

# COVID-19: Social scientists look into real-time decision-making

May 22 2020, by Rachel Sturtz

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As U.S. cities and states begin to reopen, each is mulling a series of complex decisions—to quarantine or not, to deem workers "essential" or not, to decide what's enforceable versus voluntary—requiring a balance

of science and emotions. The differences between world governments and even city councils is a real-time study of diverging interpretations of a changing set of knowns.

In April, a group of social scientists led by Chris Weible, Ph.D., professor in the School of Public Affairs at University of Colorado Denver, and Daniel Nohrstedt, Ph.D., Uppsala University in Sweden, wrote a [commentary](#) for the journal *Policy Sciences* about the ways in which their discipline can help us understand the evolving dynamics of decision-making during COVID-19.

"As social science scholars, we're good at analyzing something a year after it happens and publishing about it a year after that," said Weible. "That's one of the reasons why academia generates high quality research. But as a community member at CU Denver SPA, one of our obligations is to help make sense of what's happening now."

## **How messaging influences risk perceptions**

For the paper, Weible and Nohrstedt pulled together a diverse team of scholars from the U.S. (including CU Denver SPA's Deserai Crow and Tanya Heikkila, Ph.D.s), Austria, the UK, Australia, Switzerland, Hungary, and Sweden. Their commentary examines 10 policy perspectives including policymaking at the local and international level, crises response and management, policy networks like political parties, scientific experts, narratives, and success and failures of implementation.

In one section, the authors say the messaging of the pandemic can "influence individual risk perceptions and risk reduction responses during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic." Understanding that risk (and its severity, and how to reduce risk or help the collective effort) is key to persuading people and their governments to do something in the face of uncertainty and crisis. State governors, for example, have done a

better job of consistent messaging and giving information than the president, who has contradicted his own public health experts, "sowing confusion."

"How government communicates and justifies its decisions is extremely important. If we perceive our government's choices as legitimate, we're more likely to support those choices," said Weible. "Of course, we need to keep our due diligence of skepticism. Ultimately, policy decisions perceived as legitimate will relieve some conflicts, improve how we deliberate and discuss issues, and help us get through this pandemic."

## **Our changing perception of government's role**

Weible said the pandemic is currently "altering our view of how we relate to our government and how it relates to us" by exposing some of the vulnerabilities of our society such as the value of essential workers who we didn't appreciate before.

"There are big choices and big [policy](#) changes happening that show our interdependence and raise questions about the type of society we want and the role of government therein," said Weible. "When do you start relaxing or terminating these policies? Once we start giving people additional benefits, like unemployment and healthcare, at what time and to what extent can we take these benefits away from people? What will be expected from our [government](#) going forward?"

This summer, Weible hopes to dig into those questions in his new class, COVID-19: The Pandemic, Societies & Governments.

**More information:** Christopher M. Weible et al. COVID-19 and the policy sciences: initial reactions and perspectives, *Policy Sciences* (2020).

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