

Study highlights 'moralisation' of COVID response and restrictions

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Dr Maja Graso. Credit: University of Otago

A collaborative study led by the University of Otago has shown that COVID-19 containment and elimination efforts have become moralised. As a result, people are more likely to accept collateral damage from these efforts, such as social shaming, lost lives and illnesses, and police abuse of power. This moralisation was so strong that people reacted negatively even when COVID-19 restrictions were merely questioned.

Published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, the study, *Moralization of COVID-19 Health Response: Asymmetry in Tolerance for Human Costs*, examined how likely people were to overlook the harmful by-products of the elimination response, compared to similar actions unrelated to COVID-19 (e.g., reducing road deaths) or those addressing the economic impact of COVID-19.

The researchers gave New Zealand community participants one of two parallel lay-oriented research proposal descriptions. Although both proposals relied on the same research and presented the same information about the methods, the proposal questioning NZ's elimination approach (vs. a proposal which supported NZ's elimination approach) was rated as having less rigorous methods, reliant on less accurate information, and people were less trusting of the research team.

The article's authors hypothesised that as COVID-19 is recognised as a formidable contemporary threat, efforts to combat it would be perceived as promoting the 'greater good' because they presumably reduce overall suffering. Those efforts would be not only lauded as necessary and beneficial, but they may also become moralised. As a result, people would be more likely to accept [human suffering](#) resulting from COVID-19 containment or elimination strategies.

Both failing to properly contain COVID-19 and implementing restrictions to contain COVID-19 carry collateral costs. Collateral human costs that may result from failing to combat COVID-19 include increased cases, overwhelmed healthcare systems, health complications, and deaths. Prioritising control or elimination of COVID-19 also carries collateral human costs, such as unemployment, extreme financial stress, social isolation, substance abuse, and delayed cancer diagnoses. Left unaddressed, these forces may generate 'deaths of despair', whereby individuals perish from behaviours or worsened illnesses as a result of perceived bleak prospects. Other costs include public shaming of those

who violate or question health-based policies, abuse of law-enforcement and government power, and deterioration of human rights.

Lead author Dr. Maja Graso, a Senior Lecturer in Business Ethics at the University of Otago's Department of Management, says results supported the hypothesis, suggesting COVID-19 elimination efforts became moralised to an almost sacred level.

Although moralisation may be a natural response to such an imposing health threat, this process may also [blind people](#) to potential human costs resulting from a COVID-19 elimination strategy (e.g., extreme financial strain, undiagnosed illnesses). Importantly, moralization of COVID-19 may also mean that merely questioning elimination strategies is not acceptable. Indeed, this is exactly what their findings revealed.

"As a research team, we don't take a stance on whether moralising elimination is good or bad, nor on how COVID-19 should be handled. Instead, we examine how people assess human costs, and we invite people to consider the possibility that the moralisation of COVID-19 elimination may lead us to overlook other, less visible forms of suffering, such as loss of livelihoods or deaths of despair. It may also lead us to discount peer-reviewed scientific evidence that documents human costs resulting from elimination-based strategies," Dr. Graso says.

The paper describes that without tempered discussions, holistic assessments of human suffering will pose challenges for scientists, policy makers, and the general public alike. The current trade-offs facing decision-makers and individual citizens are difficult, unprecedented, and costly. Providing a nuanced understanding of how individuals evaluate these human [costs](#) can help guide an informed pathway towards weathering these ongoing difficulties and ultimately, minimizing human suffering.

More information: Maja Graso et al. Moralization of Covid-19 health response: Asymmetry in tolerance for human costs, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jesp.2020.104084](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2020.104084)

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