Concern for others is a better argument to foster social distancing

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ABSTRACT

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). Memorandum 1 : overview of the studies and projects registered on WPRN database

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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, whereas

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), even in the groups most hostile to these measures, which may however perceive the interest in them for their loved ones. The challenge therefore seems to be for public authorities 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 WPRN, a real-time repository of global research on the impact of COVID-19, provides information on what research is currently underway around the world.

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