Personality traits affect shelter at home compliance

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A worldwide survey conducted during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic found that people with certain common personality traits were less likely to shelter at home when government policies were less restrictive, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"We found that people who scored low on two personality traits —openness to experience and neuroticism—were less likely to shelter at home in the absence of stringent government measures, but that tendency went away when more restrictive government policies were implemented," said Friedrich Götz, MPhil, a doctoral candidate at the University of Cambridge and lead author of the study. "Initially, this was a bit astounding, as open individuals have traditionally been shown to be prone to risk taking, willing to deviate from cultural norms and likely to seek out and approach novel and unfamiliar things—all of which would arguably put them at greater risk to ignore sheltering-in-place recommendations. However, at the same time, openness is also related to accurate risk perceptions, universalism and humankind identification. Thus, in the digitalized world in which the current pandemic occurred, these qualities may have led open individuals to follow the COVID-19 outbreak in other countries, realize its severity and act accordingly."

The researchers used data from the "Measuring Worldwide COVID-19 Attitudes and Beliefs" project, a global survey that sought to assess participants' behaviors and perceptions of others' behaviors during the COVID-19 crisis as the pandemic unfolded. Götz and his colleagues analyzed responses from more than 101,000 participants in 55 countries where at least 200 people responded to the survey between March 20 and April 5, 2020. In addition to providing information on behavior, participants also provided sociodemographic data and answered a series of questions designed to measure the so-called Big Five personality traits: conscientiousness, neuroticism, agreeableness, extraversion and openness.

To assess each country's national policy stringency, the researchers used the COVID-19 Government Response Stringency Index, which assigns stringency scores based on seven policy measures—school closing, workplace closing, cancelation of public events, suspension of public transport, implementation of public information campaigns, restrictions

on internal movement and international travel controls.

"Our analyses reveal that both governmental stringency and personality independently predicted sheltering-in-place rates. Not surprisingly, in areas where government policies were more stringent, people were more likely to shelter in place," said Götz.

The researchers also found that, regardless of the stringency of government policy measures, personality traits were associated with shelter-in-place behavior. For instance, people who scored high on extraversion were significantly less likely to shelter in place, while higher scores on the other four personality traits were associated with greater likelihood to shelter in place, irrespective of how strictly the government enforced its policies.

But, while people who scored low on openness and neuroticism were less likely to shelter in place when government policies were lenient, that tendency was reduced when stricter government policies were in place.

Another explanation for the findings could be political, according to Götz. People who score high on openness tend to be more liberal in their political beliefs, and in the United States—the country with the second highest number of survey responses—compliance with social distancing behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic appears to be strongly linked to partisanship, with liberals being much more likely to comply than conservatives.

"Taken together, the results reaffirm the power of personality as a central driver of behavior, a force that is not simply eclipsed by governmental policy," said co-author Jon Jachimowicz, Ph.D., of Harvard University. "Still, stringent governmental policies were able to decrease the influence of two personality traits, demonstrating how macro-level forces can diminish the influence of certain micro-level

factors."

Because personality plays such a crucial role as governments continue to relax and reinstate tight government rules in reaction to changes in the spread of disease, it is important to understand why some people flout the rules more than others, according to Jachimowicz. Learning what characterizes such people can be informative in multiple ways, from helping to identify potential super-spreaders to tailoring public health messages to people's personalities in order to increase compliance.

More information: Friedrich M. Götz et al, How personality and policy predict pandemic behavior: Understanding sheltering-in-place in 55 countries at the onset of COVID-19., *American Psychologist* (2020). DOI: 10.1037/amp0000740

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