Helpful behavior during pandemic tied to recognizing common humanity

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A new University of Washington study links helpful behavior during the pandemic, such as donating medical supplies, to individuals' feelings of connection to others. Credit: Dennis Wise/U. of Washington

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people who recognize the connections

they share with others are more likely to wear a mask, follow health guidelines and help people, even at a potential cost to themselves, a new University of Washington study shows.

Indeed, an identification with all humanity, as opposed to identification with a geographic area like a country or town, predicts whether someone will engage in "prosocial" behaviors particular to the pandemic, such as donating their own masks to a hospital or coming to the aid of a sick person.

The study, published March 10 in *PLOS ONE*, is drawn from about 2,500 responses, from more than 80 countries, to an online, international study launched last April.

Researchers say the findings could have implications for public health messaging during the pandemic: Appealing to individuals' deep sense of connectedness to others could, for example, encourage some people to get vaccinated, wear masks or follow other public health guidelines.

"We want to understand to what extent people feel connected with and identify with all humanity, and how that can be used to explain the individual differences in how people respond during the COVID-19 pandemic," said author Rodolfo Cortes Barragan, a postdoctoral researcher at the UW Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences, or I-LABS, who co-led the study with postdoctoral researcher Nigini Oliveira at the Paul G. Allen School for Computer Science and Engineering.

In psychology, "identification with all humanity" is a belief that can be measured and utilized in predicting behavior or informing policy or decision-making. Last spring, as governments around the world were imposing pandemic restrictions, a multidisciplinary team of UW researchers came together to study the implications of how people would respond to pandemic-related ethical dilemmas, and how those responses

might be associated with various psychological beliefs.

Researchers designed an online study, providing different scenarios based in [social psychology](link) and game theory, for participants to consider. The team then made the study available in English and five other languages on the virtual lab LabintheWild, which co-author Katharina Reinecke, an associate professor in the Allen School, created for conducting behavioral studies with people around the world.

The scenarios presented participants with situations that could arise during the pandemic and asked people to what extent they would:

- Follow the list of World Health Organization health guidelines (which mostly focused on social distancing and hygiene when the study was run between mid-April to mid-June)
- Donate masks of their family's to a hospital short on masks
- Drive a person exhibiting obvious symptoms of COVID-19 to the hospital
- Go to a grocery store to buy food for a neighboring family
- Call an ambulance and wait with a sick person for it to arrive

In addition to demographic details and information about their local pandemic restrictions, such as stay-at-home orders, participants were asked questions to get at the psychology behind their responses: about their own felt identification with their local community, their nation and humanity, in general. For instance, participants were asked, "How much would you say you care (feel upset, want to help) when bad things happen to people all over the world?"
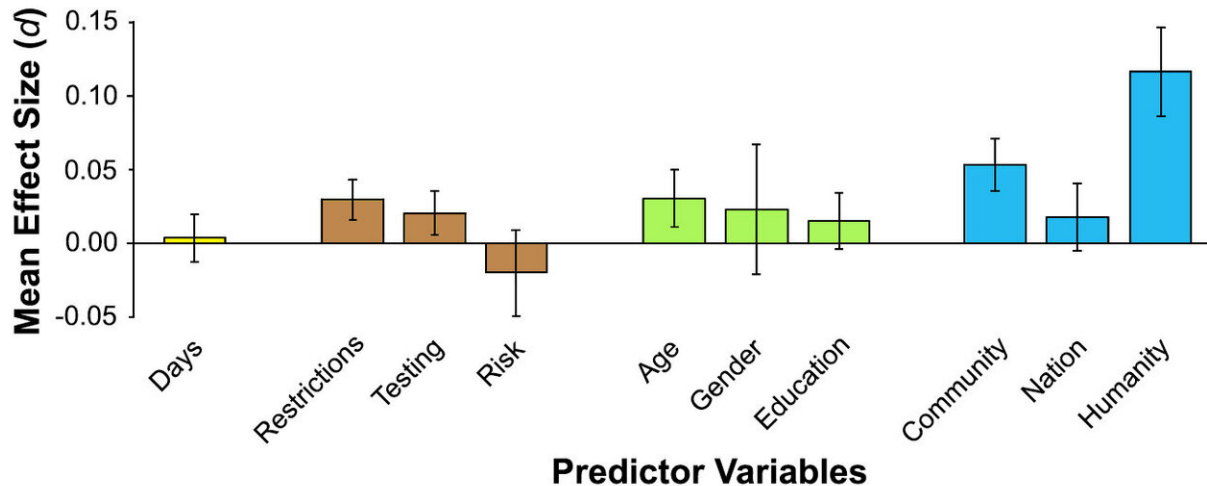
This bar chart shows that "identification with all humanity" had a larger effect size than any other variable on cooperative behavior during the pandemic. Credit: Barragan et al., 2021, PLOS One

Researchers found that an identification with "all humanity" significantly predicted answers to the five scenarios, well above identifying with country or community, and after controlling for other variables such as gender, age or education level. Its effect was stronger than any other factor, said Barragan, and popped out as a highly significant predictor of people's tendency to want to help others.

The authors noted that identifying with one's country, in fact, came in a distant third, behind identification with humanity in general and one's local community. Strong feelings toward one's nation, nationalism, can lead to behavior and policies that favor some groups of people over others.

"There is variability in how people respond to the social aspects of the pandemic. Our research reveals that a crucial aspect of one's world

view—how much people feel connected to others they have never met—predicts people's cooperation with public health measures and the altruism they feel toward others during the pandemic," said co-author Andrew Meltzoff, who is co-director of I-LABS and holds the Job and Gertrud Tamaki Endowed Chair in psychology.

Since last spring, of course, much has changed. More than 2.5 million people worldwide have died of COVID-19, vaccines are being administered, and guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, especially regarding masks, has evolved. If a new survey was launched today, Barragan said, the research group would like to include scenarios tuned to the current demands of the pandemic and the way it challenges us to care for others even while we maintain physical distancing.

While surveys, in general, can be prone to what's known as self-serving bias—the participant answers in ways that they believe will make them "look good"—researchers say that's not evident here. They point to the sizeable differences between responses that identify with all humanity, and those that identify with community or country, and note there would be little reason for participants to deliberately emphasize one and not the others.

The project is part of a larger multidisciplinary effort by this same UW research team to bring together computer scientists and psychologists interested in decision-making in different cultural contexts, which could inform our understanding of human and machine learning.

An eventual aim of the study is to use tools from artificial intelligence research and online interactions with humans around the world to understand how one's culture influences social and moral decision-making.

"This project is a wonderful example of how the tools of computer science can be combined with psychological science to understand human moral behaviors, revealing new information for the public good," said co-author Rajesh Rao, the Hwang Endowed Professor of Computer Science and Engineering at the UW.

For COVID-19 and future humanitarian crises, the ethical dilemmas presented in the study can offer insight into what propels people to help, which can, in turn, inform policy and outreach.

"While it is true that many people don't seem to be exhibiting helpful behaviors during this pandemic, what our study shows is that there are specific characteristics that predict who is especially likely to engage in such behavior," Barragan said. "Future work could help people to feel a stronger connection to others, and this could promote more helpful behavior during pandemics."

More information: Rodolfo C. Barragan et al, Identifying with all humanity predicts cooperative health behaviors and helpful responding during COVID-19, *PLOS ONE* (2021). DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0248234

Provided by University of Washington

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