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BEHAVIOURAL ECONOMIC POLICY FOR THE COVID-19 ERA: SHORT-TERM IMPACTS

This Special Issue is prompted by a global pandemic so serious that it will change all our lives irredeemably. Economic impacts in terms of macroeconomic and financial instability are going to persist for many years. Rises in unemployment around the world are already staggering. Other wider impacts on economic and social welfare are unfolding each day – including impacts in terms of increasing inequality and falling wellbeing and life satisfaction. Anyone who has experienced unemployment will know that unemployment is not just about losing a regular income. Unemployment is also about losing social connectedness and a sense of purpose. For those who are not able to return to work quickly, they will also suffer a loss of skills, disillusionment with the job search process and – potentially – a struggle to convince potential employers of their value when their CV shows a long break away from work.

These stresses will be harder to navigate for those who live alone and cannot easily access the social and community support. Those who live unhappy, at worst violent, home lives have little escape. At time of writing, in their latest Situation Report, the World Health Organisation has reported 175,694 deaths around the world – and a much larger number of bereaved family and friends, most of whom are having to navigate their grief through an extended period of social isolation when social isolation is exactly what a grieving person needs to avoid. These impacts are hard enough for those who lead otherwise affluent lives in countries with relatively good social safety nets. Many more around the world live in over-crowded conditions in poor countries without social safety nets, where political conditions are oppressive at the best of times. Large numbers of others are suffering the severe consequences of this pandemic in refugee camps and urban slums, where their already limited life chances are now dwindling rapidly.

So, now more than ever, policymakers around the world are in urgent need of powerful and transdisciplinary policy insights. Behavioural economics and behavioural science have a great deal to contribute to policy-makers' knowledge, not only around the science and epidemiology of the virus itself, but also how to mitigate against the terrible and wide-ranging ramifications of this disease – a disease with impacts we could not have imagined just 3 months ago.

As far as policymaking is concerned, this rapid and seismic change has shifted the zeitgeist in ways good and bad. Whilst the populist disenchantment with experts is (mostly) forgotten for the moment, it has been replaced with a cacophony of expert voices offering insights and opinions. Amongst this noise, it has been difficult to assess which experts are communicating analysis founded on a deep understanding, and which are offering partially

informed commentary inspired by the latest news story. As an academic journal, we will focus on the former but via our new Twitter page (@BE4Policy) we will follow the latter.

How will JBEP contribute to these debates? Any academic journal has a lot to offer in curating insights and we are building an international collection of peer-reviewed papers offering different behavioural economic policy perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic. This Special Issue is the first in a series of three COVID-19 Special Issues – each covering short-term, medium-term and long-term policy insights. In this first issue, we begin with insights which were developed as the pandemic started to unfold – with contributions from around the world, including authors from Australia, Canada, France, India, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, the USA and the UK.

We are honoured to have our first contribution from Cass Sunstein on the "Meaning of Masks" – an analysis of how social meanings modulate people's incentives to wear masks, and why leaders can play an important role in signalling new social meanings and increasing the likelihood that citizens will be encouraged by shifting social norms to wear masks, thus protecting themselves and others. Continuing the theme of social norms, Anirudh Tagat and Hansika Kapoor's fascinating paper "Go, Coronavirus, Go!" explores how cultural beliefs and social norms can be leveraged in designing culturally-relevant behavioural interventions to ensure that behaviour changes to combat COVID-19 can be sustained even after lockdowns have ended. The next contribution is "The ethics of social choices and the role of economists in a pandemic" in which Lionel Page explores the complexities of COVID-19 policy trade-offs between saving lives versus preserving the economy, emphasising that economists play an important role both in clarifying moral principles determining these trade-offs and in informing politicians to ensure that trade-offs reflect citizens' preferences.

In "Smart thinking, lockdown and Covid-19: Implications for public policy" Morris Altman explores some of the problems with lockdown policies which emerge when they are decontextualized, ignore the indirect effects of lockdown and are based on the false assumption that COVID-19 death rates can be estimated accurately. Turning to differences in health policy responses and national hospital systems across Europe, in "COVID-19 pandemic: a European perspective on health economic policies", an interdisciplinary team of surgeons, psychiatrists and economists – including Marco Alifano, Giuseppe Attanasi, Fabio Iannelli, Faredj Cherikh and Antonio Iannelli – analyse some of the impacts of differences in the quality of medical care across Europe in terms of direct and indirect mortality rates, underscoring the importance of robust and sustainable national hospital systems for the global battle against COVID-19.

The next paper, "The effect of norm-based messages on reading and understanding COVID-19 pandemic response governmental rules" by Ennio

Bilancini, Leonardo Boncinelli, Valerio Capraro, Tatiana Celadin and Roberto Di Paolo, includes some early experimental evidence from an online Italian study showing that norm-based messages do not significantly affect people's comprehension of COVID-19 response information, suggesting that some nudge-type policy interventions may be limited in their effectiveness. Around the world, COVID-19 has accelerated policy innovations leveraging modern information and communications technologies and Magda Osman, Norman Fenton, Scott McLachlan, Peter Lucas, Kudakwashe Dube, Graham Hitman, Evangelia Kyrimi and Martin Neil provide a critical assessment of these technologies in their contribution "The thorny problems of COVID-19 contact tracing apps: The need for a holistic approach".

In "The social perils and promise of remote work" Phil Lord explores the theme of remote work, advocating the development of effective policy solutions from law and behavioural economics that can ensure that the benefits of remote work, in terms of alleviating historic inequities for workers who need flexibility in their working arrangements, are balanced against the costs associated with the increased precarity of work and the potentially inequitable shift of workspace costs onto employees. This issue concludes with Michelle Baddeley's contribution "Hoarding in the Age of COVID-19", which examines some of the strange patterns and trends in COVID-19 hoarding and their implications for policy.

Sincere thanks to all the contributors and reviewers, and especially to Cecilia BG and the production team at elalambre.org for their impressively fast work with typesetting and website management. The quick turnaround of this first Special Issue would not have been possible without everyone's speed, efficiency and collaborative spirit.

For the remaining COVID-19 Special Issues, if you have a short (around 3-4,000 words) policy-focussed paper that would be a good contribution to the evolving COVID-19 debates around behavioural economic policy, then we would be delighted to receive it. Please forward it along to sabejbep@gmail.com. We will send submissions out for peer review, aiming to get decisions back to authors within 2-3 weeks. We are planning to finalise JBEP's second COVID-19 Special Issue by September 2020.

In the meantime, we hope our readers enjoy the first in JBEP's COVID-19 series.

Michelle Baddeley
University of Technology Sydney
17 June 2020

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