Qeios

Peer Review

Review of: "Moral and Ethical Orientations and Responses to Nonpharmaceutical Public Health Recommendations in the Early COVID-19 Pandemic"

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The primary value of this research is that the data were collected in March 2020, before most of the politicization of the COVID-19 response occurred in the United States. The work asks interesting questions about the relationship between individual ethical orientations and acceptance of a variety of public health policy interventions, with the intention of informing future public health messaging in the context of infectious disease outbreaks.

The analysis is conducted carefully, with multiple additional statistical tests and correction methods applied. Based on the results, the author suggests different targeted messages for Absolutists, Situationists, Subjectivists, and Exceptionists for the current measles outbreak. One question would be how to identify which people have each of these ethical orientations. In other words, how can public health officials identify who to send each of the tailored messages to?

The author is careful to describe the limitations of the convenience sample and small sample size, noting that it was skewed as more female and more highly educated. There are also a high proportion of Black or African American respondents and fewer Hispanic or Latino respondents than the US population. Given the claim that the data are consistent with a golden hour of compliance with public health recommendations, another limitation is that the survey did not include information on the respondents' political affiliations. Given the demographics of the sample, it is also likely that the sample skewed Democratic. While most of the specific political messaging about particular nonpharmaceutical

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recommendations had not yet occurred, the seriousness and scope of the outbreak had been downplayed by the president in the weeks and months leading up to the data collection period.

The author excludes a handful of the responses because they were outliers. As a robustness check, it would be interesting to see the analysis with these observations included. If there is not a great deal of variation in the levels of relativism and idealism in the sample, it will be difficult to find meaningful effects of these characteristics on the outcomes of interest. It would also be helpful to see the means for the measures of idealism and relativism, and what fraction of the sample would be categorized as Absolutists, Situationists, Subjectivists, and Exceptionists.

As a practical matter, I would suggest recoding the disagreement response to zero. Then, the means will represent the fraction of the sample that agreed with each public health policy, and the correlations will be more directly interpretable (and easier to discuss).

The study is most useful as a template for future analyses of responses to compliance with public health recommendations by ethical orientation. But, given that public health has become politicized in the United States in ways that are unprecedented, I would suggest adding research questions about the interplay between ethical orientation and political affiliation. The author is well placed to design a study that could assess whether ethical orientation predicts political affiliation/views, whether the party affiliation or the ethical orientation of an individual has a greater impact on their views of public policy, etc...

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.