CONVERGE COVID-19 Working Groups for Public Health and Social Sciences Research

Research Agenda-Setting Paper

This paper was written to help advance convergence-oriented research in the hazards and disaster field. It highlights areas where additional research could contribute new knowledge to the response to and recovery from the pandemic and other disasters yet to come. Questions about the research topics and ethical and methodological issues highlighted here should be directed to the authors who contributed to this paper.

Working Group Name:

Impacts of Narratives and Framing in Response to COVID-19

Working Group Description:

The response to COVID-19 is often framed as a war: the virus is an enemy; medical workers are described as being on the frontlines; the effort to treat patients is a battle. As Cynthia Enloe has said, "Waging a war" is the most deceptively alluring analogy for mobilizing private and public resources to meet a present danger. We should, however, resist that allure. We have learned…that in myriad countries and across generations war waging has fueled sexism, racism, homophobia, autocracy, secrecy, and xenophobia. None of those will prevent a pandemic. They will never promote trustworthy science and functional medical infrastructures. They will not protect the most vulnerable among us. They will not keep us all safe. They most certainly will not lay the groundwork for post-pandemic democracy" (Enloe 2020).

Looking at this issue through the lens of securitization theory and exploring the impact of metaphors, this Working Group examines the implications of framing pandemic response in martial terms, using historical and contemporary examples from around the world—both positive (e.g., unity of effort, national mobilization of resources) and negative (e.g., militarization of response and public life, abrogation of civil liberties in deference to 'national security', a 'sacrifice calculus' whereby lives are commodified, etc.).

The ultimate aim of the Working Group effort is to raise awareness amongst the public and policy communities so that the full scope and implications of war narratives and framing in the response to COVID-19 can be appreciated. The work is multidisciplinary, involving scholars from International Relations, History, Law, Anthropology, and Human Geography. The New York University (NYU) portion is conducted under the aegis of several concurrent programs, including the NYU Critical Disasters Studies Initiative, the NYU Initiative for the Study of Emerging Threats (ISET), and the NYU Program on Armed Forces and Society.

Priority Research Topics and Specific Research Questions:

This project revolves around three main research topics and is meant to examine both American and international examples, contemporary and historical.

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Priority Research Topics	Potential Research Questions
1. The Impact of Framing Pandemic Responses and Public Action	• Research Question 1: How is the response to COVID-19 being framed? • Research Question 2: What are the drivers of framing pandemic responses? • Research Question 3: What are the implications of framing pandemics responses? • Research Question 4: Does framing the response to COVID-19 as a war have an impact on people's willingness to support it?
2. Involvement of Military/Security Resources in Pandemic Responses	• Research Question 1: What are the drivers of involving military/security resources in pandemic responses? • Research Question 2: What are the implications of involving military/security resources in pandemic responses?
3. Gender/Race/Class Impacts of Framing and Involvement of Military/Security Resources in Pandemic Responses	• Research Question 1: Does framing of pandemic responses have particular impacts for gender/race/class groups? • Research Question 2: Does involving military/security resources in pandemic responses have particular impacts for gender/race/class groups?

Ethical / Methodological Considerations:

Caution is called for whenever social science research is conducted on human subjects. Clearly, this project will involve interacting (via surveys and interviews) with people impacted by COVID-19, either as infected people, relatives of infected people, or responders (e.g., health care and other essential workers). Compassion, sensitivity, and other appropriate ethical safeguards (not limited to those imposed via IRB processes) are required.

Other Frameworks, Considerations for Collaboration, and/or Resources:

At War with an Invisible Enemy: Securitizing the COVID-19 Response (recorded public presentation).

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