People's trust levels predict willingness to engage in COVID-19 control behaviors

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Individuals' willingness to engage in COVID-19 control measures is associated with their trust in the government, other citizens, and in particular science, according to a new study published this week in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* by Stefano Pagliaro of University of Chieti-Pescara, Italy, and colleagues.

The spread of SARS-CoV-2 since December 2019 has posed a severe public health threat to people around the world. As vaccines are being rolled out, behavioral changes are also necessary to counter the spread of the virus. These actions include both prescribed behaviors such as wearing masks, social distancing, and quarantining, as well as discretionary prosocial behaviors like donating to charities and buying supplies for people in quarantine. The willingness of citizens to engage in such behaviors varies greatly.

In the new study, researchers examined factors that may account for these differences in behavior. They collected data on 6,948 people from 23 countries using an online survey in April and May of 2020. Participants provided sociodemographic

information and details about their COVID-19 experiences, and answered questions about their moral principles, trust in their government, other citizens, and science and feelings on the importance of adhering to COVID-19 prevention measures.

The results revealed that the country in which people lived accounted for less than 10% of the variance in predicting engagement in prescribed and discretionary behaviors, and the publicized number of infections was not significantly related to individual intentions to engage in either type of behavior. Instead, behavior was largely predicted by individual differences in trust in their government, other citizens, and in particular science. Moreover, the more people endorsed moral principles of fairness and care, the more inclined they were to trust in science and the more likely they were to carry out both prescribed and discretionary behaviors related to COVID-19. Interestingly, factors such as age, gender, and education did not change the overall pattern of results. The authors conclude that communication strategies to encourage behaviors that limit the spread of COVID-19 should be tailored to the broader moral codes of given countries and subgroups of the population.

The authors add: "We considered individuals' intentions to comply with prescribed and discretionary behaviors to manage the spread of COVID-19 in 23 countries and examined the factors that might drive such behavioral intentions. We showed that the publicized statistics of the pandemic in terms of infections and deaths in each country does not represent the only, or even the most important antecedent of individual reactions, as a threat account of the health emergency would suggest. [...] Instead, considering psychological differences in terms of trust toward different agents—governments, citizens, and science—provide a more informative picture of individuals' reactions to COVID-19. " In particular, "[...] The present

research further showed that [trust](#) in [science](#) represents a crucial factor in shaping individuals' [behavior](#) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic."

More information: Pagliaro S, Sacchi S, Pacilli MG, Brambilla M, Lionetti F, Bettache K, et al. (2021) Trust predicts COVID-19 prescribed and discretionary behavioral intentions in 23 countries. *PLoS ONE* 16(3): e0248334. doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0248334

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