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Findings Report

The effect of agency and communion on pandemic response and post-lockdown recovery.

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Background

Human personality can be considered through the lens of two broad dimensions known as agency and communion (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007). Agency reflects competence, independence, achievement and is characterised by a strong drive for control, power and influence, whereas communion relates to factors such as agreeableness, social dependence, and caring and is characterised by nurturing and cooperative behaviours. The impact of population health messages may be influenced by these personality traits.

Aims

This study aimed to explore the effects of agentic and communal personality traits on individual people's responses to the pandemic, including their compliance with lockdown rules and health advice during the first UK national COVID-19 lockdown and on their recovery, wellbeing and behaviour after lockdowns ended.

Methods

Part 1

We used a survey methodology to find out about participants' personality type and their behaviours during the lockdown.

Participants were invited to nominate a person (buddy) who knew them well and were aware of their behaviour during the pandemic period, in order to confirm their responses to the survey.

Part 2

During the period from February 15th to May 10th, 2023, after the lockdowns had ended, participants completed short surveys about their well-being every 2 weeks over a period of 3 months.

Measures: Validated and widely used scales were used to assess individuals' personality and well-being outcomes. To incorporate pandemic beliefs and behaviours into our study, we adapted items from established health scales.

Participants:

1,729 Healthwise Wales participants (40% male, 60% female; *M* age = 63, *SD* = 12.9) from across Wales took part in Part 1 of the study.

230 buddies took part in confirming the information provided by survey participants.

850 participants from Part 1 also reported their well-being post-lockdown.

Summary of findings

The results of this study provide important insights into the effect of personality on compliance with health advice during the pandemic, and on post pandemic recovery.

Who does not comply with health advice?

- Individuals higher in agentic personality were less likely to comply with lockdown regulations, infection prevention advice, and health messaging compared to individuals higher in communal personality.

How can we improve compliance with health advice?

- Individuals higher in agentic personality are more likely to improve their compliance with health advice as the personal threat of infection increases, compared to individuals higher in communal personality who are less likely to improve their compliance as the threat of infection increases.
- Health messaging that emphasises the combined impact of not following health advice on both the community (other-focused) and the individual (self-focused) is likely to be more effective in promoting compliance among individuals with communal and agentic characteristics, respectively, compared to messages that do not take personality into account.

What's the cost of compliance on people's well-being?

- The more individuals complied with health advice during lockdown, the worse their well-being post-lockdown.
- Increasing awareness of the risk of infection can effectively encourage compliance, but it also has negative consequences on people's well-being and recovery, especially for those higher in communal traits.

Implications for future public messaging strategies:

Agentic individuals are motivated by power, influence, and control. For agentic characters, complying with health advice poses a threat to their sense of control, and as a result, they are less likely to adopt new health behaviours. Our analysis suggests that agentic characters are more likely to adopt new health behaviours when they understand the personal health risks and consequences of not complying. This self-focused response is in line with their

tendency to prioritise their own well-being in response to factors that threaten their sense of personal competence and independence.

On the other hand, individuals with more Communal traits are motivated by social status and acceptance through caring and nurturing others. Thus, they are more likely to comply with health advice because it aligns with their nurturing tendencies. Our results suggest individuals higher in communal personality are more likely to adopt health behaviours that align with health advice and health messaging.

Considering our findings in relation to public messaging campaigns, we believe that messages emphasising both the communal (other focussed) and agentic (self-focussed) costs of not following health advice are likely to be more effective in driving compliance compared to messages that do not take personality into account.

A need for balance

During the COVID-19 lockdown, anxiety-provoking health messages were effective in improving compliance. However, messages targeting people's recovery and transition back to normality post-lockdown were less prevalent, potentially hindering the recovery of millions.

Our findings suggest that, although increasing worry is effective in driving behavioural compliance during pandemics, using such strategies undermines people's well-being and psychological recovery. Specifically, people with higher Communal traits are likely to still be suffering from the effects of the lockdown period for some time after restrictions end. Without guidance, these people are more likely to maintain the infection prevention behaviours recommended during lockdown, which may undermine their psychological recovery post-lockdown.

These results emphasise the need for phase appropriate messaging across the entire timescale of a crisis, including response, maintenance of health behaviours, and recovery phases. Promoting anxiety-provoking health messages without a recovery support phase may incur significant social and financial costs in the future.

Our findings offer new and valuable insights into the interplay between agentic and communal personality traits and compliance with health advice. By understanding and addressing the specific motivations and concerns of different personality types, policymakers can develop targeted messaging that effectively promotes adherence to health guidelines and recovery from crises across a broader range of individuals.

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