

# Future pandemic response needs to consider cultural context, research says

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Strategies that not only conform to science but also consider the cultural context of countries are key to fighting future pandemics, according to researchers from Simon Fraser University and two U.S. universities.

Simon Fraser University Beedie School of Business professor Carolyn Egri, along with Ratan Dheer (Eastern Michigan University) and Len Treviño (Florida Atlantic University), analyzed COVID-19 case data from 107 nations, focusing on the first 91 days of the [pandemic](#). Their examination of the direct and indirect impacts of culture led researchers to conclude that countries that place more cultural value on the collective society over the individual, with citizens more willing to take government direction, had less COVID-19 case growth. Their study results are published in the *Journal of International Business Studies*.

Collectivist countries such as Malaysia, South Korea and Singapore, which value group cooperation and wellbeing, were able to quickly adapt their behavior and limit COVID-19 case growth. Individualistic countries, such as Canada, Italy, the U.K. and the U.S., which value [individual freedom](#) and choice, experienced greater case growth.

High [power](#) distance nations, where people accept hierarchical power relationships, had lower case growth because citizens were more likely to follow government guidelines. For example, people in Japan and Taiwan practiced mask wearing, physical distancing and self-isolation despite the absence of absolute lockdowns.

Low power distance nations, which are more egalitarian, with people being more likely to question experts, had higher case growth rates in comparison. In Germany and the U.S., for example, people protested COVID-19 restrictions.

The researchers also note that high uncertainty avoidance countries, which value predictability and are generally resistant to new ideas, such as Portugal and Spain, challenged COVID-19 restrictions and had higher case growth compared to countries that were less risk-averse, such as Denmark.

## Country culture and government pandemic response

During the first wave of the pandemic, governments increased the strictness of containment and closure policies; however, the effectiveness of these measures depended on a country's culture.

While relatively low levels of government intervention reduced case growth in collectivistic and high power distance countries (Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan), stronger and more restrictive [government](#) measures were needed to curb pandemic spread in individualistic and low power distance countries (Canada, U.S., U.K.).

The researchers' findings suggest that governments in individualistic nations can support behavioral change early during a pandemic by focusing on incentives that benefit the individual and reduce individual hardship, such as unemployment benefits and subsidies for necessities.

While authoritative leadership and rules are less likely to foster compliance in low power distance countries, governments can provide the right tools for individuals to make decisions, such as factual and scientific information—including knowledge gained from past pandemics.

Governments of low power distance nations can also foster support from media, local governing bodies, public service agencies, and nongoverning bodies to encourage public compliance.

Study authors also suggest that clear and transparent communication from policymakers can build trust in high uncertainty avoidance nations where people may be extra stressed about changes to their daily lives and routines intended to limit COVID-19 case growth.

Government policymakers can use this research about the impact of

culture on the spread of communicable diseases to tailor mitigation strategies for COVID-19 and future pandemics that will save lives while minimizing the economic fallout.

## **Insights for multinational companies and employee wellbeing**

Although the global pandemic has accelerated the shift towards virtual work, there will likely be cultural differences in employees accepting large-scale and long-term work digitization in a post-pandemic world.

While employees in individualistic countries may welcome the increased flexibility and independence of the virtual workplace, employees in collectivistic countries may feel increased social isolation in virtual workplaces that are less relationship-oriented. Multinational corporations will need to manage employee relations and formulate hiring, training, and support strategies that are compatible with a country's culture.

Cultural considerations are also important in how companies transition to post-pandemic workplaces. Corporations in high power distance nations should aim for setting clear standards and procedures, while employee engagement in planning, more customized training and flexibility could be essential to securing commitment in low power countries.

**More information:** Ratan J. S. Dheer et al, A cross-cultural exploratory analysis of pandemic growth: The case of COVID-19, *Journal of International Business Studies* (2021). [DOI: 10.1057/s41267-021-00455-w](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41267-021-00455-w)

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