

Debate: Facing uncertainty with(out) a sense of control – cultural influence on adolescents' response to the COVID-19 pandemic

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Based on nationally representative online samples from 23 countries, an international survey (Blackbox, 2020) reported that, despite the presence of some discrepancies, people in collectivistic societies were generally more supportive of their countries' preventive measures to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus as evidenced by ratings which were typically (and in some cases, well) above the global average (Global $M = 45$; e.g., China = 85; Vietnam = 77; India = 59). By contrast, respondents from individualistic societies generally rated their nations' restrictive measures much more unfavorably (e.g., United States = 45; Australia = 43; United Kingdom = 37) (Blackbox, 2020).

Consistent with the survey results, there are conceivably large cross-cultural variations not only in terms of people's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and its preventive measures but also with regard to the negative psychological effects individuals (and especially adolescents) could experience as a result of these measures. We argue that while COVID-19-related restrictions could have profound psychological implications for adolescents, who are especially susceptible to environmental harshness and unpredictability (Chang et al., 2019), the effects are likely to differ depending on the specific type of learning style adolescents adopt to cope with uncertainty threats (Chang et al., 2011). Specifically, societal disease-control regulations that restrict personal freedoms might undermine adolescents' sense of control in individualistic cultures, where individual learning-focused problem-solving style (i.e., a free, independent search for innovative solutions) is the predominant way to deal with uncertainty. Adolescents' sense of control might conversely increase in collectivistic cultures where social learning-oriented problem-solving style (i.e., copying existing solutions with deference and conformity) is the predominant way to reduce uncertainty, especially if they do perceive the effectiveness of societal regulations in combating the COVID-19 pandemic. Such cultural differences lead us to predict disparities regarding short-term adjustments and future outcomes between adolescents in individualistic societies and those in collectivistic ones.

Sense of control is the belief that one can overcome environmental uncertainty, which constitutes a primary motivating force in life (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Research has shown that individuals' sense of control could contribute to a lower preference for risk-taking and more

delayed gratification in the face of uncertain threats (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). Thus, uncertainties triggered by the COVID-19 crisis might bring about adverse outcomes especially for adolescents who have a low sense of control, including an increase in the likelihood of these adolescents engaging in risky (e.g., rule violations) and unhealthy behaviors (e.g., substance use). Sense of control is also linked to long-term health and well-being (Lachman & Weaver, 1998), and might serve as a protective factor against negative developmental outcomes due to harsh and unpredictable environments (Chang et al., 2019).

Cultural differences on the basis of learning styles might affect how people attain a sense of control, where the generation of learning-specific solutions to problems could reduce uncertainty. Researchers have distinguished between individual and social learning-focused problem-solving styles as two fundamental ways of environmental adaptation (Boyd & Richerson, 1988). Individual learning-focused problem-solving style addresses environmental challenges via individual trial and error and it fosters an individualistic culture that supports self-expression, independence, and innovation (Chang et al., 2011). People in individualistic cultures should therefore derive a sense of control from exerting autonomy and personal freedom. Conversely, social learning accrues knowledge about environmental challenges by borrowing others' solutions. It facilitates a collectivistic culture that emphasizes conformity and compliance (Chang et al., 2011). Thus, people in collectivistic cultures should derive their sense of control from participating in societal cooperation.

This cultural perspective provides insights into potential cross-societal differences in adolescents' responses to the COVID-19 crisis. Adolescents in individualistic cultures might experience a lower sense of control due to the temporary loss of autonomy and freedoms resulting from societal restrictions imposed by authorities to contain the spread of the virus (e.g., lockdowns and travel restrictions). This lower sense of control might contribute either to an overly fatalistic or optimistic and self-efficacious view about COVID-19, both playing a role in engendering a poorer understanding of, and lesser support for these societal regulations. As a result, these adolescents are predictably more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors during the pandemic. Meanwhile, the threat of uncertainty might also prompt adolescents in individualistic societies to seek to retain personal control through actions that affirm their

personal freedoms. They are more likely to ignore personal and societal disease-prevention measures, thus exposing themselves and others to unnecessary risks of infection. In line with this argument, empirical findings (e.g., Oosterhoff, Palmer, Wilson, & Shook, in press) have suggested that young people in individualistic societies (such as the United States) have generally not been adhering very strictly to guidelines on movement restrictions that were implemented as part of measures aimed at containing the spread of COVID-19. In the long run, the COVID-19 pandemic may bring about a long-lasting reduction of these adolescents' sense of security, especially for those with a lower sense of control. This decrease in one's sense of security could subsequently lead to more externalizing problems and inferior academic performance as suggested by a recent cross-cultural study (Chang et al., 2019).

Although adolescents in collectivistic societies are likely experiencing COVID-19-related uncertainties that are similar to those currently encountered by their individualistic counterparts, these adolescents' sense of control might benefit from unified societal efforts in combating the common threat of the pandemic and by trusting authorities and viewing experts as societal role models. The collective sense of control that can be derived from trusting authorities would strengthen the belief that the pandemic is manageable and that the disease is avoidable, which, in turn, should prompt adolescents to conform to disease-prevention measures relating to personal hygiene such as handwashing and mask-wearing. Adolescents in collectivistic cultures should also be more willing to participate in societal disease-control regulations, which will further increase their sense of control. For example, people might volunteer in the community they live in to help with the collective preventive efforts. Indeed, Zhejiang Civil Affairs Bureau (2020) has reported that close to three million individuals have volunteered by mid-February to partake in such endeavors in just one province (Zhejiang) alone in China following the COVID-19 outbreak. From a long-term perspective, participating in collective efforts (e.g., volunteering) should lead to a positive-feedback loop that increases adolescents' sense of control, which will subsequently predict fewer externalizing and academic problems in the future.

To conclude, individuals' sense of control plays a key role in their immediate adjustments to the pandemic and in terms of shaping their future developmental trajectory by mediating the relationship between uncertain threats and behavioral adjustments. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, societal disease-control regulations that involve some restrictions on personal freedoms, which could undermine adolescents' sense of control, might induce some backlashes in individualistic societies. However, this does not mean that nothing can be done to buffer adolescents against such threats in individualistic societies. Recognizing how one's culture can affect individuals' sense of control constitutes the first step to helping adolescents manage uncertainties during the COVID-19 crisis. It behooves policy-makers, educators, and parents to address this potential cultural effect in innovative ways. For example, social learning

methods can be employed to creatively communicate (e.g., using celebrities and the social media) the necessity and effectiveness of societal regulations to adolescents. Adolescents should also be encouraged to partake in community cooperative activities that focus on helping people in need during this pandemic. Future research should also examine more factors that might affect individuals' sense of control, especially during a global crisis such as the current COVID-19 pandemic.

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