National identification promotes compliance with Corona rules

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Nearly every country in the world has been affected by the Covid 19 pandemic. In response, governments around the world have initiated far-reaching measures that have required—and continue to require—profound collective changes in citizen behavior. Especially in the first year of the pandemic, when vaccines were not yet available, it was particularly important that people followed instructions, such as limiting physical contact, refraining from travel, and wearing masks.

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"A national identity is the strongest predictor of support for health policies during the pandemic," says Flavio Azevedo from the University of Jena. "Individuals who identify more strongly with their nation are most willing to accept the high burdens of adopting protective behaviors and supporting public health policies." Importantly, the value of national identity reflects the degree of identification with one’s nation, which was assessed using a scientific set of questions, such as respondents' self-assessment on a predetermined scale. It is not synonymous with nationalism.

50,000 respondents in 67 countries

The findings emerge from a unique study. In order to investigate how people around the world deal with the exceptional situation of a pandemic and the corresponding protective measures in the respective countries, a group of psychologists led by the US American Jay van Bavel called on colleagues via Twitter during the first wave of the pandemic to collect data in the respective countries. More than 250 scientists responded to the call, surveying about 50,000 people in 67 countries in April and May 2020 about the extent to which they followed restrictions on physical contact and hygiene requirements, as well as supported policy measures.

The researchers also verified their findings through another study. They compared national identification data from the World Values Survey—a regular international survey of human values—from a period before the pandemic with mobility data collected by Google from the spring of 2020. The study confirmed the findings of the first study: in countries with a higher average level of national identification, citizens restricted their mobility more during the months
of April and May 2020.

Overcoming dangerous situations through a sense of community

"We know that already 100 years ago three psychological factors supported the spread of the Spanish flu: a wrong risk assessment, resistance to social isolation and the inability to comply with preventive measures against an invisible threat," says Flavio Azevedo. "That is why it is particularly important for us behavioral scientists to pay special attention to such an exceptional situation, in which people are collectively called upon to change their habits," explains the psychologist from the University of Jena. "It provides fundamental insights into people's behaviors as well as decision-making, and thus can help shape protective measures before and during a pandemic." For example, from the current research, it is possible to see how important fostering a sense of community and belonging is to managing such a global threat situation.

The network will continue to evaluate the data collected and present further research findings. The researchers will provide information about this on their website: https://icsmp-covid19.netlify.app.

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https://socialsciences.nature.com/posts/an-international-investigation-of-the-psychology-of-covid-19 - Flavio Azevedo reports on the special research collaboration and the study results together with colleagues on these Nature blog
A strong national identification motivates people to get involved in public health, analyzed an international research team.
Image: Jan-Peter Kasper