

# Concern for Others is a Better Argument to Foster Social Distancing

Luck, Simon<sup>1</sup>  
Lahlou, Saadi<sup>0</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Paris Institute for Advanced Study

## TO CITE

Luck, S., & Lahlou, S. (2023). Concern for Others is a Better Argument to Foster Social Distancing. *Proceedings of the Paris Institute for Advanced Study*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.5072/zenodo.1115395>

## PUBLICATION DATE

01/05/2020

## KEYWORDS

covid-19	coronavirus	socialnorms	decision-making
Infection likelihood perception		Public Health	Human Behaviours, Social Relations
Risks, Crisis Management		Public Policy	

## ABSTRACT

*During the Covid-19 pandemic, the authorities asked for unusual instructions that contradicted generally valued behaviours: isolation and social distancing rather than social activities and rituals (going out, consumption, physical contact). Unsurprisingly, there is a difficulty in changing behaviour in the direction imposed by the pandemic, although at a time of progressive deconfinement, respect for social distancing is a crucial issue, and everything suggests that these behaviours will have to be maintained over time. It is therefore essential to understand the best ways to persuade citizens to adopt the right behaviours. Memorandum 1 : overview of the studies and projects registered on WPRN database*

Social psychology studies typically focus on social norms to understand, anticipate and influence the behaviours of individuals and groups (to simplify: «others do it, so do it too»). While norms can be produced by groups themselves, it is primarily institutions (often governments) that prescribe desired behaviours.

In the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, the authorities asked for unusual instructions that contradicted generally valued behaviours: isolation and social distancing rather than social activities and rituals (going out, consumption, physical contact). Unsurprisingly, there is a difficulty in changing behaviour in the direction imposed by the pandemic, although at a time of progressive deconfinement, respect for social distancing is a crucial issue, and everything suggests that these behaviours will have to be maintained over time. It is therefore essential to quickly understand the best ways to persuade our fellow citizens to adopt the right behaviours.

Ongoing studies are examining the drivers of public compliance with safety measures. While it comes as no surprise that awareness of the dangerousness of the virus is emerging as an important factor in respecting social [distancing](#), the effectiveness of recourse to the social norm, usually the preferred instrument of behavioural scientists, is being questioned. Several studies suggest that empathy and concern for others are more strongly correlated with respect for social distancing ([US Study](#) and [Danish study](#)). This is true even in the groups most [hostile](#) to these measures, who may however perceive their usefulness to protect their loved ones. The challenge therefore for public authorities seems to be to encourage individuals (especially young people and those without co-morbidity, who have little to fear for themselves) to pay attention to others. In other words, asking citizens to respect instructions in order to spare the lives of others, and to spare the medical profession the trouble, is an altruistic argument that goes beyond the call for selfish safeguard.

Although this work, carried out on American, English and German populations, is still awaiting validation for publication, it opens up interesting prospects for further exploration of these promising avenues and inspires the design of public health campaigns.

# Appendix

<https://wprn.org/item/433252>

**The emotional path to action: Empathy promotes physical distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic (WPRN-433252) - Pfattheicher , Stefan (Aarhus University)**

We show that (i) empathy is indeed a basic motivation for physical distancing, and (ii) inducing empathy for those most vulnerable to the virus promotes the motivation to adhere to physical distancing. In sum, the present research provides a better understanding of the basic motivation underlying the willingness to follow one important measure during the COVID-19 pandemic. We further point to the potential for policymakers to use empathy to promote physical distancing – in this way to increase the chance of saving lives.

<https://wprn.org/item/431952>

**Social Distancing During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Normative Interventions and Correlates of Social Distancing (WPRN-431952) - Leary , Angelina (University of Central Florida)**

Concern over self-infection, economic concerns, death, and political ideology did not predict social distancing. Concern for others (positively) and fear of missing social events (negatively) predicted social distancing. CONCLUSIONS: Results suggest normative interventions may be contraindicated for increasing social distancing; however, they also provide valuable information that suggests compassion, not fear, drives social distancing.

<https://wprn.org/item/433852>

**Moral outrage and social distancing (WPRN-433852) - De Neys , Wim (CNRS & Université de Paris )**

People who respect social distancing less and find these violations more permissible also believe that the virus is less likely to infect them or others. This implies that violators do not necessarily care less about others; they simply see the virus as less threatening. Therefore, caution is needed when attributing social distancing violations to a lack of moral character.

Paper @ <https://psyarxiv.com/j9h76> : “People who respect social distancing less and find these violations more permissible are not necessarily bad citizens who do not care about others. They simply see this behavior as less threatening than others and therefore might see less need to respect the rules [...]. This conclusion might be relevant when thinking about possible interventions. For example, one recent experimental study (Everett, Colombatto, Chituc, Brady, & Crockett, 2020) found that manipulations that stressed people’s moral obligation to adopt social distancing behavior (e.g., “It’s your duty!”, “Be a good person!”) had little impact on participants’ social distancing intentions and beliefs. Although speculative, in line with the current suggestions, it might prove to be more effective here to try to directly alter (i.e., boost) people’s threat perception. [...] From a societal point of view, the biggest challenge might not be to get citizens to respect social distancing rules at the point where their threat perception is peaking but to keep people to stick to this behavior when they start to perceive the virus as less threatening.”

<https://wprn.org/item/434052>

**Violating social distancing amid COVID-19 pandemic: Psychological factors to improve compliance (WPRN-434052) - Farias , Jessica (University of Brasilia)**

Social distancing is one of the most effective measures to prevent coronavirus from rapidly spreading. Our analysis investigates the role of some variables (political partisanship, income, professional status, social norms, and uncertainty avoidance) in intentions of not complying with social distancing measures, which can lead to higher infection rates and to compromising the capacity of health systems worldwide. We applied an online questionnaire to 2,056 Brazilian participants. Our findings indicate that individuals that support rightwing parties, have lower wages, are currently unemployed, and have a higher uncertainty avoidance tendency are more prone to violating social distancing measures. Social norms also play a significant role on the intentions but only when using ingroup members (family and friends) as referents.

Paper @<https://psyarxiv.com/apg9e>: “When creating policies to persuade individuals to comply with COVID-19 prevention measures, it is important to focus on perceptions, norms and possible detrimental consequences of non-compliance applied to ingroups (family, friends etc.)”

## Bibliography

Farias, J. E. M., & Pilati, R. (2020). *Violating social distancing amid the COVID-19 pandemic: Psychological factors to improve compliance* [Techreport]. PsyArXiv. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/apg9e>

Neys, W. D., Raelison, M., Boissin, E., Voudouri, A., Bago, B., & Bialek, M. (2020). *MORAL OUTRAGE AND SOCIAL DISTANCING: BAD OR BADLY INFORMED CITIZENS?* [Techreport]. PsyArXiv. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/j9h76>