

Neoliberalism and Pandemics: A Critical Cultural Psychological Perspective

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Abstract

In this theoretical article, we analyze from a critical cultural psychological perspective why neoliberalism is ill-suited to handle crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, we describe a process whereby neoliberalism motivates individualism, which in turn contributes to precarity, inequality, depoliticization, and penalty, each of which have exacerbated the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic. We conclude with a critique of how hegemonic practices in the field of psychological science are implicated in this process of neoliberal individualism and consider how the field might resist neoliberalism.

Keywords

neoliberalism, pandemics, COVID-19, critical cultural psychology

The choice is between a substantial, if incalculable, number of human lives and the American (i.e. Capitalist) “way of life.” In this choice, human lives lose. But is this the only choice?
—Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World*

Neoliberalism intensified the COVID-19 pandemic. This is particularly clear in the United States (US), our place of focus, where over one million people died (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024). In this paper, we integrate critical philosophy with empirical social scientific research to examine from a critical cultural psychological perspective how neoliberalism exacerbated the pandemic. Our argument is as follows. Neoliberalism, entailing structural and sociopsychological components, encourages individualistic attitudes, behaviors, and ways of being. This individualism, in turn, worsens inequality and precarity and, crucially, discourages political solutions to these problems, favoring instead penal ones. Such neoliberal individualism is inherently at odds with the collectivism necessary to contain the pandemic, exacerbating its severity and leaving neoliberal societies, and indeed the entire world, vulnerable to ongoing and future pandemics.

To contextualize this argument, we explain our theoretical approach before discussing the structure and psychology of neoliberalism. We then review how neoliberalism encourages, motivates, and produces individualism and, as a result, how neoliberal individualism produces inequality, precarity, depoliticization, and penalty, and how these have hindered pandemic responses. We finish by critiquing how psychological science has contributed to neoliberal pandemic responses and offering suggestions for how psychologists can resist neoliberalism, both within the field and in broader society.



Critical Cultural Psychology

We approach neoliberalism and its undermining of pandemic responses from the perspective of critical cultural psychology. To explain this perspective, let us begin with cultural psychology, which views cultures as patterns of ideas made manifest in attitudes, behaviors, products and cultural artifacts, institutions, and discourses in the material worlds that people inhabit (Adams & Markus, 2001). These ideas (psyche) and manifestations (structure) are dialectically linked in a relationship of mutual constitution, being that structure shapes psyche and vice versa.

Cultural psychology often attempts to normalize attitudes or behaviors viewed as abnormal, irrational, or unhealthy by outsiders by understanding their function within their cultural context. While this is vital for research that does not stigmatize those harmed by capitalism and colonialism, we do not approach neoliberalism from this relativistic perspective, but from a critical one. As will become clear in our following discussions, we view neoliberalism as immensely detrimental to people's health and well-being, particularly for those marginalized along racial and class lines. By approaching neoliberalism from the perspective of critical cultural psychology, our goal is not to normalize it but critique it. It is our hope that in doing so we can contribute to the growing resistance in academia and beyond to neoliberalism and its prioritization of wealth accumulation at the expense of human lives.

Neoliberalism

In its most popular conceptualization, neoliberalism is a political theory according to which governments' sole responsibility is the creation and maintenance of free markets (Harvey, 2007). Neoliberalism emerged in the 1930s as an attempt to revitalize classical liberalism amidst its widespread perceived failure following the Great Depression. This goal was pursued with increased vigor following World War II, though it was not until the 1970s that it attained global influence (e.g., Slobodian, 2018). Today, neoliberalism is a predominant political philosophy, and through its instantiation in policy and practice has evolved from a political philosophy to a culture.

From the perspective of cultural psychology, neoliberalism is a pattern of ideas (e.g., free markets are the most efficient way to distribute goods and services) with dialectically related structural and sociopsychological manifestations. Such a research program was initiated by Adams et al. (2019), who theorized that the structure of neoliberalism has created psychological changes in kind, such that under neoliberalism people have increasingly individualistic attitudes, behaviors, and ideologies—a process that they argue psychological science is deeply implicated in—which in turn bolsters support for neoliberalism. Following these researchers, we contend that neoliberalism has profoundly shaped the US, and, by extension, has shaped psychological experience such that neoliberal cultural patterns are now dominant in US society.

Psychologically, *individualism* is the central aspect of neoliberalism (Adams et al., 2019). Research shows that neoliberal ideology is associated with narcissism and self-interest (Beattie et al., 2019), and that making neoliberalism salient through experimental manipulation decreases interpersonal trust (Zhang & Xin, 2019) and increases feelings of loneliness and anomie (i.e., the perceived lack of a social system; Becker et al., 2021; Hartwich & Becker, 2019). It is perhaps unsurprising then that neoliberal ideology further shapes attitudes toward those experiencing *precarity*. Those endorsing neoliberal ideology are particularly likely to stigmatize charity recipients (Hopper, 2022) and oppose movements for class, race, and gender justice (Girerd et al., 2020; Girerd & Bonnot, 2020). If neoliberals have little sympathy for those experiencing precarity, they have similar views toward *inequality*. Studies have shown in varied ways that neoliberal ideology predicts desire for wealth and status (Wang et al., 2023), as well as preferring hierarchy and inequality and opposing attempts to increase equity (Azevedo et al., 2019; Bettache et al., 2020; Ginn et al., 2022; Goudarzi et al., 2022).

If neoliberalism is associated with a range of detrimental social and psychological outcomes, it might be expected that neoliberalism would garner much political opposition. However, another aspect of the psychology of neoliberalism is *depoliticization*, whereby political problems are understood in terms of the individual. Still, neoliberalism is not opposed to state intervention, so long as that intervention takes place in the penal realm. *Penalty* is thus another psychological aspect of neoliberalism, with research finding that neoliberal ideology, and living in particularly neoliberal

eral contexts marked by inequality and precarization, are associated with support for policing and prisons (Schmitt & Jimenez, forthcoming). These consequences of neoliberal individualism—precarity, inequality, depoliticization, and penalty—will be considered further in terms of how they have shaped pandemic responses. To situate these considerations, it is first necessary to review how neoliberal societies fared during COVID-19.

Neoliberalism and COVID-19

Neoliberal polities have not effectively handled the COVID-19 pandemic: neoliberal economic policies undermined pandemic preparedness, neoliberal ideology guided pandemic responses, and, resultantly, neoliberal polities experienced worse COVID-19 outcomes.

To the first point, neoliberalism was ill-prepared for the pandemic given decades of deregulation, privatization, and defunding of social services. Examining these *systemic weaknesses* of neoliberalism, Mellish and colleagues (2020) argued that inadequate medical and public health infrastructure, a lack of universal healthcare, and decentralized public health authority in neoliberal nations resulted in excessive infections and deaths. Warf (2021) adds that such government abandonment caused citizens to be distrustful of government, resulting in many flouting public health recommendations.

To the second point, neoliberal ideology guided governmental responses to the pandemic¹, a process referred to by Andrew et al. (2020) as the *straitjacket of neoliberalism*. This is seen in the use of markets to produce masks, respirators, and vaccines. Rather than nationalizing vaccine production, for example, it is left to multinational corporations who protect their profits behind intellectual property rights, leaving unvaccinated billions across the globe (Godlee, 2021).

To the third point, empirical analyses have shown that nations and states with particularly neoliberal policies and practices had worse COVID-19 outcomes. Barrera-Algarín et al. (2020) found that nations with less public health spending experienced more COVID-19 cases and deaths. Even within the neoliberal US, Schmitt, Jimenez, et al. (2023) found that relatively more neoliberal states had lower vaccination rates and higher mortality rates. Furthermore, survey data suggest that those endorsing neoliberal ideology, and those living in particularly neoliberal states, reported greater opposition to preventive measures, belief that vaccines are harmful, and belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories. It is with the goal of understanding from a critical cultural psychological perspective why neoliberalism fared so poorly that we now turn to individualism.

Individualism

Individualism is the central component of the psychology of neoliberalism. This is evidenced by its historical development, whereby early neoliberal thinkers emphasized the values of freedom and self-determination from classical liberalism (while devaluing others such as equality), by its policies, which dismantles social institutions, and by its psychology, which seeks a self radically abstracted from context and free to move in and out of places, jobs, relationships, and cultures devoid of obligation to others (Adams et al., 2019; Schmitt, Black, et al., 2023).

These theoretical writings on neoliberalism and individualism have empirical support. Analyzing data from over 160 nations, Goudarzi et al. (2022) found that neoliberal policies at the national level are associated with support for merit-based (rather than need-based) resource distribution at the person level. That is, people living in more neoliberal contexts prefer individual reward to social solidarity. Furthermore, longitudinal analyses of written language have found that individualistic word usage has increased during the neoliberal era (Nafstad et al., 2013) and survey research finds neoliberal ideology to be associated with indicators of individualism—including internal locus of control, agentic values, self-interest, and narcissism (Beattie et al., 2019).

1) Interpreting government interventions (e.g., economic impact payments) as inconsistent with neoliberalism relies on a misunderstanding of neoliberalism as a “small state”, rather than a strong one restructured to maximize profit. “There is nothing contradictory about ‘disaster socialism’” (Šumonja, 2021, p. 220), as these temporary measures ensure the long-term stability of neoliberalism.

It became apparent during the early days of the pandemic that individualism would conflict with the collective action necessary to contain the virus. Many saw masking and social distancing mandates as threatening their personal freedom, an attitude expressed in protest signs: GIVE ME LIBERTY OR GIVE ME COVID-19! Disdain for such public health measures reflects the neoliberal belief that collectivism is inherently authoritarian (Hayek, 1994). Thus, preventive behaviors have often been treated as individual choices, rather than necessary collective actions. Importantly, this neoliberal individualism is not only held by fringe protestors but is largely internalized by the political institutions responsible for managing the pandemic. When even the institutionalized public health response to a pandemic prioritizes individual freedom over collective health and safety, the result is high death rates in particularly neoliberal contexts (Barrera-Algarín et al., 2020; Schmitt, Jimenez, et al., 2023).

Supporting these ideas, empirical research has shown that relatively more individualistic regions saw fewer emergency declarations, stay-at-home orders, business closures, and mask mandates, less adherence to recommended preventive behaviors (e.g., Bazzi et al., 2021), and more COVID-19 cases and deaths (e.g., Rajkumar, 2021). These regional patterns are mirrored at the person level; survey research finds that individualism is negatively associated with preventive behaviors (e.g., Maaravi et al., 2021).

Furthermore, individualism has shaped understandings of the pandemic. Polls suggest that most US Americans blame the pandemic on individual behavior (Talev, 2021). This may lessen care for others, as individualism predicts less concern about the health of friends and family (Castle et al., 2021) and less donations to COVID-19 relief funds (Bian et al., 2022). It appears that individualism undermines pandemic responses; without a public, there cannot be public health. If neoliberalism encourages individualism and individualism has worsened the pandemic, then the next task is to show how neoliberal individualism contributes to precarity, inequality, depoliticization, and penalty.

Precarity

We next describe how individualism generates experiences of precarity, and how such precarity has undermined pandemic responses. Precarity is the “politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death” (Butler, 2009, p. 2). Precarity results from the material conditions wrought by (re)organizations of traditional relationships between labor and capital, and is characterized by unstable employment, lacking employer- or state-provided benefits, lacking occupational identity or solidarity, lacking opportunity for social mobility, and the individualization of employment-based hazards and risks (Montgomery & Baglioni, 2020; Standing, 2014).

Standing (2014, 2016) has traced how the austerity of neoliberalism has produced and expanded the extent to which people experience precarity, stemming from the erosion of trade unions, the globalization of the labor market, the privatization of public services, and the explosion of (student, medical, credit card, and payday loan) debt. Importantly, the emerging “precariat” class is marked by its diversity, including people traditionally thought to live in precarious situations such as extreme poverty, but also people from middle-class backgrounds who are struggling to pay their mortgages or student loans in an increasingly unstable job market (Schram, 2015; Standing, 2014). This is not to equate the precarity that these groups face, but rather to highlight that precarity unites these groups of different social standings through shared psychological tendencies (e.g., anxiety, uncertainty; Carvounas & Ireland, 2008; Neilson, 2015). Though precarity and its sociopsychological correlates have been more widely distributed across the population under neoliberalism, there are still disparities in this distribution, such that women, people of color, and older adults are more likely to face precarious employment conditions (Kalleberg, 2011; Oddo et al., 2021). The experience of precarity under neoliberalism and its associated anxiety, uncertainty, and transiency are juxtaposed with the kinds of rhetoric that are used to justify the underlying changes in labor relations. The flexibility and “freedom” of precarious gig work are touted to occlude the ways in which this precarity is not only harming those it purports to help but also shaping new subjectivities (Snyder, 2016).

We contend that widespread experiences of precarity have negative implications for pandemic responses. In early 2020, unemployment in the US rose from 3.6% to at least 13%, with disproportionate increases in unemployment rates for women, people of color, and part time workers (Smith et al., 2021). This spike in unemployment resulted in the loss of employer-sponsored health insurance for as many as 3.5 million US Americans, many of whom may avoid medical

care even in the face of serious illness from COVID-19 (Banthin et al., 2020; Gaffney et al., 2020). Without adequate healthcare coverage, the threat of severe illness from COVID-19 becomes not just a threat to health, but also to financial wellbeing (Johnson, 2020). Furthermore, health and financial threats coincide; unemployment and job insecurity predict negative mental health outcomes (Llosa et al., 2018; Paul & Moser, 2009), which are in turn associated with increased COVID-19 mortality (Vai et al., 2021).

Though the COVID-19 pandemic led some precarious workers to experience increased predictability of work hours as their positions were deemed “essential”, this was marked by new forms of precarity such as the unpredictability of new tasks (e.g., enforcing mask wearing), coping with the risk of contracting COVID-19, and feeling that one had to work in unsafe conditions for fear of losing employment (Loustaunau et al., 2021). In a longitudinal study, Shoss et al. (2021) found that workers who reported more precarious work conditions reported working more while sick, suggesting that the precarious conditions of the neoliberal labor market may drive the spread of disease during a pandemic, as workers feel that they have no choice but to continue working while sick to avoid unemployment.

In addition to forcing people into unsafe conditions, such precarity may indirectly contribute to the spread of COVID-19 by increasing stress and fatalism, which in turn discourage preventive behaviors. Jimenez et al. (2020) found that lacking sick leave predicted fatalistic beliefs about COVID-19, which in turn predicted lower intentions to practice social distancing and handwashing. Tran et al. (2022) found that delivery drivers who experienced more work-related pressure and loss of family income reported lower frequency of hand sanitization and use of face shields. Probst et al. (2020) showed that people who experienced job insecurity were less likely to follow COVID-related safety guidelines. However, these effects were attenuated by unemployment benefits; states with more robust unemployment benefits saw a reduced relationship between job insecurity and non-compliance, suggesting that more protections against neoliberal precarization can reduce the negative impact of precarity on COVID-related safety behaviors.

Precarity is simultaneously *shared* in that the material conditions and sociopsychological correlates of precarity are widely experienced and *alienating* from others in the context of individualized neoliberalism. Precarity’s shared nature and the diversity of the precariat make it dangerous to capital in that it could galvanize collective actions that upset neoliberal power structures. However, when precarity is combined with the forces of cultural individualism and depoliticization that accompany neoliberalism, the resultant situation is one in which people are encouraged to cope with precarity alone (Scharff, 2016). Failing to adapt to precarity is seen as a personal failure (Snyder, 2016), making precarity an alienating experience.

Inequality

By combining policies that favor the wealthy, such as tax breaks for business owners, with those that further immiserate the poor, such as cutting welfare, neoliberalism fosters inequality (Roy-Mukherjee & Udeogu, 2021). Focusing on income inequality, since the 1970s real incomes have grown by 20% for the bottom 99%, while they have grown by 200% for the top 1% (Sommeiller et al., 2016). Under neoliberalism those at the top have enhanced economic, political, and social opportunities, while those at the bottom often fall through the increasingly porous safety net and into, as we see later, the evermore impervious carceral dragnet.

Such inequality stemming from neoliberalism is only exacerbated by its individualism. Further, not only does neoliberalism generate inequality, but it also creates ideological justifications for inequality. Indeed, research finds that neoliberal ideology, as well as living in neoliberal societies, predicts preference for inequality (Beattie et al., 2019; Bettache et al., 2020; Goudarzi et al., 2022). Why does neoliberalism encourage these positive attitudes toward inequality? Neoliberalism asserts that “individuals should be rewarded according to personal achievements” (Bettache et al., 2020, p. 217). It follows that inequality would be seen as resulting from differences in individual skills, habits, and efforts, rather than structural advantages and disadvantages. This perspective on inequality bolsters its legitimacy; those who endorse neoliberal ideology view economic inequality as legitimate (Azevedo et al., 2019) and oppose attempts to reduce inequality (Bettache et al., 2020). In short, neoliberalism fosters inequality and convinces people that it is fair.

Inequality has sociopsychological consequences (Payne, 2018), which we argue may be conducive to widespread transmission of communicable diseases. Indeed, regional inequality is associated with more COVID-19 cases and deaths (e.g., Zaki et al., 2022). In addition to objective reasons (e.g., lacking healthcare), subjective experiences and

interpretations of inequality may further contribute to viral spread. Living in neoliberal societies increases preference for inequality (Goudarzi et al., 2022), which in turn predicts belief in COVID-19 conspiracy theories (Tonković et al., 2021), opposition to public health measures and international vaccine distribution (Clarke et al., 2021; Guidry et al., 2021), and less prosociality and greater depression in the context of COVID-19 (Politi et al., 2021; Shi et al., 2021).

Further, inequality may discourage preventive behaviors. For advantaged groups, inequality may provide psychological distance from the source of threat. For White US Americans, situational exposure to COVID-19 racial disparities and dispositional racial prejudice were associated with decreased concern about COVID-19 and reduced preventive measures (Miller et al., 2023; Skinner-Dorkenoo et al., 2022). For disadvantaged groups, inequality can increase perceived risk (Harell & Lieberman, 2021) which, if it develops into fatalism, can demotivate preventive behaviors by making disease susceptibility seem inevitable (Jimenez et al., 2020). Inequality and its social representations, communications, and understandings seem likely to dissuade people from trying to protect themselves and others from the pandemic.

Depoliticization

Given that neoliberalism exacerbates precarity and inequality, it might be expected that neoliberalism would generate significant political opposition. This has generally not been the case in the US, as neoliberalism has been largely embraced by both major political parties and there have been few mass protests against neoliberalism. Instead, these and other social issues are individualized, and thus *depoliticized*, by neoliberal individualism.

Neoliberalism views the individual as the primary unit of society and encourages these individuals to act in self-interested ways, which obscures political forces that shape individual experience and inhibits political action (Brown, 2015). Research has found that in neoliberal contexts, political problems such as poverty, debt, and racism are frequently understood to be caused by individual factors (Lazzarato, 2012; Nisbett, 2017). This depoliticization has occurred through assaults by neoliberal pundits and politicians on “the social” on several fronts: an epistemological front in which the existence of “society” is denied, a political-economic front in which the state retracts its role in maintaining social welfare, and a cultural front in which collective solidarity is eroded in favor of entrepreneurial individuals.

This process has been referred to as *responsibilization*, described as a way for neoliberal governments to govern indirectly by instilling a moral imperative for people to become self-governing subjects who are responsible for tasks and roles previously belonging to the state (Juhila & Raitakari, 2017; Miller & Rose, 2008; Rose, 2000). Empirical studies have demonstrated that *responsibilization* shapes how people in neoliberal contexts understand and cope with political issues. Further, people internalize blame for their indebtedness, despite its political determinants (Sweet, 2018). Similar patterns of *responsibilization* have been observed in the context of navigating precarious work conditions (Scharff, 2016), and coping with economic hardship (Halpin & Guilfoyle, 2004; Pyysiäinen et al., 2017). Not only do people often internalize blame for these problems, but also others tend to assume certain characteristics (e.g., laziness, criminality) about people in such conditions (Breheny & Stephens, 2009; Somers & Block, 2005). This absolves the political forces producing such conditions.

We contend that *depoliticization* has also shaped responses to COVID-19, worsening its severity. Rather than governmental (non)response, people often blame other individuals for the pandemic; many blame the unvaccinated for rising COVID-19 cases (Talev, 2021), health professionals struggle to maintain compassion for unvaccinated patients (Bibler et al., 2021), and media discourses derogate people who violate public health guidelines (Labbé et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2022). People may also feel guilty for contracting and spreading COVID-19 (Cavalera, 2020). The *depoliticization* of the pandemic is further suggested by lack of widespread protest amidst immense death and suffering. In the US, COVID-19 and “the chaotic non-response from the federal government” (Lopez & Neely, 2021, p. 5) has killed over a million people, while over 10 million lost their jobs. Still, people have only intermittently demanded universal health insurance, sick leave, guaranteed safe housing, free masks or at-home tests, increased public health or hospital funding, support for those isolating or quarantining, or other government actions that might have mitigated the pandemic (Stuart et al., 2022). Such *depoliticization*, which views life outcomes as wholly self-determined, may have stifled the sustained collective action needed to prevent unnecessary deaths.

Here, one might counter that COVID-19 has been extremely politicized, and that this politicization has stifled pandemic responses. Indeed, politicians are given more media attention than scientists (Hart et al., 2020) and anti-vaccine

attitudes and behaviors are predicted by political ideology (e.g., Bilewicz & Soral, 2022). This is a “politicization” of COVID-19 in that one’s political ideology shapes their pandemic behaviors, however it is still demonstrative of a broader depoliticization as COVID-19 has been commonly understood as a personal rather than political problem, meaning that political solutions are deemed unrealistic or ignored.

Though the pandemic has been depoliticized, there is some encouraging evidence that it may repoliticize social arrangements previously taken for granted. Birnbaum et al. (2023) found that experiencing personal harm early in the pandemic predicted future political advocacy. Using longitudinal methods, Wiwad et al. (2021) found that experiencing the pandemic led people to adopt external (vs. internal) attributions of poverty. However, these shifting attributions did not lead to changes in support for government intervention. While not directly tested, perhaps people recognize that when the government acts it does so through penal institutions, which demotivates those concerned with social inequality from supporting intervention.

Penalty

If social problems such as precarity and inequality are seldom addressed politically, then the next question to consider is how they are addressed. In this section, we seek to do so by arguing that neoliberalism motivates material and psychological penalty and such penalty has proved disastrous for the pandemic.

The first portion of this argument concerns what has been referred to as the logic of neoliberal *penalty* (Harcourt, 2011) according to which criminal punishment is considered the sole legitimate domain of government intervention. While of course ignoring the tremendous amount of government action taken to create and maintain markets, neoliberal penalty ensures that the many social problems exacerbated by neoliberalism—including precarity and inequality—are addressed through the criminal justice system. This process has been written about by Wacquant (2009), who argues that neoliberalism has generated extreme social insecurity, structured along racial and class lines and concentrated within zones of relegation, which is then managed through punitive penal practices. Heightened penalty may seem surprising given that neoliberalism is often understood as limited government intervention. However, rather than limiting, neoliberalism reorganizes government by specifying carceral institutions as one of the few valid modes of government intervention. That is, under neoliberalism the role of the government is not to provide but to punish.

Consistent with our critical cultural psychological approach, we view neoliberal penalty as having material and sociopsychological components that each exert influence on the other. Materially, neoliberal penalty has shifted funding away from health, education, and other social goods and services toward the criminal justice system. It should be unsurprising, then, that the neoliberal era has overseen the rise of mass incarceration and police militarization, as well as other punitive practices such as three-strike laws, mandatory minimum sentences, and solitary confinement (e.g., Wacquant, 2009). This material side of neoliberal penalty has a concordant sociopsychological side, marked by support for harsh criminal punishment. Empirical research has shown that endorsers of neoliberal ideology, as well as those living in particularly neoliberal states, express greater support for police militarization and use of force (Schmitt & Jimenez, forthcoming).

This neoliberal penalty exacerbated the severity of the pandemic in at least three ways: Government actions intended to address COVID-19 often followed the logic of neoliberal penalty, with punishment favored to provision, and channeled through institutions of policing. Further, neoliberal penalty motivated and justified the proliferation of jails and prisons, which accelerated the spread of the virus.

Facing COVID-19, governments were forced into action. These actions, however, were often guided by neoliberal penalty. As one example, as New York’s vaccine distribution trailed other states, then-Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that, rather than providing state resources to increase efficacy, hospitals unable to distribute their allotted doses would face up to a \$100,000 fine and could be banned from receiving further vaccines (Dean, 2021).

In addition to such punitive vaccine distribution plans, neoliberal penalty has been detrimental to COVID-19 responses by channeling government intervention through institutions of policing. Perhaps unsurprisingly given neoliberal austerity, police are often tasked with enforcing public health regulations (van Dijk et al., 2019; White & Fradella, 2020). Given the structural racism of policing (Rucker & Richeson, 2021), police enforcement of COVID-19 policies expands their presence in (particularly poor) Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous communities. One relevant anecdote is

particularly striking: in Nashville, the first person arrested for not wearing a mask was Black and homeless. Empirical work suggests that this is part of a broader pattern. Focusing on New York City, [Kajeepeta et al. \(2022\)](#) found that residents in Black and low-income neighborhoods, while no less likely to violate COVID-19-related mandates, faced disproportionate rates of arrest and prosecution. This increased police contact can be harmful: police kill over 1,000 people each year and injure countless more ([Sinyangwe et al., 2021](#)) and police contact can produce stress, anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, and other mental health problems ([Geller et al., 2017](#)). Such consequences can have knock-on effects in terms of COVID-19, as people experiencing these issues may be less psychologically equipped to adhere to preventive measures ([Carney et al., 2024](#); [Leiferman & Pheley, 2006](#)). Even more directly, police contact may deter such measures. Studies have shown that police contact was associated with avoiding healthcare facilities ([Carbonaro, 2022](#)), while experiencing police contact perceived to be unjust predicts less compliance with COVID-19 restrictions ([McCarthy et al., 2021](#)). Together, this research shows that policing the pandemic increases the violence directed toward vulnerable groups and attempting to do so may produce even worse consequences.

The third way in which neoliberal penalty has exacerbated the pandemic is by motivating and justifying mass incarceration. Due to frequent admissions, transmission from staff, overcrowding, and underfunded health systems, jails and prisons are superspreading environments (e.g., [Montoya-Barthelemy et al., 2020](#)). Jails and prisons have experienced the largest COVID-19 outbreaks ([Brinkley-Rubinstein & Nowotny, 2020](#)) and incarcerated people are particularly likely to die from COVID-19 ([Marquez et al., 2021](#)). These heightened rates of COVID-19 concern those inside and outside of prison, as research finds that there is a positive relationship between prison and community transmission rates ([LeMasters et al., 2022](#); [Wallace et al., 2021](#)) and that areas with higher incarceration rates experienced more COVID-19 cases (e.g., [Sims et al., 2021](#)). In these varied ways, the penalty of neoliberalism has proved detrimental to COVID-19 responses.

What Is to Be Done?

Neoliberal individualism, alongside its precarity, inequality, depoliticization, and penalty have contributed to the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic ([Table 1](#)). These problems are, of course, way beyond the responsibility of the field to solve. From the perspective of critical cultural psychology, neoliberalism's values, beliefs, and lifeways go hand in hand with its structures, institutions, and economic policies, indicating that psychological changes require structural changes in kind. Thus, collectivistic, egalitarian values would be most effectively encouraged by moving beyond neoliberal capitalism toward a system designed to fulfill human needs rather than maximize profit: in a word, socialism. If such a future is the goal, then there may be concrete (if modest) ways in which psychological science might resist neoliberalism and its associated individualism.

The first step is to challenge hegemonic sociopsychological research which is motivated by neoliberal ideology and, in turn, supports, legitimizes, and naturalizes neoliberalism. If, as [Jeremy Gilbert \(2013\)](#) writes, "the point of neoliberal ideology is not to convince us that Hayek was right; it is to console us that the sense of insecurity, of perpetual competition and individual isolation produced by neoliberal government is natural" (p. 15), then much of the sociopsychological research on COVID-19 has reproduced this ideology.

Sociopsychological research on COVID-19 has positioned the individual as the site of analysis and solutions. Research attempting to explain the severity of the pandemic has attributed it to individual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors without considering facilitatory or preventative structural factors. This has led to the proliferation of nudge interventions encouraging preventive behavior compliance through cognitive reflection ([Pennycook et al., 2020](#)) and empathy ([de Ridder et al., 2022](#)). Other research has focused on increasing individual resiliency through mindfulness ([Bossi et al., 2022](#); [Tang et al., 2022](#)), focusing on the future ([Dennis et al., 2022](#)), and positive psychology interventions ([Waters et al., 2022](#)). While well-intentioned, such research ultimately imagines individual-level interventions as the solution to structural and political problems.

Table 1

Components of Neoliberal Individualism and Their Impact on COVID-19

Structural Examples	Psychological Examples	Impact on COVID-19
Precarity Short-term employment; lack of healthcare; welfare cuts	Mental health issues; fatalism	Pressure to work while sick; experiences of precarity inhibit preventive behaviors
Inequality Income; health; education	Positive attitudes toward inequality; negative attitudes toward the structurally disadvantaged	Inequality associated with higher case and mortality rates of COVID-19; anti-egalitarian people were more likely to oppose preventive government actions
Depoliticization Economic decision-making by non-democratic institutions; privatization of public goods	Blame and lack of compassion for others; internalization of guilt and shame	Lack of government action resulted in many preventable deaths; people attributed these deaths to individual behaviors
Penalty Mass incarceration; police militarization; punitive approaches to welfare and public health	Support for aggressive policing; negative attitudes toward the incarcerated	Prisons were superspreading environments; police contact discourages seeking medical care

The individualism of sociopsychological research on the pandemic naturalizes, and thereby depoliticizes, precarity and inequality. Take, for instance, a paper which found that essential workers experienced elevated suicidal ideation during the pandemic (Bond et al., 2021). While recognizing that this likely stemmed from structural inequality, the authors recommended that essential workers be provided greater access to mental health care. This is representative of how psychology responded to the pandemic, recognizing it as a mental health crisis requiring clinical treatment (Gruber et al., 2021), rather than a structural and political crisis requiring government intervention and mass public collective action. Left unquestioned is why public health systems have been defunded in favor of carceral ones, how dismantling the social safety net has made all aspects of the pandemic, from social distancing to receiving medical treatment, less attainable for the precarious, or why some workers who are deemed essential are paid very little.

Neoliberal penalty has been similarly bolstered by psychological research on the pandemic. Police officers, write Edwards and Kotera (2021, p. 360), keep “communities safe...while putting their physical and mental health at risk” and should be provided with resources to cope with the associated stress. Left unsaid is that police are well-funded, and that this funding comes at the expense of social goods and services which could have more effectively addressed the pandemic. Other research has documented that the pandemic has exacerbated mental distress among the incarcerated. While this could be used to argue for prison abolition or smaller scale decarceration, researchers have called for psychoeducation workbook interventions (Wilson & Dervley, 2022), nature exposure (Li et al., 2021), and yoga (Ishaq et al., 2023). Sociopsychological science has sought to acclimatize people to the crisis instead of challenging the social and political conditions in which the crisis arose.

If psychological science has undergirded the neoliberal pandemic response, then the question remains of what can be done to avoid this happening in the future. Sugarman (2015) encourages psychologists to interrogate the assumptions of neoliberalism and its sociopsychological consequences, while Adams et al. (2019) call for decolonizing psychology via denaturalization, indigenization, and accompaniment. These efforts will involve psychological scientists embracing new methods, epistemologies, and politicized standpoints (Power et al., 2018; Sullivan, 2020). To this latter point, while the field often prides itself on its apolitical objectivity, Levins and Lewontin (1985, pp. 4-5) remind us that “to do science is to be a social actor engaged, whether one likes it or not, in political activity”. Scientific questions, then, “can be decided objectively only within the framework of certain sociopolitical assumptions”. It is toward this goal that we outline a critical cultural psychology which examines the mutual constitution of culture and psyche to critique oppressive systems such as neoliberalism.

We raise two additional points. First, we need to make material changes to the structure of academic research given that, as it is, high cost of education and other structural barriers have made it so that research is mostly conducted by beneficiaries of neoliberalism (i.e., upper-class individuals from the Global North) who, while seldom endorsing its harshest fiscal policies, tend to internalize its individualism. Furthermore, academic life, with its increasingly common experiences of precarity, indebtedness, and competition (Coşkan et al., 2021), seems more likely to foster neoliberal, individualistic values than more collectivistic ones. To resist neoliberalism, then, is to challenge and change this structure. Such political actions may be opportunities for increasing solidarity with labor movements among manufacturing, healthcare, and service industry workers catalyzed by the pandemic (Kasmir, 2021). If sociopsychological science has been used to understand and promote collective action in many political and cultural contexts (e.g., Agostini & van Zomeren, 2021), then future work can seek to inspire solidarity and collective action against the neoliberal austerity which exacerbated the pandemic.

Second, we must attend to the often overlooked penalty of neoliberalism (Schmitt & Jimenez, forthcoming). While many have critiqued how psychological science has helped neoliberalism achieve social control via responsabilization (Binkley, 2015), less attention has been paid to how it has contributed to courts, police, and prisons, along with their increasingly aggressive pursuit of punishment. To resist neoliberal penalty, psychologists might utilize a critical cultural psychology perspective to delineate how past research has been used to plan, implement, or legitimize the carceral system, produce research which denaturalizes it, documents its harmful effects, and informs and supports relevant activist work, while refusing to collaborate with or receive grant funding from carceral institutions. All of these actions and more are needed if the field is to resist neoliberalism.

Conclusion

In the US, the COVID-19 pandemic displayed the many contradictions of neoliberalism: over a million dead, millions more lacking health insurance; essential workers being denied sick leave and hazard pay; hospitals closed while many died because of hospital overcrowding; corporations destroying millions of COVID-19 tests deemed unprofitable amidst an international shortage; among others. Psychological science has contributed to neoliberalism and neoliberal reactions to the pandemic. Rather than advocating for structural change, the field has focused on encouraging individual efforts to navigate the pandemic and government non-response while depoliticizing mass death. As climate change and globalization increase the likelihood of future pandemics, it is vital to understand how neoliberalism shapes pandemic responses. Still more important is to move beyond neoliberalism: mitigating future pandemics depends on it.

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