

Knowledge as Preventor of Disease Stereotyping - Evidence from Covid-19 in Malawi and Zambia

Research shows that:

Symptoms are more important than identities in shaping perceptions of disease, willingness to help, and support for free movement of individuals with Covid-like symptoms in the community.

Group identities do affect perceptions of disease (in Malawi) and willingness to help neighbors (in both countries) but to a small degree.

Concern that the pandemic will exacerbate group conflicts may be overstated, at least in some cases.

Conventional View on Social Effects of Disease

Research shows that the threat of disease activates negative behaviors towards outsiders, such as prejudice, ethnocentrism, compliance with social norms, and xenophobia - while enhancing attachment to and compliance with insiders. Further, disease threats have been shown to provoke anti-outsider attitudes and intensified boundaries between groups, exacerbating stereotypes of "the other." Humans have long associated outsiders with disease, blaming contagions on community outsiders, justifying excluding behaviors and violence based on real or imagined disease threats. Associating outsiders with disease thus risks leading to social stigmatization and political exclusion.

Covid-19 may impact outsider/insider thinking as symptoms of illness affect pro-social behaviors (e.g., willingness to help) or excluding behaviors (e.g., the desire to restrict free movement). Without clear information on a disease, outsider-based stereotypes may emerge due to insufficient knowledge and personal experience with the disease.

Stereotyping and Symptoms

Recent research from GLD scholars from Malawi and Zambia - countries with norms that favor helping others in the community - highlights the role of knowledge in the emergence of stereotypes. Research on Malawi and Zambia finds small but persistent identity effects on the perceptions of disease (in Malawi) and willingness to help neighbors (in both countries). However, these effects do not seem particularly acute for more racially distinct groups, nor do they change significantly as the pandemic waxes and wanes over time. In contrast, symptoms play a much larger, more persistent role in shaping whether individuals see others as having Covid-19, their willingness to help them, and whether or not they believe they should have free movement. Thus, knowledge of symptoms appears to play a larger role in social relations during the pandemic than insider-outsider distinctions.

Spread information - not prejudices

Policymakers and other stakeholders can reduce the potentially negative social effects of the pandemic by focusing on medical information rather than social identities. Since identities can operate as heuristics when people lack clear information, increased knowledge about disease, particularly symptoms, may reduce the risk of stigmatization of a certain group of people. Therefore, politicians should focus on providing general information about symptoms and give precautionary advice rather than linking disease to particular groups.

To access the full paper, see:

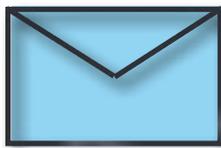
Ferree, Karen E.; Kao, Kristen; Dulani, Boniface; Harris, Adam S.; Lust, Ellen; Ahsan Jansson, Cecilia and Metheney, Erica. (2021). "Symptoms and Stereotypes: Perceptions and Responses to Covid-19 in Malawi and Zambia," The Program on Governance and Local Development, University of Gothenburg. Latest version available via: [GLD.gu.se](https://www.gld.gu.se)

About GLD

The Program on Governance and Local Development (GLD) is a research program based at the University of Gothenburg, originally founded in 2013 at Yale University by Program Director, Professor Ellen Lust. GLD focuses on the local factors driving governance and development. The program is dedicated to international collaboration and scientifically rigorous, policy-relevant research in an effort to promote human welfare globally. Program findings are made available to the international and domestic communities through academic publications, policy briefs, public presentations, and social media, as well as on-the-ground workshops in cooperation with local partners.



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Contact

Department of Political Science,
University of Gothenburg
Box 711, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden
Visiting address: Sprängkullsgatan 19,
Gothenburg
contact@gld.gu.se

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