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Loneliness during the pandemic – social isolation increases the likelihood of selfish behaviour

[no press embargo](#)

Social distancing as a counter-measure to the COVID-19 pandemic has far-reaching social consequences which have so far hardly been discussed from an economic perspective. This is demonstrated in a study by the Halle Institute for Economic Research (IWH). “Experiencing social isolation resulted in the participants in our study making more selfish decisions,” says the author of the study, Sabrina Jeworrek, Assistant Professor at Otto von Guericke University Magdeburg and head of research group in the Department of Structural Change and Productivity at IWH.

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A Spanish study had already shown that the willingness to donate had declined during the pandemic. The IWH study now examined whether social distancing could provide an explanation for this behavioural change. As the IWH study was carried out at the end of May 2021, during extensive easing in Magdeburg and the associated feeling of relief, the effects of social distancing appear to be continuing post-lockdown. However, the study also contains good news: “The subjects displayed more prosocial behaviour after we’d reminded them of the applicable norms,” says Jeworrek.

For the study, Sabrina Jeworrek and Joschka Waibel conducted two online experiments involving more than 500 students at Otto von Guericke University Magdeburg. In both experiments, the subjects were randomly divided into two groups – one that was consciously reminded of social distancing by means of specific questions about their personal experiences and feelings during lockdown, and a neutral control group. In both experiments, subjects were presented with the following situation: An individual and a charity each receive the same amount of money. The individual can make use of the charity’s funds or increase these by making a donation from their own pocket.

In the first experiment, the subjects had to judge the social appropriateness of the different options for dealing with this situation. “We didn’t observe any differences between the two groups. Evoking memories of social distancing apparently had no impact on the underlying norm that describes behaviour in such a situation as socially appropriate or inappropriate,” explains Sabrina Jeworrek. In the second experiment, new subjects assumed the role of the individual who received a sum of money and was also allowed to manage the charity’s budget. In this case, there were significant differences between the groups. The control group took a much smaller amount of money from the charity than the group with vivid memories of lockdown. “The results show that activating memories of social isolation leads to more selfish monetary allocation decisions. If, however, the subjects were also made aware of

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how subjects in another study behaved in a similar situation, the negative impact of social distancing could be reduced,” says Jeworrek.

The study therefore also proves that it is important to highlight values and norms, especially now. Focusing on exemplary behaviour can be an important tool in alleviating the negative social consequences of the lockdown. The study also shows that digital media is apparently not an adequate substitute for close human contact. “Young people like our students, in particular, stayed in touch with family and friends using video calls or social media. Nevertheless, almost 80% experienced social isolation,” says Sabrina Jeworrek.

Publication


Sabrina Jeworrek, Joschka Waibel: Alone at Home: The Impact of Social Distancing on Norm-consistent Behavior. [IWH Discussion Papers 8/2021](#).

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