

# Coping with change: identity, threat and risk

Rusi Jaspal (University of Brighton) on his keynote at the European Congress of Psychology

**W**hen I was invited to deliver a keynote lecture at the 18th European Congress of Psychology 2023 – in Brighton, where my own institution is based – I knew immediately

what I wanted to talk about. The congress theme is ‘uniting communities for a sustainable world’, and sustainability is dependent upon our ability to embrace change and to adapt to it effectively. Given the consistent focus in my research upon identity processes, the lecture had to focus upon how we cope with threats to our sense of identity amid the societal and individual changes that we all experience.

Identity is complex. It refers to the unique constellation of elements that makes each and every one of us unique. Identity is at the heart of how people think, feel and behave. It is created as we establish a unique view of ourselves. It grows as we encounter novelty in life. It is vulnerable to threats. It is constantly defended. Some defensive strategies are effective. Others are doomed to failure. All this occurs in a social context characterised by constant change, uncertainty and the advent of technology. Indeed, this social context will in part determine which coping strategies become available to us and indeed how effective they will be in the long term.

Our sense of identity, then, provides a lens for interpreting any (hazardous) change and determines how we subsequently respond. Particular identity characteristics (the content of identity) shape our perceptions, understandings and actions.

Change is of course central to the human experience. It would be impossible to identify any time in history where humans have not experienced some form of change. Yet in recent times, it seems that the change we have experienced has been especially dramatic...

## **Identity Process Theory**

There is little doubt that the outbreak and subsequent

spread of the novel coronavirus (beginning in 2020) and its associated disease have changed, and will continue to change, how we see the world and ourselves in the months and years to come. Evidence on the impact of the pandemic on healthcare, science, economy, environment, let alone our behaviours and wellbeing, is now abundant (e.g. Bonotti & Zech, 2021). The longer-term implications continue to be studied.

Of course, coronavirus was not the first crisis to change the way in which we see ourselves, our relationships and the world we live in. The first clinical observations of AIDS in 1981 and the subsequent identification of HIV, the virus that causes it, also heralded an era of massive change – particularly for gay and bisexual men, who were disproportionately affected by the disease in Western industrialised societies. Pre-existing homophobic stigma was exasperated. Disease mitigation measures were introduced that were seen as curtailing their freedom, rights and wellbeing. Many lived in fear of infection and mortality and experienced the psychological trauma of death and dying around them. Indeed, when attempting to study the impact of coronavirus, many of us drew upon evidence generated during the course of the HIV/AIDS pandemic (e.g. Logie & Turan, 2020). Both are examples of massive social change that impacted on all of us, in one way or another.

We all have our own personal accounts of how such particular forms of societal change have affected our own identities. This has been one of the foci of psychologists interested in the human impact of societal change. After all, change affects us when we are conscious of it and our understandings of change shape how it affects us. In my own research, I have used tenets of Identity Process Theory (IPT) (Breakwell, 2015; Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014) to shed light on the ways in which societal change may affect an individual's sense of identity and how they subsequently think, feel and behave in relation to the change (e.g. Breakwell et al., 2023; Jaspal et al., 2023).

IPT is a social psychological theory of how people construct, manage and defend their identity when it is challenged. The theory postulates that individuals

strive to construct an identity characterised by adequate levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, continuity and positive distinctiveness. These are sometimes referred to as 'identity principles'. Change of any kind can curtail these feelings, resulting in what is described in the theory as identity threat.

Identity threat is harmful for psychological wellbeing and spurs the individual to attempt to cope. The goal of coping is to restore adequate levels of the identity principles. Coping strategies vary in their level of long-term effectiveness – some provide a 'quick fix' to a threatened identity while others successfully promote sustained wellbeing. It is the coping strategies that we use that I am interested in. After all, coping can include changes in patterns of thought, emotion and behaviour. It is often these patterns that determine the level of psychological wellbeing that we ultimately experience.

### Marginalised communities

One of our key foci over the last few years has been to understand the factors that determine which coping strategies we elect and how effectively we use them. We have developed the concept of 'identity resilience' – the individual's overall construal of the extent to which their identity is generally characterised by self-esteem, self-efficacy, continuity and positive distinctiveness (Breakwell, 2021). We have found that higher baseline levels of identity resilience appear to be protective against identity threat and positively associated with the adoption of effective coping strategies (Jaspal et al., 2022). This is clearly a construct that needs to be studied further in the context of coping with change,

Although societal changes, such as the emergence of coronavirus and HIV/ AIDS, affected many of us, there is now considerable evidence that being a member of a marginalised group in society can aggravate the extent of threat and limit the availability of effective coping strategies. This can mean that

some marginalised subgroups are disproportionately affected by the changes. By marginalised communities, I refer to groups within societies that are either officially or unofficially pushed to the margins because of their minority status. These groups may receive differential treatment and/or access to material and non-material resources (Moscovici et al., 1985). They may also experience what are termed 'minority stressors' (Jaspal et al., 2022). Marginalisation can be determined by many different factors, such as one's ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, language, or even physical and mental health conditions. Nevertheless, the characteristics and the extent to which such marginalisation is perpetrated may differ across social, cultural and temporal contexts. Social identity-based stigma may be resisted by members of marginalised communities and such resistance itself can be part of the coping process (Jaspal, 2011).

Both HIV/ AIDS and coronavirus exemplify the impact of marginalisation on psychological wellbeing. In particular, data in the UK and other Western countries showed a higher risk of contracting Covid-19 among people from marginalised groups, such as those from lower income backgrounds, from deprived parts of the country, and those identifying as minority ethnic, when compared to other groups (Local Government Association, 2021). This shows that social and demographic characteristics are associated with greater inequalities in health and wellbeing in the face of change. I have also found that minority ethnic people are at increased risk of poor mental health during the pandemic due to social inequalities (Jaspal & Lopes, 2021) and that ethnic minority gay and bisexual men living with HIV are more susceptible to threats to wellbeing (Jaspal et al., 2017). This may mean that societal change affects them more adversely.

Individuals from different social groups differ in their risk appraisal, which has significant implications for their health and wellbeing. In this regard, aiming to assess perceived risk effectively, my colleagues and I developed the Covid-19 Own Risk Appraisal Scale (CORAS) (Jaspal et al., 2022). In this study, we adapted an extant psychometric scale that had been originally developed to measure one's own risk of HIV/ AIDS to assess one's own risk of contracting the novel coronavirus and its associated disease. Incidentally, we had also used this scale to measure gay and bisexual men's risk appraisal in relation to HIV infection, showing variation in relation to different social and demographic identity characteristics (Jaspal et al., 2019). Results showed that the CORAS is reliable and that scores correlate highly with scores on the Fear of Covid-19 Scale (Ahorsu et al., 2020). We found no differential item functioning by gender, age, or ethnicity, making the scale suitable to measure perceived risk in diverse social and demographic groups. Perception of risk affects how people will think, feel and behave when a change arises.

In seeking to examine likelihood of engaging in particular behaviours in the face of change, we also

### Key sources

- Breakwell, G.M. (2015). *Coping with threatened identities*. Psychology Press.
- Breakwell, G.M. (2021). Identity resilience: Its origins in identity processes and its role in coping with threat. *Contemporary Social Science*, 16(5), 573-588.
- Breakwell, G.M., Fino, E. & Jaspal, R. (2021). The COVID-19 Preventive Behaviours Index. *Evaluation & the Health Professions*, 44(1), 77-86.
- Breakwell, B., Jaspal, R. & Wright, D. (2023). Identity resilience, science mistrust, COVID-19 risk and fear predictors of vaccine positivity and vaccination likelihood: A survey of UK and Portuguese samples. *Journal of Health Psychology*.
- Jaspal, R. & Breakwell, G.M. (eds.) (2014). *Identity process theory: Identity, social action and social change*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jaspal, R., Lopes, B. & Breakwell, G.M. (2022). Minority stressors, protective factors and mental health outcomes in lesbian, gay and bisexual people in the UK. *Current Psychology*.
- Jaspal, R., Assi, M. & Maatouk, I. (2023). Coping with COVID-19 in Lebanon: A social psychological perspective. In J. M. Ryan (Ed.), *COVID-19: Surviving a Pandemic*. Routledge.

Full list available in online/app version.

designed and developed the Covid-19 Preventive Behaviors Index (Breakwell et al., 2021). The measure aimed to assess the likelihood of adopting behaviours designed to limit one's risk of contracting and/or transmitting coronavirus to others. However, it is clear more research will be necessary to improve our measurement and understanding of the impact of perceived risk on the lives, health, and wellbeing of individuals who identify as members of marginalised groups. It must aim to identify effective psychological and behavioural coping strategies, and to provide evidence-based recommendations on necessary policy and intervention to mitigate the existing divide.

As a discipline focused on how human beings react to change, psychology must look beyond Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies. We have attempted to do just that. In Lebanon, for instance, gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men are at particular risk of identity threat, psychological adversity and poor health outcomes. The wellbeing of gay and bisexual men in Lebanon continues to be shaped by their particular social context, including past experiences, exposure to potentially threatening political instability, stressors related to the financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as difficulties in accessing adaptive coping strategies (Jaspal et al., 2020).

### **Psychology must innovate**

Identity change is an inevitable dimension of the human condition. However, the relations between identity, health and wellbeing in marginalised groups are especially complex. The available evidence suggests that marginalised groups are more susceptible to identity threat but that they may have decreased access to resources that can facilitate effective coping.

My keynote lecture, drawing upon various empirical studies conducted in distinct contexts of threat, such as stigma, the experience of chronic illness, climate change and the management of conflicting identities, will shed light on the psychology of human identity, how it changes and, crucially, how people including those from marginalised groups attempt to cope with these changes. The focus will be upon the conditions under which identity can become threatened; identity resilience and its association with psychological wellbeing and coping strategies; and how identity resilience can be measured in empirical research into psychological wellbeing and coping. A key message will be that the discipline of psychology must continue to innovate: developing robust measurement tools, looking beyond our own cultural contexts and, above all, asking challenging questions to improve the lives of individuals from different groups within society.

## Supplying Clinicians & Educators since 1972



**Price match promise on all products**  
See website for details and terms

Visit [www.annarbor.co.uk](http://www.annarbor.co.uk) to view our extensive product range  
enquiries@annarbor.co.uk Tel 01668 214460

**FREE UK delivery for orders over £100**

**ann arbor**<sup>®</sup>  
publishers  
LIMITED