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Construing the COVID-19 Pandemic in the UK: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and measures used to contain it have had a significant psychosocial impact. This paper reports a study of its psychological effects in 108 UK residents who completed an online survey between the first and second waves of the pandemic asking them to describe the main difficulties that they experienced and how they coped with these, what they had learnt from the pandemic, and their anticipations of a post-pandemic future. Deductive thematic content analysis of the results in terms of diagnostic constructs of personal construct psychology identified overarching themes of transitions, with themes of anxiety, threat, loss of role, sadness, contempt, and stress; strategies, with themes of constriction, hostility, and individual coping strategies; reconstruction, including revision of superordinate constructs, revision of subordinate constructs, and no reconstruction; and anticipations, with themes of recovery of certainty and structure, constriction, dilation, aggression, and no anticipation. Two contrasting patterns were observed, one characterized by failure to reconstrue, hostility, and/or constriction, and the other by revision of superordinate constructs, dilation, and/or aggression.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which originated in China in 2019, has had significant psychological and social effects, both as a consequence of the disease itself and of the measures adopted to contain it. It has, for example, been associated with increases in anxiety, depression, stress (including posttraumatic stress), suicidal ideation, probability of psychiatric diagnosis, and domestic violence (Bo et al., 2020; Boyraz & Legros, 2020; Brunet et al., 2022; Guessoum et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2020; Taquet et al., 2021; Usher et al., 2020; Xiong et al., 2020).

A particularly challenging aspect of the pandemic is what has been regarded as the unprecedented nature of experiences during this time, and consequent difficulty in making sense of these experiences. Meaning-making processes have now received some research attention, with violation of core beliefs (Milman et al., 2020; Negri et al., 2023) and disrupted meaning-making (Milman et al., 2020) being found to mediate the impact of COVID stressors on mental health, while various studies have shown greater meaning in life to be associated with wellbeing during the pandemic (Arslan & Allen, 2022;

Yıldırım & Arslan, 2021), and ways of making sense of the social environment have been related to perceptions of, and adherence with, measures to contain the spread of the virus (Gennaro et al., 2023). Particular aspects of the meaning of the pandemic have also been explored by the elicitation of narratives (Branquinho et al., 2020; Fioretti et al., 2020; Jen et al., 2022; Todorova et al., 2021; Venuleo et al., 2020).

From a personal construct theory perspective, experiences of the pandemic can be viewed in terms of transitions in construing and strategies used to cope with these transitions and the invalidation associated with them (Cipolletta & Ortu, 2021; Winter & Reed, 2020). In a study that elicited accounts of residents of the USA concerning their worst experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, transitions that were identified were anxiety, threat, loss of role, sadness, contempt, and stress (Winter et al., 2023). When the data were pooled with those derived from an Italian sample, COVID-related threat to self was found to be a robust predictor of peritraumatic distress, as were deprivation of resources and anxiety (Cipolletta et al., 2022). The US participants' experiences showed more threat to life and loss, while the Italian participants' experiences were more characterized by threat to the world, social isolation, stress, and feeling trapped. Strategies that have been identified as being used to lessen or avoid invalidation during the pandemic include constriction of people's worlds, and hostility, in Kelly's (1955) sense of extortion of evidence for predictions (Winter & Reed, 2020), which has been associated with distrust and with pandemic conspiracy theories (Kovář et al., 2024). Further recent research from a personal construct theory perspective on experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy has included studies focusing on transitions in construing (Ianza et al., 2022; Tomaino et al., 2021), personal relationships (Alfredetti et al., 2022), construction of the body (Cappellari & Del Rizzo, 2022), and bereavement experiences (Filisetti, Entilli, & Cipolletta et al., 2022).

In the present study, experiences of the pandemic were investigated in residents of another country that was significantly impacted by it, the UK. Research questions were whether the same transitions would be identified as in the previous studies of residents of the USA and Italy (Cipolletta et al., 2022; Winter et al., 2023), what strategies were adopted to address these transitions, whether reconstruction was evident in response to the pandemic, and what were anticipations of the future.

Method

Design

The study was part of a multi-national research program involving 15 countries in which there was qualitative analysis of participants' stories, elicited online, regarding the COVID-19 pandemic (Todorova et al., 2021; Tomaino et al., 2021). Ethical approval for the UK component of the study was provided by the Health, Science, Engineering and Technology ECDA of the University of Hertfordshire (protocol number LMS/SF/UH/04250).

Participants

108 UK residents were recruited from a Qualtrics participant pool between 1st. and 22nd. September, 2020. 63% were female, 79% were aged between 26 and 65 years (age range 19 to 71 years), and 83% were white British.

Context

The UK reported its first case of COVID-19 in January, 2020, and within a year its number of COVID deaths had risen to the highest in Europe (Barr et al., 2021). The initial government response to the pandemic, involving delay in implementing lockdown and social distancing, was described as 'one of the most important public health failures the United Kingdom has ever experienced' (House of Commons, 2021, p. 32), but a range of lockdown measures were eventually introduced, as was the first national vaccination program. Data collection for the study took place between the first and second waves of the pandemic.

Measures

Participants were asked to write answers to the following questions in an on-line survey:

1. What are the main difficulties you are facing, and how are you dealing with them?
2. What has the pandemic taught you about what is important and meaningful to you?
3. What are you most looking forward to after the pandemic is over and why?

Data analysis

Responses from the UK participants were subjected to thematic content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using a deductive approach (Kyngäs et al., 2020) in which, similarly to the previous studies of US and Italian residents (Cipolletta et al., 2022; Winter et al., 2023), the responses were viewed from the perspective of personal construct theory, particularly drawing upon the theory's 'diagnostic constructs' (Kelly, 1955). Two members of the research team independently coded responses, resolving any disagreements in discussion with a third member of the team. Responses could be coded under more than one theme.

Results

Four overarching themes were identified, each with subthemes.

Overarching theme 1: Transitions

This theme concerns emotional experiences, which, for Kelly (1955), were associated with the awareness of transitions in construing such as the invalidation or validation of constructions.

Theme 1a: Anxiety
Kelly (1955) equated anxiety with the uncertainty of being unable to anticipate events because they are largely 'outside the range of convenience' of the person's construct

system. Such uncertainty was described by participants either in a general sense or in relation to specific aspects of the pandemic, e.g.:

> Uncertain about the future. (UK37F33)[1]

> The main difficulty is not knowing what the future is, we cannot make definite plans for holidays meeting up with family and friends etc. (UK70M67)

> Insecurity over the economic future. Worry about what is going to happen with the second spike in Coronavirus. Fear over the effect that it will have on my family. (UK31M48)

> Keeping up with the rules as they change every minute just keep watching the news for new ones and try to remember them. (UK90F26)

Theme 1b: Threat

Kelly (1955) regarded threat as awareness of an imminent comprehensive change to core structures, those that are central to one's identity. This may involve threat of death or of serious illness, as expressed by one of the participants:

> I am facing problems with corona, it's not only lockdown but my problem if they close hospital is big problem for me. For me pandemic is serious. I am scared my sickness it's very important I go to hospital. (UK82M52)

The threat may also concern illness of significant others, e.g.:

> Worrying about older family members catching covid19 and about their welfare in general. (UK20F34)

Theme 1c: Loss of role

One aspect of loss of role for Kelly (1955) was *guilt,* the 'perception of one's apparent dislodgement from his core role structure' (p. 502), one's characteristic view of oneself. Participants' descriptions of this experience included:

> Due to restrictions on mixing households, I'm not seeing my family currently. This means not providing childcare for grandchild or visiting elderly parents. Childcare instead has been provided elsewhere and that undermines our relationship - not currently dealing with this… I'm shopping online and providing phone support to elderly parents which is less than ideal. (UK79F42)

> I have lost two friends in the last three months - not Covid related - but I was not able to visit them before they died, which was very distressing. (UK55F68)

Theme 1d: Sadness

Sadness was defined by McCoy (1977, p. 112) from a personal construct theory perspective as 'an awareness of invalidation of implications of a portion or all of the core structure.' This may result from a loss in which some elements of the person's world (for example, significant others who have been sources of validation) are 'no longer… within the range of convenience of some constructs.' As described by one participant:

> My main difficulty is dealing with my father's death 3 months ago. I am trying to continue with life but some days this is hard. (UK50M37)

Theme 1e: Contempt

Another emotion defined by McCoy (1977) was contempt, which she viewed as 'awareness that the core role of another is comprehensively different from one's own and/or does not meet the norms of social expectation' (p. 121). Contempt was apparent in participants' descriptions both of people in general and of the government, e.g.:

> The pandemic has taught me that quite a few of the British public lack basic intelligence and are totally irresponsible by flouting the COVID 19 rules. An extreme amount of arrogance is obvious not helped by the flimsy approach by this government (UK47M42)

> I have learned that people are stupid and selfish and to be more prepared as this will happen again and again. (UK67M55)

> We learned that there are still loads of many selfish people in the UK for not doing their part to fight this pandemic, with having riots, protests, illegal parties, it's extremely irresponsible thus causing a possible 2nd wave, then these idiots will start to blame our government. I was told many took the advantage of the furlough and having a great time, is this necessary for these people? I am extremely disappointed with these idiots, while they were having a great time, but we suffered during the last 6 months. (UK103M46)

> Annoyed with the government response and how corrupt it is. (UK35M58)

> Our stupid government never cared about keeping people alive. Boris Johnson[2] literally spread it himself. (UK104F30)

Theme 1f: Stress

Kelly (1955) viewed stress as the awareness of potential threat. For some participants, it was expressed in terms of being overwhelmed by an accumulation of pressure, e.g.:

> Mental health and financial issues. It is unbelievably stressful. I don't know how on earth we are meant to survive this. (UK104F30)

Overarching Theme 2: Strategies

This theme concerns the strategies used to deal with transitions in construing, such as to avoid or minimize invalidation.

Theme 2a: Constriction

One of the strategies that Kelly (1955) indicated a person may use to deal with 'incompatibility of … construction systems' is constriction, in which the person draws in the outer boundaries of their world in order to exclude events that are potentially invalidating. Lockdown measures may be regarded as an enforced constriction (Winter & Reed, 2020), but were welcomed by some participants, e.g.:

> Although lockdown measure and restrictions are a little annoying I understand their importance.I and everyone can surely see the 2nd. wave of COVID is now happening…we cannot allow to have the number of deaths we had to happen again so these restrictions are something we all have to get on with…lives before economy. (UK64M50)

> You have to keep distance. (UK77M43)

Theme 2b: Hostility

The individual who is faced with invalidation may engage in hostility in Kelly's (1955, p. 510) sense of 'the continued effort to extort validational evidence in favor of a type of social prediction which has already proved itself a failure.' Extortion of evidence may be accompanied by reinterpretation or discounting of contrary evidence, as was evident in the accounts of some participants, e.g.:

> I am most looking forward to this time next year when everyone finally realises that acting out of fear is pathetic and causes more problems than it solves. People will be scratching their heads saying "hmmm, last year we saw a significant decline in deaths related to pneumonia, heart disease, lung disease and so on and so on, and all these deaths we've attributed to a flu were by and large going to happen anyway … it looks like we've took on a decade's worth of debt and caused a mental health crisis, loneliness epidemic, stifled the education of a whole generation of kids, and earned ourselves a nice little recession for no good reason." There's no good reason to look forward to this besides bitter, selfish spite. But here I am. (UK78M26)

> dealing with the way idiots are responding to corona in particular the left wing anti-Brexit[3] woke arrogant media. I find just switching them off is the best way forward (UK45M45)

> to not listen to government bollox (sic) and never listen to a politician until the treason act is reinstated. (UK23M30)

Theme 2c: Individual coping strategies

Several participants described the strategies that they had employed to cope with aspects of the pandemic, e.g.:

> lack of social interaction, dealing with it by communicating with people online and spending more time doing the things I love. (UK101F19)

> I have issues with anxieties. I am dealing with it by improving my diet, going outside more often, and self-help books. (UK95M33)

> Addiction to gambling. Dealing with it by self excluding and giving my phone to my wife. Lack of fitness. Dealing by setting goals and sticking to them. (UK94M32)

> I am 71 so needed to self isolate. Luckily I do not mind my own company. As long as I have the radio on. I hate silence in the house. I have endless curiosity about things. I read the newspapers cover to cover. I garden. I do housework now and then. I do any surveys that turn up. I have become very resourceful at shopping online, trying new stores. (UK31F71)

Overarching Theme 3: Reconstruction

Some participants described how the pandemic had led them to reconstrue their approaches to life.

Theme 3a: Revision of superordinate constructs

This appeared to involve, for some participants, a fundamental revision of their philosophies of life and of their priorities, e.g.:

> Family and friends and the simple things in life are more important than money. (UK2F67)

this should have taught us all that illness doesn't discriminate and nor should we; we should lift up the sicker/weaker/less advantaged amongst us not put people down and give thanks and fair pay to everyone who works hard. (UK79F42)

Don't take life for granted and life is too short. (UK90F26)

It has taught me that being a bit of a loner is not a bad thing. I suppose it means you are happy in your own skin, which helps. The people who find it difficult must be suffering, but perhaps it will make them grow. (UK31F71)

That nothing is permanent. That's why I live every day as it is the last so as I can avoid having the feeling of 'what if.' (UK108F35)

It taught me that it's important to remain true to myself and to make decisions based on my own personal understanding and experience not to rely on others who don't always have our best interest at heart. (UK30F33)

Theme 3b: Revision of subordinate constructs

For other participants, reconstruction concerned more concrete aspects of everyday living, e.g.:

The pandemic has taught me that I relied too much on convenience food. (UK6F57)

Use the open air. (UK91M39)

It brought more of my attention to the hobbies that I have abandoned. (UK101F19)

Theme 3c: No reconstruction

For some participants, the pandemic did not elicit any reconstruing, e.g.:

Nothing that I didn't know before. (UK11M39)

Nothing. If a disease is going to get you it will get you. (UK84M54)

nothing. I already knew…though I think it's taught others what a cretin Boris is, who before thought he was "charming". (UK9M466)

Overarching Theme 4: Anticipations

Most participants described what they were anticipating after the pandemic.

Theme 4a: Recovery of certainty and structure

Some responses concerned looking forward to a life which, by being more certain and structured, was less anxiety-provoking, e.g.:

I'm looking forward to not being scared of anyone. I'm looking forward to going to my favourite fish and chip shop (I know that makes me sound like a stereotype) and not have to have in the back of my head what if he's got it what if she's got it. (UK65N39)

Being able to go back to normality, travelling without restrictions, going to cinemas for entertainment and being able to go shopping without the need to wear a facial mask. (UK106F27)

Having some certainty when making plans. (UK70M67)

Theme 4b: Constriction

Some participants' anticipations appeared to involve attempting to achieve even greater certainty by constricting their worlds, excluding possible sources of invalidation, e.g.:

> Get rid of all the useless, non-contributing selfish idiots in our country. Then we are able to progress and move forward. (UK103M46)

> Brexit and stopping all migration and returning all refugees and every migrant who has moved here since 1947 they have no clean ways they are disgusting in their habits… return of football and end of blm[4] and all other racist gangs of criminals a return to the real England (UK45M45)

Theme 4c: Dilation

For Kelly (1955, p. 476), the converse strategy to constriction was dilation, which 'occurs when a person broadens his perceptual field in order to reorganize it on a more comprehensive level.' As described by one participant:

> I'm really looking forward to just being able to freely move around without wearing masks or worrying about catching COVID. I'm looking forward to having friends over and eating food with them and being able to hug people on seeing them! God, I miss hugs. (UK27F28)

Theme 4d: Aggression

Other participants anticipated aggressiveness, in Kelly's (1955) sense of an active elaboration of their perceptual fields. They were looking forward not just to reengaging in activities that they had had to forego during the pandemic, but to embarking on new adventures, e.g.:

> I am most looking forward to travelling obviously. I want to finish off all the countries in Europe first including Bosnia, Moldova and Liechtenstein, before finishing off Asia. (UK89F20)

> I am looking forward to visiting my friends and start dating. (UK95M33)

> Getting rid of this government so we can restore our freedoms. (UK97F41)

Theme 4e: No anticipation

Some participants were unable to anticipate a life beyond the pandemic, e.g.:

> I do not believe the pandemic will ever be over so this is an otiose question! (UK54M56)

> Nothing at all. It won't be 'over', ever. (UK81M44)

Discussion

The study replicated findings of our previous research with residents of the USA and Italy (Cipolletta et al., 2022; Winter et al., 2023) in that UK residents' worst experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic could be viewed from a personal construct theory perspective in terms of transitions of anxiety, threat, guilt, sadness, contempt, and

stress. Asking participants additional questions about how they responded to these experiences provided indications of the strategies that they used, their reconstruing, and their anticipations of the future. Their strategies involved constriction of their worlds, in compliance with lockdown regulations; hostility expressed in discounting evidence that invalidated their constructions or extorting evidence consistent with these; and a range of individual coping mechanisms. Several participants showed evidence of reconstruing, both at the superordinate level of their fundamental philosophies of life and at the subordinate level of aspects of everyday living. Finally, most participants anticipated a future which involved a recovery of certainty and structure or, going beyond this, a dilation of their worlds or an aggressive elaboration of these, although some participants anticipated increasing certainty by constriction of their worlds or could not anticipate a post-pandemic world.

As we have described elsewhere (Winter et al., 2023), the conceptualization of experiences during the pandemic in terms of transitions of construing provides implications for the targeting of interventions at particular transitions at both the individual and the relational level. A major focus of such interventions may be meaning-making processes and facilitation of a sense of coherence (Castiglioni & Gaj, 2020). As we have also indicated previously, a further advantage of a personal construct analysis is that it suggests implications at a macro-social level, involving interventions in institutions facing challenges due to the pandemic and recommendations concerning government responses that are most likely to facilitate compliance with measures aimed to reduce the spread of the pandemic.

A major strength of the study was that it enabled exploration of the personal meaning of the COVID-19 pandemic by analysis of the accounts of residents of one of the countries that was most badly affected by the pandemic. Although these accounts were included in a previous investigation, informed by narrative theory and a meaning-making perspective, of the 'COVID stories' of residents of 15 countries, which indicated that for participants 'What I thought was so important isn't really that important' (Todorova et al., 2021), the present study involved a more intensive exploration of the experiences of the UK participants from the viewpoint of personal construct theory. A limitation of the study is the possible lack of representativeness of respondents to an on-line survey, who were predominantly female and Caucasian, and another is the brevity of many of their answers.

In describing the choices that people make in trying to enhance their anticipations, Kelly (1955) differentiated between those that involve 'security or adventure' (p. 64) or, in other words, 'constricted certainty or…broadened understanding' (p. 65). Similar to the trajectories of 'stillness' and 'dynamism' identified by Tomaino et al. (2021) in people's experiences of the pandemic, these alternative approaches were reflected in two major contrasting responses to the pandemic and anticipations of the future that were evident in participants in our study. One pattern involved failure to reconstrue, with a hostile clinging to existing constructions and a view of a future which was either fatalistic and dominated by COVID or which involved constriction to a world from which individuals who espoused alternative constructions were excluded. This was exemplified by the participant whose hostile strategy involved 'switching off' the 'left wing anti Brexit woke arrogant media' and whose anticipation of the future included Brexit, stopping migration, expelling refugees and migrants, ending the *Black Lives Matter* movement, and 'a return to the real England.' Another participant, whose espousal of conspiracy theories was reflected in referring to the pandemic as the 'plandemic,' anticipated a future in which

they would essentially adopt a hostile approach of 'not having to read about all the lies in the media and listening to corrupt politicians.'

A polar opposite pattern was observed in those participants who showed revision of superordinate constructs, setting the stage for dilation and aggressive exploration of a post-pandemic world. For example, the participant who learnt that 'it's important to remain true to myself and to make decisions based on my own personal understanding and experience' anticipated 'Travelling. I'm a nomad at heart and dislike being forced to remain in this cold, dead country.' Another participant, for whom the pandemic 'reinforced how fortunate I feel to be in a strong stable marriage that provides love and companionship even in tricky circumstances,' was looking forward to 'lasting change in society whereby we are all brought closer to face challenges and make fundamental changes to improve equal opportunities.' For a further participant, whose learning that 'nothing is permanent' involved living 'everyday as if it is the last,' anticipated a time when there is 'no more stigma against races who are suspected of carrying the virus.' These participants' accounts are consistent with reports of the pandemic having been a stimulus for personal growth in some individuals (Castiglioni et al., 2023).

For Kelly (1969, p. 288), 'the experience of tragedy, and not the sense of certainty, is the basis of all hope, and is indeed the most essential step in the bold pursuit of better things.' While the COVID-19 pandemic certainly had devastating effects on many individuals, including some participants in the present study, those who were able to reconstrue, in contrast to those who clung to, or attempted to increase, some previous certainty, envisaged a future which carried the prospect of bold pursuit of better things not only for themselves but for society as a whole.

Notes

1. Quotes from participants are identified by participant code number, gender, and age. Minor grammatical and typographical errors in participants'responses have been corrected.
2. The UK Prime Minister at the time.
3. Brexit is the departure of the UK from the European Union.
4. The Black Lives Matter movement.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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