

COVID-19 and prejudice against migrant: the mediating roles of need for cognitive closure and binding moral foundations. A comparative study.

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Since the emergence of COVID-19 being declared a global pandemic, several reports of intensified uncertainties, inequalities, division, and discrimination have been reported worldwide. The early stages of any pandemic are usually saturated with uncertainty, as the only certainty is that weeks, months, and maybe years to come will be full of uncertainty (Vos, 2020).

Past research has confirmed that feelings of uncertainty are related to increased physiological stress markers (Greco & Rogers, 2003). On a behavioral level, unpredictability elicited anxious behaviors such as avoidance and enhanced attention toward negative stimuli (Herry et al., 2007). Other studies have demonstrated that individuals decrease information processing under conditions of uncertainty, stress, and anxiety, form quick judgments, and make simple decisions (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). But what mitigates prejudice against migrants in situations of uncertainty? Addressing this question we explored how individuals with greater COVID-19 concern perceive migrants as a greater threat and show prejudice against them, indirectly through the mechanism of need for cognitive closure and binding moral foundations.

This study which examined the relationship between uncertainty caused by COVID-19 concern and prejudice against migrants. This relationship was tested by adopting a sequential mediation model by integrating COVID-19 concern, NCC, the three binding moral foundations, and prejudice against migrants. Research was conducted in two European countries: Malta and Italy. Six hundred and seventy-six individuals participated in this

quantitative study (Malta: N=204; Italy N=472). Results from this study showed that the need for cognitive closure and binding moral foundations mediate the relationship between COVID-19 concern and prejudice against migrants in both countries. When testing the three binding moral foundations (loyalty, authority, and purity), the authority foundation seems to be the most consistent predictor.

The implications of the findings contribute to theories about how situational uncertainty caused by COVID-19, together with the need for epistemic certainty and binding morality, contribute to increased prejudiced attitudes against migrants. Practical implications from this study suggest that policymakers, the media, and public officers share a joint responsibility when addressing the public about this pandemic. Speeches and policies that depict the pandemic as overwhelmingly scary increase uncertainty in an already new and unprecedented context. This, together with the discourse about 'foreigners,' creates the divide between 'us' and 'them' and increases prejudiced attitudes against migrants. Therefore, precise information on how COVID-19 is transmitted and treated, and reassuring information on prevention could reduce uncertainty and help counteract misinformation and stigmatization of some social groups.

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