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Scientific report

## United Nations Psychology Day 2020 focused on Multilateralism

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**Abstract.** As the United Nations marks its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2020, psychologists are increasingly involved in the work of the UN since 1945. This reached new heights on May 27, 2020, as the 13<sup>th</sup> annual Psychology Day at the United Nations drew a record attendance of 1,271 participants from 104 nations, to hear four international psychologists describe different aspects of their work on “multilateralism.” This report offers a summary of the Day, including its four messages by Drs. Fathali Moghaddam, Susan Michie, Michele Gelfand, and Sarah Lyons-Padilla.

**Key words:** United Nations, Psychology Day, international, multilateralism, NGOs

On May 27, 2020, the thirteenth annual Psychology Day at the United Nations, brought together over 1,271 participants from 104 nations to celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN. This year’s focus was on “UN75: *The multilateralism we want: Psychological contributions to building bridges among and within nations.*”

The first Psychology Day at the UN was in 2007. Based on its success, this has become an annual event each April in New York City (Takooshian, 2020a), now attracting over 500 attendees (Feher, 2017). UN Psychology Day (UNPD) 2020 was unusual in at least four ways:

(1) **Theme.** Since this was the 75<sup>th</sup> year of the UN, the theme focused on the mission of the UN itself: “UN75” and multilateralism (<https://www.un.org/en/un75>).

(2) **Sponsorship** of UNPD shifted from the American Psychological Association (APA) and its Office of International Affairs (<https://www.apa.org/international/united-nations/>) to the Psychology Coalition at the UN (PCUN, <http://psychologycoalitionun.org/>). PCUN is a coalition of psychology NGOs, formed in New York City in 2011 (Okorodudu, 2013), which has been expanding despite a few challenges – and now numbers about 150 psychologists and interns representing nine psychology NGOs (Takooshian, 2020b). Many PCUN members recently contributed to volume 1 of a new book series on “Behavioral science in the global arena” (Congress et al., 2020; <https://www.unpsychologyday.com/>).

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(3) **Virtual.** Since New York City is the U.S. epicenter for the coronavirus, the United Nations building is closed. Rather than cancel UNPD, PCUN requested and received APA cooperation to hold the first virtual UNPD, using the “Go To Meetings” platform (Figure 1).

(4) **Participants.** Instead of 400 participants in one room in New York City, this UNPD drew 2,763 registrants, and 1,271 of these were able to participate online from 104 nations. Only 25% of these were in the USA.

As in the past, UNPD was kindly hosted by the diplomatic community – this year including the Missions of Palau, Dominican Republic, and Mexico.

On May 27 at 11 am, the 130-minute forum was welcomed by its two hosts: Drs. Leslie Popoff, the President of PCUN, and Rashmi Jaipal, Head of the APA team at the UN.



**Figure 1.** Announcing UNPD 2020 world-wide (source: <https://www.unpsychologyday.com/>)

The first of two 45-minute panels was moderated by Dr. Walter Reichman, Chair of the PCUN Program Committee, who introduced his two speakers, and moderated a lively Q & A. The second panel was moderated by Dr. Maysa Akbar, who introduced her two speakers, and moderated a lively Q & A. The four experts' presentations appear below.

In the final 20-minute Q & A, all six experts fielded several online questions from colleagues and students from as far as Nepal.

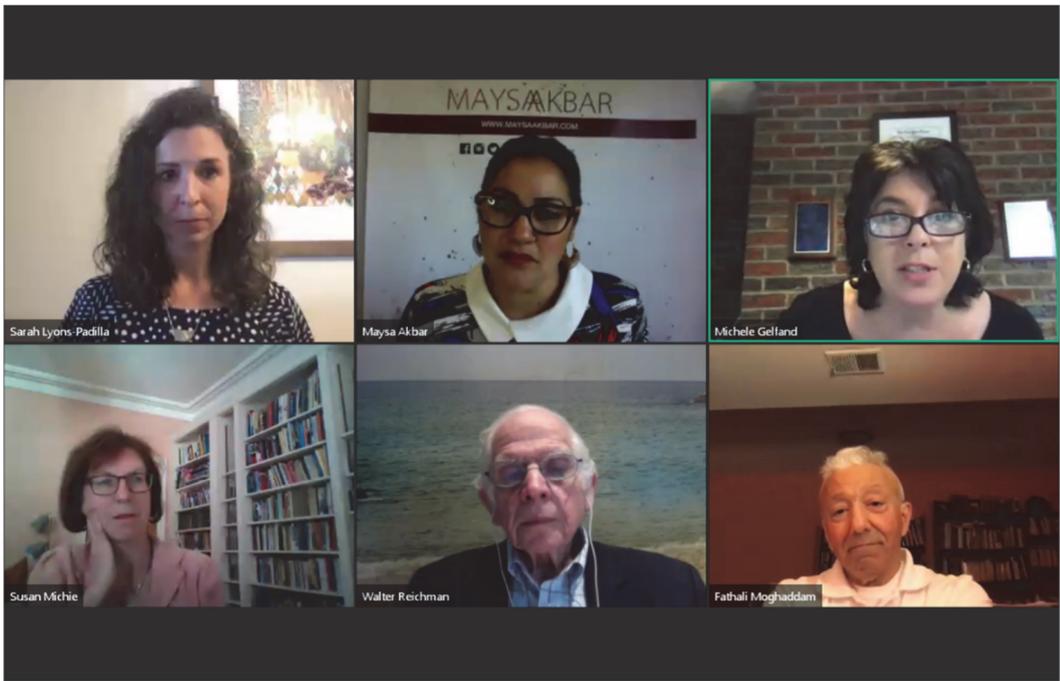
A video recording of the entire 130-minute UNPD is now available online<sup>1</sup> (Figure 2), as are recordings of past UNPDs in 2019<sup>2</sup> (Figure 3) and 2018<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> UNPD 2020. Retrieved from

<https://register.gotowebinar.com/recording/viewRecording/6161065434192697099/5678870212515006466/takoosh@aol.com?registrantKey=3357184339558304524&type=ATTENDEEMAILRECORDINGLINK>

<sup>2</sup> UNPD 2019. Retrieved from <http://webtv.un.org/search/the-time-is-now-psychological-contributions-to-global-gender%20equality-12th-annual-psychology-day-at-the-united-nations/6030064139001/?term=psychology%20day&sort=date>

<sup>3</sup> UNPD 2018. Retrieved from <http://webtv.un.org/search/11th-annual-psychology-day-at-the-united-nations/5769788009001/?term=psychology%20day&sort=date>



**Figure 2.** A scene from UNPD 2020  
(photo from personal archive of authors)



**Figure 3.** By contrast, a scene from UNPD 2019  
(photo from personal archive of authors)

PCUN President Leslie Popoff noted that especially in 2020, the hosting of UNPD required the coordination of many dedicated volunteers. She thanked the speakers and moderators, the nine cosponsoring groups, the team at the APA (Sally Leverty, Juliana Mayhew, Jung-Yun Min, Drs. Gabriel Twose, Amanda Clinton, Nelida Quintero), the three UN missions (Palau, Mexico, Dominican Republic), the PCUN program committee (Drs. Walter Reichman, Maysa Akbar, Comfort Asanbe, Rashmi Jaipal, Sonia Suchday, Michelle Bell, Vera Araujo Soares, Laura Lopez-Aybar, Ayorkor Gaba, Cynthia Grguric, Carmen I. Vazquez), and outreach team (Priyadarshiny Sandanapitchai, Harold Takooshian, Elaine P. Congress).

For any details on UNPD or PCUN, check the links above, or contact UNPD at [unpsychday@gmail.com](mailto:unpsychday@gmail.com), or PCUN President Leslie Popoff at [drLPopoff@gmail.com](mailto:drLPopoff@gmail.com)

### **Summaries of the four UNPD messages**

**Fathali Moghaddam**, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, Georgetown University and Director of Interdisciplinary Program in Cognitive Science started the panel discussion with his presentation on *The Role of Psychological Science in Better*

*Understanding and Strengthening Open Societies and Multilateralism*. He discussed one of his research areas, ‘political plasticity’, that explores the political conduct from a psychological lens; it examines to what extent and how fast we can change political behaviors. He further elaborated on the need to recognize social and cognitive capacities at the citizen level to achieve what he terms as ‘actualized democracy’. Psychologists play a significant role in understanding the characteristics of democratic citizenship at the individual and macro levels to help achieve and sustain democracy across borders. To strengthen multilateralism, he emphasized the recent approach towards ‘omniculturalism’ that focuses on human commonalities rather than the exaggeration of group differences. He highlighted that psychologists can educate the nations to understand their perception on the threat of invasions and its consequences as a result of rapidly increasing globalization.

**Susan Michie**, Ph.D., Director of UCL Centre for Behaviour Change and Professor, Department of Clinical, Educational and Health Psychology, University College London presented on *Limiting COVID-19 Transmission: A Psychological Perspective*. As a member of the UK government behavioral advisory group and WHO COVID-19 consultant advisor on behavioral science, she translates evidence-based knowledge to guide policy-making decisions. She highlighted that behavior is at the heart of the current pandemic, and psychologists can contribute towards behavioral changes to limit the transmissions. There are numerous challenges that psychologists face when working with policymakers due to different agendas and terminology. However, using simple and comprehensible frameworks that can be easily translated into potential recommendations can overcome such challenges. She further stated that even smaller behavior changes such as washing hands, wearing masks and social distancing can make a significant impact on the suppression of the pandemic and how psychological knowledge can assist in developing different interventions specific to each behavior.

**Michele Gelfand**, Ph.D., Distinguished University Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Maryland focused on *The Culture of Populism*. She discussed how some deep-rooted cultural dynamics become the driving force in the rise of populism and intolerance across nations. Tight culture has strong norms and punishments, whereas loose culture has weak norms and highly permissive. Findings have shown that groups who experience continuous threats from natural disasters to pathogen outbreaks tend to be tighter compared to groups with lesser threats. In addition, tight cultures have more order, higher self-control and uniformity, while loose cultures are comparatively disorganized and more open to creativity and change. She reported her findings on how perceived threats determine leadership preferences and the inclination towards either tight or loose group norms. Besides, political leaders have also exploited this mechanism and frequently use threatening words in their narratives to attract voters. To quantify these languages, she has developed a threat dictionary using words used in social media platforms to track threats over time. She suggested that when dealing with objective and exaggerated threats, showing empathy and developing partnerships across governments and local organizations to help understand ‘others’ can mitigate the roots of populism.

**Sarah Lyons-Padilla**, Ph.D., UX Researcher, Tech Industry, focused on *When Disconnection Breeds Extremism: Marginalization, Discrimination and Risk*

for Radicalization. She talked about the psychology behind radicalization, specifically on how one's identity conflict plays a crucial role in violent extremism. Some immigrants may feel culturally homeless as they are unable to develop a sense of belonging to any ethnocultural group. She described that discrimination experienced by immigrants could exacerbate the impact of cultural homelessness on significant loss and leads to increased support for extremist ideologies to restore a sense of purpose and direction. Thus, fostering refugees' integration, funding community buildings and counter-radicalization programs, and exploring cultural homelessness with significant loss and extremism outside minority communities are some of the fundamental measures in preventing extremism.

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Научное сообщение

## День психологии – 2020 в ООН, посвященный мультилатерализму

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**Аннотация.** В 2020 году Организация Объединенных Наций отмечает 75-летний юбилей. Психологи включились в работу ООН со времен ее образования в 1945 г., и их труд с каждым годом становится все более заметным. Новым ярким свидетельством плодотворного сотрудничества ООН с психологами и психологическими организациями стал 13-й Ежегодный День психологии в ООН, который состоялся 27 мая 2020 г. В этом году мероприятие проходило онлайн и собрало рекордное количество участников – 1271 исследователя из 104 стран. В данном репортаже представлен краткий отчет о Дне психологии – 2020 в ООН, который включает краткий обзор события и докладов четырех выдающихся психологов – докторов психологических наук Фатали Могхаддам, Сьюзен Мичи, Мишель Гельфанд и Сары Лайонс-Падилья, посвященных их исследованиям различных аспектов мультилатерализма.

**Ключевые слова:** Организация Объединенных Наций, День психологии, международный, мультилатерализм, неправительственные организации

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