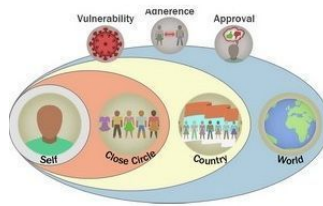## Close Circle Affects Behaviour During Pandemic

Social influences are more important for people's adherence to distancing rules during the pandemic than their own beliefs, a new study shows (Tunçgenç et al. 2021).

You might also like: [Communicating COVID-19 Uncertainty to Public](link)

The pandemic has demanded a drastic change in our behaviours, with social distancing being one of the main features of the 'new normal'. A team of researchers set out to investigate what motivates people to follow the rules and what role social influences play in defining one's behaviour amid the pandemic.

The study used a global dataset of 6,674 participants from 114 countries who were asked about their relationships with other people on three levels, i.e. the close circle, the country and the world, and how these relationships impacted their adherence to COVID-19 distancing guidelines. The focus was on three aspects: perceived vulnerability to the disease, adherence to distancing rules, and approval of distancing rules.

The analysis showed that adherence to distancing rules was the strongest in people whose friends and family exhibited such behaviours, and perceived adherence of others outweighed perceived approval of others for self-adherence. This was more important than people themselves believing that following the rules was pertinent. At a country level, similar social impact was observed in those who felt bonded with their country. Vulnerability of close ones to the disease strongly supported self-adherence in people while the aspect of self-vulnerability played a prominent role for social distancing in those who had wider social circles and hence received more social support. Two other important predictors of adherence to distancing rules were collective efficacy and collectivism.

The findings highlight that during the pandemic, social reference, especially from close groups such as family and friends, has become a significant aspect of people's behaviour. In addition, the impact of collective motives was greater than of more selfish considerations, e.g. vulnerability to the disease.

Outlining policy implications based on the results, the authors underscore the need to appeal to the influence of close circles on people's behaviour when explaining the need to follow social distancing rules to the public. As such, people may be directly asked to provide an example by their own adherence to the rules. Alternatively, messages should enhance the sense of community and shared future, as well as emphasise collectivistic measures. "For effective policies during pandemics and future crises that require a collective behavioural response, our message is as follows: Even when the challenge is to practise social distancing, social closeness is the solution," the authors note in conclusion.

Image credit: Tunçgenç et al. (2021)

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