

Where Psychologists Should Fear to Tread on Covid-19, They Don't

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CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING brain teaser: A bat and a ball cost \$1.10 in total. The bat costs \$1.00 more than the ball. How much does the ball cost? A researcher devised the question [15 years ago](#) as a measure of our ability to move past intuitive responses to deeper, reflective thinking — a concept Daniel Kahneman, a psychologist and Nobel Prize winner in economics, would go on to explore in his 2011 book “Thinking, Fast and Slow.” It’s been popularized to the point you may already know the answer. (Hint: It’s not 10 cents, the response that springs to mind for most people. If you ponder a bit you’re more likely to arrive at the correct answer, which I’ll get to later.)

So, what does the answer to the bat-and-ball question have to do with how you size up the threat posed by Covid-19? According to psychologist Mark Travers, intuitive thinkers — the 10 centers — may be (in his view) irrationally concerned about the virus. In an April 5 [article](#) for Forbes, he uses that concept to explain survey results showing that men are more cavalier than women about Covid-19 risks. Based on a study finding that men outscored women on the bat-and-ball question and two similar brainteasers, he posits that males are more rational. The difference could be due to genetics or the environment, he writes, but to Travers, it ultimately suggests that “men might be better equipped to size up the Covid-19 risk for what it is: a threat that, in most cases, is still exceptionally remote.”

Travers is one of a [slew](#) of [psychological](#) and [behavioral](#) experts [weighing](#) in to tell us how we should [think](#), [feel](#), and [act](#) in the face of Covid-19 — and some of it can be [useful](#). It’s a stressful time, after all. Anxieties are running high, and there are, to date, very few firm answers regarding how long the pandemic might last.

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But while psychologists can be essential to helping the public deal with the mental health fallout of Covid-19, not everyone thinks analyses like Travers’ are improving matters. Indeed, according to Stuart Ritchie, a psychology lecturer at King’s College London who wrote a recent [analysis](#) of the issue for the British website UnHerd, some behavioral researchers are “disgracing themselves” by using psychological research to downplay the severity of the pandemic. “We shouldn’t be trying to draw conclusions from our research, especially small-scale lab studies,” he told me, “for something as serious, unprecedented, and rare as this.”

The stakes are too high to get it wrong. In March, for example, psychologist David Halpern, head of the Behavioral Insights Team (aka “the Nudge Unit”) that consulted on the U.K.’s response to the pandemic, offered advice that now seems dangerously misguided: [He spoke](#) of achieving “herd immunity” by “cocooning” older people and otherwise deliberately allowing the virus to spread. He also recommended delaying social distancing, arguing that people would quickly tire of it and not comply.

While Halpern's influence on official decision making is unclear, the U.K. did not act swiftly, and it is now among the hardest-hit countries in Europe.

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One of the psychologists Ritchie calls out in his analysis is Northeastern University professor David DeSteno. In a February 11 [op-ed](#) for The New York Times, DeSteno started with the assumption that the seasonal flu "presents a much greater threat than does the coronavirus." He then drew on psychological experiments, including his own, to explain why he thought people were overreacting by buying face masks, avoiding crowds, and being suspicious of Asians. "Such findings show that our emotions can bias our decisions in ways that don't accurately reflect the dangers around us," he wrote.

In his article, Ritchie characterized opinion pieces by DeSteno and others as "dreadful misfires" for minimizing the threat of Covid-19 not long before governments began imploring their citizens to stay home. He told me that the social scientists themselves are guilty of another replicable behavioral quirk: confirmation bias, the tendency to favor information consistent with your own point of view. You could just as easily compose a "just so" story using psychological principles to explain why people — like the men in Travers' article — underestimated the threat.

"It's completely speculative," said Ritchie. "People rarely consider these biases in concert with each other. They just focus on one and say 'this must be the explanation for all our behavior.'"

DeSteno told me that Ritchie "completely mischaracterized" his views by not accounting for what was going on at the time. When DeSteno's op-ed was first published, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had reported only 13 cases of Covid-19 in the U.S., and many American officials were still ignoring or downplaying the likely impact of the virus. At the same time, by early February it was clear that Covid-19 was spreading globally — and quickly. Public health experts were warning that something very bad was coming — and, in fact, was likely already here, although we were not yet widely testing for it.

Should DeSteno have known better, based on this? It's a fair question — but he was far from alone in issuing ostensibly research-based psychological and behavioral nostrums and prognostications early on. In a February 28 [piece](#) in Bloomberg Opinion, for example, Cass Sunstein, a behavioral economist at Harvard University, expressed concern that people would take unnecessary precautions such as canceling trips, refusing to fly, or avoiding certain countries due to the virus. (A month later he [wrote](#) that expensive precautions were justified.) And in a March 12 [opinion](#) piece for Project Syndicate, the German psychologist Gerd Gigerenzer looked to the psychological research and responses to past viral epidemics to predict that people will react to Covid-19 based on fear rather than evidence.

For my part, by the end of February, I was rethinking spring travel, talking contingencies with two of my children who were in other countries, and considering steps to protect my mother.

However, it is true that fear can compel people to act in irrational and harmful ways. Both Gigerenzer and DeSteno decried discrimination against Asians after the outbreak began in Wuhan, China, for example. The idea is not to justify panic or bad behavior, it's to question the premise at the center of

these pieces that Covid-19 posed less of a threat than everyday dangers we take in stride such as car accidents or other illnesses.

To Simine Vazire, a psychology professor at the University of California, Davis, such predictions were wildly premature. “I would be very cautious to say ‘people are overreacting and I know this because I understand the human mind,’” she said. “Even if we did, you’d still need the other half of the equation, which is ‘What would be the appropriate reaction?’”

Yarkoni chalks up most of the opinions to harmless psychological storytelling. “The stories could potentially be true, but we usually have no idea, and very little basis for determining that,” he said.

But Ritchie disagrees. A bunch of articles by experts floating around in prominent places could easily influence people and governments, he said. “That’s what people hope for when they write articles.”

Instead, Vazire suggests that behavioral scientists should leave risk assessment to the virologists and epidemiologists. “I can sympathize a lot with why they believe these things,” she said of experts publishing their speculations in the press. “But I feel very little sympathy for why they went and printed it in a very high-circulation newspaper with their credentials attached to it, because I knew better than to do that.”

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