Prosociality predicts health behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic

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3. Abstract
Socially responsible behavior is crucial for slowing the spread of infectious diseases. However, economic and epidemiological models of disease transmission abstract from prosocial motivations as a driver of behaviors that impact the health of others. In an incentivized study, we show that a large majority of people are very reluctant to put others at risk for their personal benefit. Moreover, this experimental measure of prosociality predicts health behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic, measured in a separate and ostensibly unrelated study with the same people. Prosocial individuals are more likely to follow physical distancing guidelines, stay home when sick, and buy face masks. We also find that prosociality measured two years before the pandemic predicts health behaviors during the pandemic. Our findings indicate that prosociality is a stable, long-term predictor of policy-relevant behaviors, suggesting that the impact of policies on a population may depend on the degree of prosociality.

4. Data description
To study the link between social preferences and health behavior, we collect measures of health behaviors and social preferences in two surveys involving a broadly representative sample of the Swedish population (N=967). In the health behavior survey, we collect information on thirteen different health behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic, including whether participants maintain physical distancing, follow hygiene recommendations, and stay home when sick. In the social preferences survey, we measure prosociality by using an incentivized game in which people can expose others to risk for their own benefit. The game does not involve any framing that is linked to COVID-19, but instead measures a general willingness to forgo personal benefit to mitigate risks to others. We match these data with an additional prosociality measure collected for a subset of the same participants two years before the pandemic.

5. JEL codes for the project: D01, D91, I12, I18

6. Key-words: social preferences, health behavior, externalities, COVID-19