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Authors

Mell, Johnathan

Lucas, Gale

Gratch, Jonathan

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Pandemic Panic: The Effect of Disaster-Related Stress on Negotiation Outcomes

Johnathan Mell

University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida, United States

Gale Lucas

University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California, United States

Jonathan Gratch

University of Southern California, Playa Vista, California, United States

Abstract

Prior research often finds increased altruism following natural disasters. One explanation is the social heuristic hypothesis: humans are prosocial by nature but become self-interested when they have the opportunity to deliberate. As the stress of a disaster lowers people's ability to engage in effortful deliberation, their heuristic prosocial tendencies emerge. However, this link has often been explored with very simple tasks; here, we study the impact of COVID-related stress on outcomes in multi-issue negotiations with a computational virtual agent. In two experiments with a virtual negotiation partner, we explore two distinct pathways for how COVID-19 stress shapes prosocial behavior. Consistent with the social heuristic hypothesis, COVID-stress is correlated with giving, mediated by heuristic thinking. But COVID-stress also seems to enhance information-exchange and perspective taking, which allowed participants to grow more value which they could give away. Our results give new insights into the relationship between stress, cognition, and prosocial behavior.