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BOOK CHAPTER<sup>1</sup>

Book: “*Trends in Sociology, Psychology and Anthropology (Volume – 3)*”

**Taming Black Swans: Societal Psychology of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Other  
Future Global Crises**

Short Title: Taming Black Swans

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**Abstract**

Black swans are a metaphor for low-probability and high-impact events that are unpredictable, and tend to shape history. The 21<sup>st</sup> century extraordinary societal situations, such as the major collective upheaval that represents the global COVID-19 pandemic, irrevocably shatter the common people's universe. These global crises, characterized primarily by unprecedented complexity, pervasive layers of uncertainty, and numerous misleading patterns elicit temporal breakdown in the course of individuals' existences. The individuals' existences so shattered lead to various cognitive, emotional, and behavioural shutdowns and disturbances. Therefore, human beings and whole societies tend to deploy various adaptive coping mechanisms to overcome these challenging circumstances. Thus, the loss of usual stable benchmarks and related transcendental damages caused to people and societies should be analysed by relevant and holistic multilevel approach proposed by societal social psychology. Indeed, the current chapter highlights the importance of a multilevel analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic and other global crises, situated at four different levels, ranging from intra-personal to ideological levels of analysis. The primary importance of this multilevel approach is to better seize "domino effects" of cascading consequences of global crises that allow to develop related strategic multilevel crisis management which is crucial for more resilient human beings and societies facing future uncertain times.

**Keywords:** Black swans, global crises, COVID-19, societal psychology, multilevel approach, crisis management

## **Introduction**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century extraordinary societal situations, such as global health pandemics, unpredictable terrorist attacks, various natural and man-made disasters, wars and geopolitical collapses are inherent to the human condition. The current post-COVID-19 era highlights the need for relevant multilevel crisis management that would allow to tame important spillover effects and consequences of the invisible and intangible virus SARS-CoV-2 that overwhelmed the world in 2020. Therefore, the current chapter aims to highlight the particular relevance of societal psychology for an analysis of complex societal situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and other future global crises. In particular, usual strategic crisis management encounters numerous misleading patterns, pervasive layers of uncertainty and systemic failures which constitute a fertile ground for crisis. Indeed, the especially floating landscape of the COVID-19 pandemic that occurred in a complex and globalized world requires an innovative crisis management approach, based on strategic thinking and capitalization of acquired experiences where a multilevel analysis of the crisis situation appears indispensable.

These extraordinary situations, that constitute major collective upheavals for people and societies, share numerous common characteristics despite their apparent heterogeneity (Pelletier, 2021a). These extraordinary situations are often labeled “Black swans” (Taleb, 2007), as a metaphor to extremely rare outlier situations characterized by their low-probability of occurrence and high-impact on people and societies. Black swan events tend to bound humans’ imagination and representations that are grounded in a surprising event that has never happened before (Paté-Cornell, 2012). Indeed, whatever the origin and consequences, these extreme situations commonly elicit a temporal breakdown in the course of individuals’ lives and existences that lead to important upheavals of the usual understanding of the world, and related cognitive, emotional and behavioural shutdowns and disturbances (Pelletier, 2016).

Thus, human beings and societies tend to deploy various adaptive coping mechanisms that allow them to deal and to overcome these challenging and destabilizing circumstances.

### **From Cosmos to Chaos: Shattered Lives in the Midst of a Crisis**

Major crises situations are often similar to a chaos that might be described as a "cosmology episode that occurs when people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system." (Weick, 1993, p. 633). The "cosmology episode", that conceptually originates in philosophy, refers, similarly to metaphysics, to the investigation of the origin of the world and other space-time phenomena. Indeed, the scientific field of cosmology studies the Universe as a whole and such a holistic approach focuses on various ways to deal with uncertainty and unpredictability of random events (Coles, 2006). In Weick's sense "cosmology episode" designates a deep and unprecedented upheaval of individuals' universe and disruption of their system of representations of reality. This important erosion of meaning that shattered humans' existences is commonly followed by the reconstruction of situational and global meaning that allow people to cope and to overcome the stressful and implausible collective trauma (Park, 2016). Meaning-making processes often lead to various life changes and reshuffling of individuals' existence, such as reconsidering spiritual beliefs and life goals, strengthening interpersonal relationships, reaching overall posttraumatic growth, and increased psychological resilience (Park, 2010, 2016).

In particular, the COVID-19 Coronavirus pandemic, that overwhelmed the world in 2020, is an emblematic example of large-scale global crisis of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The global COVID-19 crisis has been elicited by the invisible and intangible SARS-CoV-2 virus that measures only around 120 nm in diameter. To this date, the unprecedented worldwide pandemic has caused 768 983 095 confirmed cases of COVID-19 disease and 6 953 743 deaths (World Health Organization, August 2, 2023). Indeed, the International Health Regulations Emergency Committee of the World Health Organization has declared on January 30, 2020 that the new

type of Coronavirus elicits COVID-19 disease outbreak in China, primarily due to the high patterns of human-to-human transmission. Afterwards, the COVID-19 spread has become an international public health emergency due to the globalized and fast disease transmission that irrevocably requires not only international solidarity and cooperation but also the pace of adoption of global and multilevel crisis management (World Health Organization, January 30, 2020). Thus, during the COVID-19 crisis numerous international organizations highlighted the primordial need for respect of human rights in shaping the pandemic response to the global health threat and the recovery from emergency (e.g., United Nations, April 2020).

The global COVID-19 pandemic outbreak that has thrown the world's ecosystem into disarray has shattered numerous aspects of people's daily lives worldwide during a prolonged period and it has caused important transcendental damages to people and societies (Pelletier, 2022). The COVID-19 large-scale threat irrevocably creates pervasive tensions that might result in various reverberations of the crisis and unprecedented cascading impacts in different sectors, such as knock-on economic risks, cybersecurity failures, livelihood crisis, erosion of social cohesion, and other globalized network effects (The Global Risks Report, 2022). Therefore, there is an importance of scientific investigations from different disciplines that allow to better seize various aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences in a holistic manner. In particular, social psychology as a research field aims to investigate and to understand how thoughts, emotions, and behavior of individuals are influenced by real or imagined presence of others (Allport, 1954). Although, a branch of social psychology, named "societal psychology", that offers alternative viewpoints to the mainstream social psychology, focuses on the influence of all-embracing environment on individuals' thoughts, emotions, and behavior (Himmelweit & Gaskell, 1990). Thus, the societal social psychology approach allows to investigate and to offer holistic and authentic analysis of various multilevel consequences and spillover effects of extreme situations in general, and the global COVID-19 pandemic in particular.

## **Societal Psychology: A Multilevel Approach to the COVID-19 Crisis**

The strength of societal psychology remains in the ability to describe, analyze, and predict various individual and collective processes that precede and follow different extreme situations. Furthermore, societal social psychology approach aims to deploy multiple methodologies that range from complex quantitative methods to innovative qualitative methods. The combination of these different methods allows to develop relevant mixed methods research designs in order to strive for holistic and real-world based understandings of current and future extreme situations and their irrevocable “domino effects” of consequences. Moreover, the complexity of real-world crisis situations requires a multilevel analysis, such as the four levels of explanation in social psychology, originally formulated by Doise (1986), and more recently completed by (Doise & Valentim, 2015). This original conceptual framework aims to provide an integration of different levels of explanation of social and societal phenomena that are situated at four, often overlapping, levels of analysis: the intra-personal, the inter-personal, the positional and the ideological levels (see Fig. 1). Such a multilevel analysis applied to crisis situations might offer holistic and innovative perspective on the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, and also other future global crises.

### **1) Intra-personal Level of Analysis**

Firstly, the intra-personal level of analysis highlights the fact that the aversive invisibility and intangibility of SARS-CoV-2 virus makes from the COVID-19 a large-scale unpredictable health threat of extreme consequences on individuals. In particular, the invisible nature of the virus heightens individuals’ primordial need for meaning of the unknown virus and the unprecedented pandemic situation (de Jong, Ziegler, & Schippers, 2020). The construction of meaning is underpinned by complex processes of the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Therefore, individuals are forced to reconstruct the shattered reality and the meaning of this new reality on the

basis of their pre-existing knowledge, representations, projections and imaginations, their own living experience, and also on the basis of similar events in history. Thus, SARS-CoV-2 virus represents for laypeople primarily dangerous and worldwide killing virus that is highly contagious and spreads easily by human-to-human transmission. The new virus arouses commonly the duality of life and death in people (McLaughlin, Pelletier, & Boespflug, 2022), and this fear of death that shatters usual stable benchmarks drives individuals' attitudes and behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pyszczynski, Lockett, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2020). Moreover, the feeling of anxiety and uncertainty, and other aversive psychological reactions, such as an overall state of ill-being, sadness, stress, depression, and anger has been reported by the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown (Pelletier et al., 2022). Furthermore, a synthesis of research conducted worldwide on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated that with the COVID-19 pandemic there is a global increase in depressive symptoms from 4.4% to around 30%, and an increase of anxiety symptoms from 3.6% to around 30 % in the general population (Association for Psychological Science, January 21, 2022). Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic obliged individuals to deal with the unprecedented collective trauma and to strengthen and develop their own coping skills in the context of global adversity (Silver, 2020).

### **2) Inter-personal Level of Analysis**

Secondly, the inter-personal level of analysis highlights the relational consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, individuals have suffered from subjective feeling of loneliness and social isolation, primarily due to extensive lockdowns, that have global detrimental consequences on individuals' mental health (Okruszek, Aniszewska-Stańczuk, Piejka, Wiśniewska, & Żurek, 2020). Many people expressed their worries



and their willingness to protect their loved ones by social distancing and by rigorous application of the COVID-19 sanitary policies that have impede their usual social life and daily activities (Pelletier et al., 2022). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to stigmatization and prejudice associated with the COVID-19 disease and its origin in China (Roberto, Johnson, & Rauhaus, 2020). Additionally, the previously mentioned individuals' aversive emotional reactions contribute to erode people's cognitive resources which results in the inhibition of executive functions (Tiedens & Linton, 2001). Executive functions refer to high-level cognitive processes, such as task-planning abilities, mental flexibility, decision-making processes and lower cognitive and behavioral inhibition. These impairments in executive functions can lead to aggressive behavior and contribute to an increase in verbal and physical interpersonal violence during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (United Nations, June 24, 2020).

### **3) Positional Level of Analysis**

Thirdly, the positional level of analysis focuses on various social positions occupied by individuals in a given societal context. Specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic era has led to important changes and challenges with regard to work and schooling. In particular, work isolation and work loss have elicited important disruptions and uncertainty that impacted individuals' lives and the overall functioning of organizations and institutions (Shoss, 2021). Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic as a part of "social distancing" sanitary policies, many employees were obliged to work from home where family-work conflict and social isolation have led to increased stress and decreased productivity and work engagement (Galanti, Guidetti, Mazzei, Zappalà, & Toscano, 2021). These challenging and involuntary remote working conditions obliged many people to develop new and effective adaptation strategies and communication

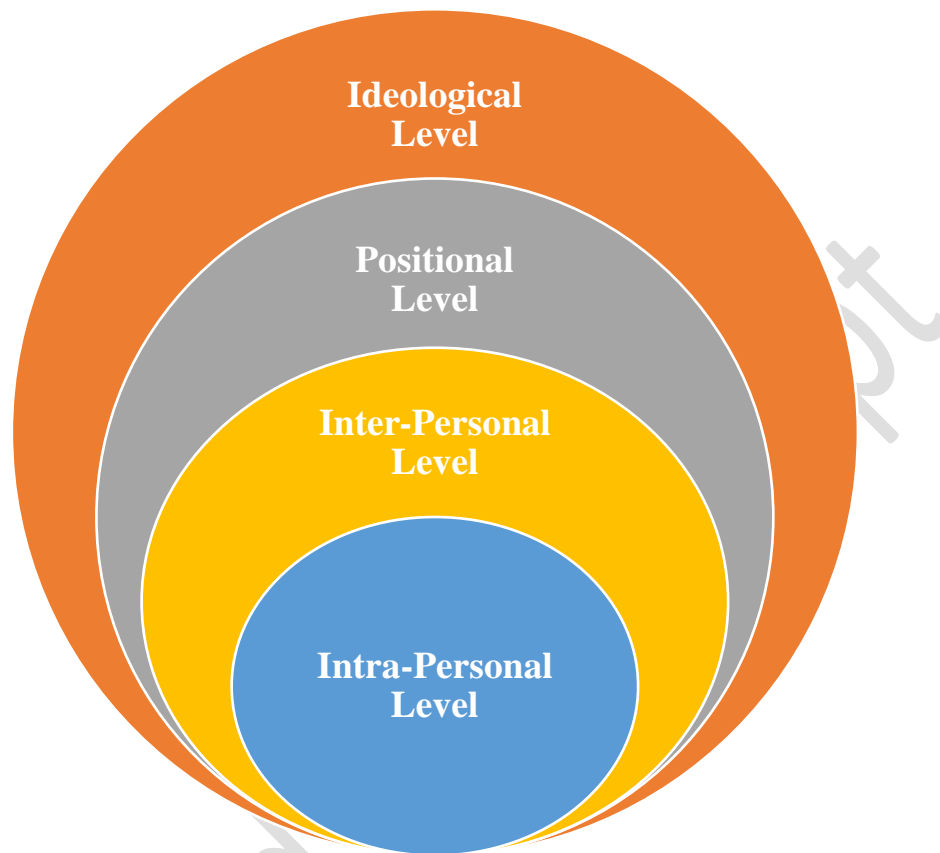
skills that constitute important resources in remote working conditions (Wang, Liu, Qian, & Parker, 2021). Additionally, the closure of schools has resulted in psychological impacts on children and adolescents that were obliged to deal with aversive uncertainty for the next future (Colao et al., 2020) and in exacerbating various existing inequalities (Doyle, 2020). Thus, future crisis management should irrevocably focus on the positional level of analysis during major global crises and bear relevant considerations of people's feelings of psychological distress due to the aversive crisis circumstances such as job insecurity, uncertainty, and long-term isolation (Giorgi et al., 2020). In particular, specific crisis interventions and training programs should be tailored to improve individuals' stress management, work-life balance, crisis-related coping strategies, and overall psychological resilience in crisis situations.

#### **4) Ideological Level of Analysis**

The fourth level concerns the ideological level of analysis, in particular various social representations, belief systems, and ideologies that govern society. During the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, social construction processes have had primordial role in constructing subjective representations of the invisible SARS-CoV-2 virus of about 120 nm in diameter that drive people's inner states and health-related behavior (Ferrandon et al., 2021; Pelletier et al., 2022). Although, the spread of SARS-CoV-2 virus has occurred in parallel with the spread of COVID-19 "infodemic" due to various mass media information, misleading fake news, and conspiracy theories diffused via traditional and social media that had important impacts on people's emotions, well-being, and overall psychological resilience during the crisis (Gao et al., 2020; Giri & Maurya, 2021). Indeed, mass media have a central role in the social construction of reality during collective upheavals, such as the COVID-19 pandemic because they are

primary vectors of various information and ideologies, visual symbols, common beliefs, and codes of conduct (Pelletier et al., 2023). Moreover, people's hesitant attitude towards the new COVID-19 vaccine is multifactorial because it is underpinned by various ideological factors, such as false information, lack of sufficient and transparent information, lack of trust in government and public health policies, and also religious ideologies influencing issues of confidence (e.g., Kanozia & Arya, 2021; Machingaidze & Wiysonge, 2021; Troiano & Nardi, 2021). Additionally, research demonstrated that ideological beliefs, such as religion (Hart & Koenig, 2020), and general belief in a just world (Wang et al., 2021) have protective role for people's mental health during the COVID-19 crisis, and these ideological beliefs tend to reduce negative emotions and increase positive emotions. Therefore, ideology, as a set of beliefs, governs political, economic and human reactions during times of pervasive uncertainty and global complexity. Therefore, specific crisis interventions and resilience trainings should highlight the fact that mass media and the use of new technologies represent a double-edged sword. Indeed, the widespread of various information, misleading fake news, and conspiracy theories considerably undermine individuals' trust, application of public health policies, and crisis management as a whole.

**Fig. 1:** The Original Multilevel Analysis Model Applied to Crisis Situations (Adapted from Doise, 1986)



As outlined above, the current chapter highlights the relevance of societal psychology approach for a multilevel analysis of large-scale global crises, on the basis of example of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, during crisis situations, the common universe tends to transform into temporary collapse and chaos that challenge directly the resilience of human beings and societies. During these extreme circumstances, individuals' social representations tend to shape crisis management and crisis-related behavior (cf., Lopes & Gaskell, 2015; Rizzoli, Romaioli, & Contarello, 2017). The recent crisis of COVID-19 has highlighted various vulnerabilities and severe fragilities of the globalized world that tend to amplify the “domino effects” of consequences of major global crises. According to the latest Human Development Report 2021/2022 (United Nations Development Programme, 2022), we currently live in the era of

worry and emerging new kinds of uncertainty that are characterized by various volatile and interacting strands. Thus, navigating these new kinds of uncertainty tends to undermine human development, exacerbate different tensions, but it also creates new challenges and opportunities.

### **Concluding Remarks on the COVID-19 Crisis Management and Recovery**

The overall aim of crisis management remains to allow people and societies to recover from crisis situations by triggering positive adjustments to the new normality. The resilience of people and societies allows an effective adaptability and the ability to deal with various crisis circumstances, and important fears and anxieties that petrify the population. In particular, the global COVID-19 pandemic, characterized by unprecedented complexity, pervasive layers of uncertainty, and numerous misleading patterns, represents important challenges for crisis management effectiveness. Under such conditions, decision makers have to tame pervasive uncertainty and deal with novelty and complexity of the crisis situation to achieve their objectives and navigate in the “fog of the war-like times”. Also, decision makers and scholar should bear a particular attention on specificities of individual and social construction processes that allow to fill the void caused by the unknown COVID-19 pandemic and construct representations of every unprecedented crisis situation (Pelletier et al., 2022). Therefore, future crisis management should irrevocably deploy strategic innovation and multilevel approach that allow for capitalization of acquired experiences, leading to more sustainable strategic crisis management of future global crises (Pelletier, 2021b).

Although, an effective future crisis management requires the development of human capital that catalyzes an efficient implementing of strategic thinking, strategic planning and also strategic innovation to reach suitable objectives (AlQershi, 2021). As a matter of fact, the development of human capital that allows people and societies to strive toward global cooperation and human development remains crucial for more effective crisis management of future global crises and more resilient human beings and societies facing future uncertain times.

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