Information and further research such as this can allow for more informed decision-making, as potential reactions can be more easily and accurately predicted.

Taylor also discusses interesting research conducted in the field of conspiracy theories and more specifically, how fears and beliefs spread through social networks. Conspiracy theories arise during times of uncertainty as people try to make sense of threatening events and developments. What has been discovered and described in this book is that social media provides an echo chamber for people with similar views, e.g. individuals that are vehemently against vaccinations. Social media provides a space where people can join groups of like-minded individuals. In its essence, this is not intrinsically negative; but what has been seen to happen is that views that differ from that of the group do not seem to manage to permeate into the discussions. Therefore, members of such groups are constantly only faced with information that backs up their own beliefs. An interesting piece of research mentioned by Taylor is that anti-vaccination sites may be better at their methods of communication. In a study which compared two anti-vaccination sites to two pro-vaccination sites, the findings show that the anti-vaccination sites were more interactive, but also provided information on both sides (granted, pro-vaccination information stated here might be skewed or altered to support their ar-

guments). The noteworthy result of this study is that interactive websites seemed to improve the level of vaccination acceptability by the public. Of course, anti-vaccination sites aren't frequently visited by the general public, but these findings can nonetheless provide useful in trying to make scientifically backed pro-vaccination sites more appealing to those wary of vaccines. Anti-vaccination or low vaccination rates in general are a very prominent issue in our current COVID-19 pandemic.

The book also delves into the topic of treating pandemic related emotional distress. During pandemics, even our current one, a lack of mental health, social support systems and mental health professionals can be linked to a higher probability of people developing emotional and psychological problems. The book states that a proactive response to this issue is necessary, including a rapid assessment of outbreak-associated psychological stressors. What has been seen to occur is that medical health practitioners, who are evidently under a lot of stress themselves in a pandemic situation, often fail to detect psychological disorders. A method must therefore be developed in order to more easily and effectively detect individuals who are seen or believed to suffer from medically significant distress. Furthermore, procedures for selecting optimal interventions must also be developed. Taylor mentions the screen-and-treat approach here. A very prominent example of this method is a mental health programme that was instituted following the 2005 London bombings to primarily help treat PTSD. The services were provided free of charge and a 24/7 helpline was established. Callers were then referred to a screening team. People who screened positive were then asked to complete a more in-depth evaluation with a clinician. Further actions were then taken given the individual's specific needs (Brewin 2008). Of course, implementing such a service for a more localised, yet, of course, tragic, event such as the London bombings is more manageable than a similar service that would have to be made available worldwide during a pandemic. The main lesson that can be drawn from this example is that mental health services such as this have been previously implemented and proven to be of positive use to society. Subsequently, more attention and effort need to be placed on developing an effective strategy for mental health screenings during events such as our current COVID-19 pandemic.

This book applies directly to the topic of this issue: *Generation Corona*. Psychological analysis such as that described in this book can, for one, be applied to the current young generation. The findings can help governments better understand the younger generations' beliefs, fears and worries, and therefore enable them to adapt their strategies and actions accordingly. The book and similar research could also be a vital asset to aid the current young generation in being better prepared for possible future pandemics. Even if science is continually advancing in this field, human psychology tends to remain rather constant. So, people will probably react and act similarly in the future as they do now.

Having lived through two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, one can congratulate the author on his accurate predictions. We saw that the pandemic increased the need to provide psychological support for people with behaviours and personality traits linked to maladaptive reactions during the pandemic. Providing a sense of stability even during the pandemic, reactions to alternative behaviours and cognitive-behavioural therapy in higher-risk cases proved necessary as a response to the psychological needs of people around the world, while, especially with a vaccine available, it

remains difficult to improve health-promoting behaviours such as vaccine adherence, especially for people such as health care workers. It becomes obvious that conspiracy theories are nothing unusual but instead, a reality one has to face in any extreme situation. However, one wonders whether this book should not be considered outdated, since it was outlived by the experiences during the pandemic and science has already substantially advanced on many topics discussed here. This is certainly the case with regard to this pandemic, and as ever more recent literature is being published, it becomes increasingly unattractive to go back to the scientific status quo ante. The advantages of reading this short book can be summed up with two arguments. First of all, the oversight this book offers, combined with the general approach, still makes this book elementary literature that remains a good starting point into the psychology surrounding pandemics, which of course lacks the specific scientific advances made during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Secondly, as mentioned previously, this book was written before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The book therefore draws upon previous pandemics and epidemics that sometimes played out quite differently in order to inform and reinforce its messages, so that the information provided can be considered rather a template where general strategies against pandemics can only be analysed on a broad scale. One therefore has to acknowledge that this book is a general approach to pandemics that is informative when it comes to general discussions on pandemic-related psychology, but lacks the advances and more importantly, the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic; such as the fact that the isolation of children during the lockdowns might have huge secondary effects. Lastly, on a rather political note, this book reminds us that predictions and precautionary measures are indeed possible; since it proves that a lot of challenges could be anticipated. The excuse of unpredictability is therefore not entirely valid. This train of thought should give way to working towards more future-oriented policies.

Overall, *The Psychology of Pandemics* is a book that provides an outline of the course of pandemics before COVID-19, while at the same time highlighting behavioural and psychological factors that require attention from psychologists and health care workers. Even further, this book highlights the need to be prepared not just for the current pandemic, but for other pandemics that may occur in the future (and which are considered to be very likely).

The book is written in an accessible style with clear structure and conclusions after each chapter. The main statements are largely unchallenged even after comparing them to the reality of this pandemic. One can even go so far as to interpret the unique distance of this book to everyday pandemic politics to be a refreshingly unpoliticised view on communication and psychology during a pandemic, although one has to keep in mind that this book might be superseded rather sooner than later by updated literature.

Taylor's book can therefore be considered one of the most influential books of this pandemic and represents a catalyst for further critical discussions on the psychological impact of pandemics.

Taylor, Steven (2020): The Psychology of Pandemics: Preparing for the Next Global Outbreak of Infectious Disease. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 178 pages. ISBN 978-1527549005 (hardback). Price: €25.45.

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Berlin Demography Days 2022: “Youth in Demographic Change” (16-18 May 2022)

Reported by Anne Bierwirth, Noah Croitoru and Milena Kulsheimer

At the Berlin Demography Days 2022, international experts in demography as well as political and social science discussed current issues of demographic change and their effects on the youth. For three days, several challenges in this field were addressed, focusing mainly on population development in Germany on the first day and Europe on the second, while opening up the perspective to global questions on the last day of the conference.

The public panel event was attended by students from seven European school classes and, among others, Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President of the European Commission for Democracy and Demography, Hermann Gröhe, Member of the German Bundestag, Christa Katharina Spieß, Director of the Federal Institute for Population Research, as well as Sabine Walper, Director of the German Youth Institute. The discussion forums of the Berlin Demography Days were held online, while the public panel event took place on-site at the WissenschaftsForum Berlin.

As in the previous years, the event was organised by Diakonie Deutschland and Population Europe, the network of leading European research institutions in the field of population sciences, in cooperation with the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Home Affairs and the Federal Ministry of Health as well as international partners.

Under the motto “Youth in Demographic Change”, the Berlin Demography Days considered general topics of intergenerational justice, youth policy strategies and chances for political participation; and it thereby tackled questions such as: What moves younger people and what are their future prospects in an aging society? What are the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and is the youth resilient? How important are the earlier years in one's life for the following course of life?

These big questions and ideas were bundled into four major conference themes, namely “younger people's voice in politics”, “younger people and the life course”, “attitudes, aspirations and crisis resilience” and “policies supporting younger people”.

The contributions dedicated to “young people's voices in politics” aimed to make visible the potential for conflict and power disparities between generations. Despite engaging in large-scale activism, most popularly as part of the struggle against climate change, young people face exclusion from political participation by the demographically stronger older generations. As the population is aging, political decision-making is dominated by this older generation. Herein lies a considerable risk for conflict between youth and their elders. Social cohesion, however, depends on the avid political participation of youth alongside older age groups. Therefore, it is crucial to analyse how political participation and involvement can be made more accessible for young people.

Both in questions of participation, as well as in considerations of “attitudes, aspirations and crisis resilience”, socio-demographic diversities among young people play a defining role. The pandemic has affected young people deeply in several aspects of their life, the short- and long-term consequences of which need to be studied. What needs to be resolved, furthermore, is how to successfully implement support for young people in managing their fears and expectations. After all, these fears and expectations have certainly impacted young people's attitudes throughout the pandemic.

Not only these internalities but also external factors define “young people and the course of life”. Here, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic converges with a development that has been observed well before the pandemic: the shift from linear courses of life toward non-linear biographies riddled with changes in education and occupation until retirement. Young people today experience increasing uncertainties in their prospects for the future.

The challenges youth face, analysed in all of the conferences' four thematic areas, converge and must be addressed through “policies supporting younger people”, as is the title of the final thematic area. This support must be made accessible to all and take into account the diversities within the heterogeneous “young generation”. Here, the crucial question emerges on how political decision-making can ensure the efficacy of political support for young people.