

# From the Motivation Barometer to the THRIVE project – Past and future research on psychological aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic

**Olivier Luminet**

*Research Institute for Psychological Sciences, UCLouvain and Fund for Scientific Research (FRS-FNRS), Belgium*

## Introduction

Since the fall 2020, I had the chance to join a consortium of Belgian psychology researchers monitoring cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects of citizens' functioning across the Covid-19 pandemic. The project, called the Motivation Barometer (<https://motivationbarometer.com/en/>) collected data until the end of 2022. Although we are still publishing papers based on the data collection done during the pandemic, we couldn't pursue new data collections due to lack of funding. In the spring 2023, the Belgian federal agency for research (Belspo) launched a post-covid call to fund scientific projects examining the long-term impact of the Covid crisis on the Belgian society. There were two conditions to apply for the call. First, the research team needed to be multi-disciplinary. Second, the consortium needed to include several research institutions located in the different regions of the country. Early November we learned the very good news that this 1.5 million € project is funded.

In this paper, I will highlight the goals and principles of the Motivation barometer project and illustrate some key findings. Then, I will present the THRIVE project, which will be running from December 2023 until March 2027. The goal of this paper is to generate interest and potential new collaborations within the community of EHPS

members.

## The Motivation Barometer (2020-2022)

The overall aim of the Motivation Barometer was to develop an evidence-informed and, whenever possible, an evidence-based policy with respect to various psychological challenges that the population was facing during the pandemic.

Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) was a central psychological framework, together with socio-cognitive models of behaviour change. The large variety of psychological domains covered included behavioural (e.g., adherence to measures), motivational (e.g., vaccination motivation), cognitive (e.g., risk perception), emotional (e.g., boredom), and social (e.g., loneliness, trust in authorities) aspects of individuals' functioning. We were particularly interested in examining determinants of outcome variables such as adherence to sanitary behaviours, well-being, or vaccination willingness, together with variations in people's preference for different Covid-related policy options.

Next to regular data collections targeting the whole Belgian population, we also assessed some vulnerable groups including youngsters, elderly, or unvaccinated people (for a full presentation of the Motivation Barometer, see Vansteenkiste, Waterschoot, Morbee, et al., 2024). From the beginning of the pandemic, we communicated

largely that the Covid-19 was a major psychological challenge in addition to the central medical aspects. To this end, we used different communication pathways and channels to reach different stakeholders (media, political authorities, NGOs). Political authorities involved in public health were consulted on a regular basis during follow-up committees. It gave them an opportunity to provide inputs on new direction and priorities of the project. However, we kept a total independence regarding the final decisions about which domains and population to target.

In terms of methodology, the pace of data collection was flexible, governed by the rise of emerging themes and concerns related to particular phases of the pandemic (e.g., vaccination campaign, demonstrations against the covid measures, ...). The Motivation Barometer relied on a variety of research designs and statistical methods to collect and analyze findings. We used both cross-sectional cohorts and longitudinal follow-up surveys (20% of the total sample), but also administered experimental designs using for instance a vignette format. The total sample involved almost half-million participants collected during more than 100 data-collection waves between March 2020 and October 2022, with on average almost 3,000 participants in each wave (range: 746 – 24,818). Of this total sample, subsamples participated multiple times, with 32,156 persons having participated between 2 to 5 times, 7,109 persons between 6 to 10 times, and 2,408 persons between 11 to 20 times (Vansteenskiste et al., 2024).

The following study illustrates one contribution of our project. We examined how the proportionality of measures taken by public authorities between March 2020 and March 2022 to face the epidemiological situation was related to citizens' behaviour, motivation and mental health (Waterschoot, Morbée, Van den Bergh, et al., 2023). An important conclusion that we largely communicate was that stringent measures are not

per se demotivating or damaging people's well-being, nor are lenient measures as such motivating or enhancing well-being. Only proportional measures, that is, measures with a level of stringency that is aligned with the actual epidemiological situation (e.g., number of people hospitalized for Covid-19), are associated with the greatest motivational, behavioural, and mental health benefits.

## The THRIVE project (2023-2027)

The THRIVE project is a natural continuation of the Motivation Barometer project, but it also contains some important changes. First, we want to better combine descriptive and predictive objectives. From a descriptive perspective, we will use a person-centered approach to identify profiles with high risk for low well-being and realize in-depth work on sub-groups at risk (e.g., within youngsters, the ones involved in transition life steps). From a predictive perspective, we will use trajectory analyses to predict groups with higher resilience in mental health and identify factors that explain mental health gaps such as age, gender, ethnicity, education, socio-economic level, or occupational status.

Second, in addition to further population based data collections, we will focus on qualitative data with vulnerable groups such as youngsters or people with low SES. This will be achieved through the inclusion of sociologists specialized in qualitative approaches in the research team. Third, our approach will better integrate objective (e.g., stringency of sanitary measures) and subjective markers (e.g., trust in authorities) and their interrelations with mental health. Fourth, by relying on existing data collected during the pandemic and associating them to new post-pandemic waves, the present proposal will provide a rich temporal and dynamic perspective on the core issues tackled in this project. Thus, not only

do we appraise the experience of the pandemic, but also its traces. For instance, we will examine how the pandemic is remembered and the conditions under which it can become part of the collective memory of the population in general, or of some specific groups (Luminet & Cordonnier, in press).

The project involves active collaborations with partners in other countries. Three research groups, closely linked with EHPS, will be involved, including Kyra Hamilton from Griffith University (Australia), Martin Hagger from University of California, Merced (US), and the Dutch National Institute of Public Health and the Environment (RIVM) (involving among other Jet Sanders and Floor Kroese). The goal is to develop parallel data collections during the research project, having a close examination of previous datasets along with the identification of domains in which cross-national comparisons can be operationalized. These collaborators will also be involved in the impact plan (see below) with a specific focus on designing effective interventions in the domains of well-being and democratic governance.

## Societal impact

In addition to a scientific committee including researchers from other domains (epidemiology, political science, public policy), the project includes an impact plan, with the goal of implementing concrete recommendations based on the scientific findings. This means active collaborations with stakeholders (e.g., health insurance companies, patient associations, political authorities) via co-creation formulas. This involves bottom-up approaches in which the different partners provide their own expertise regarding scenarios of future pandemics, and the different strategies to address in those situations.

THRIVE aims to gather crucial information on the preparedness of the population to adopt health behaviors in the event of a future pandemic. It will

assess the factors that influence this readiness and examine how these behaviours impact individuals' well-being, mental health, and relation to democratic governance. Our findings will help public authorities in understanding the effectiveness of targeted prevention campaigns for specific groups based on their socio-demographic and psychological characteristics. Furthermore, it will help strike a balance between the effectiveness of these health behaviours in mitigating the pandemic and their potential impact on people's well-being (on a similar issue see Wollast, Schmitz, Bigot, et al., 2023).

In addition to the research activities, we also developed an expert group called "Psychology and corona" (<https://en.bfp-fbp.be/psychology-corona>). The group was composed of academics working in Belgian Universities and representatives of Belgian professional psychology associations. The goals were to advance a conceptual framework on corona-related behaviour as a basis for strategic advice, to disseminate research reports and opinion pieces, and to build up links with media, committees of other experts and policy makers.

In 2023, we realized that the valuable insights of this collaboration should be extended beyond Covid-19 and could tackle other societal challenges.

Based on the same principles of functioning than "Psychology and corona", our group extended its goals to other societal challenge, and it now called "Psychology and society".

The activities of this new expert group are related to education, research, and communication with stakeholders. We decided to center the first actions towards climate change. The education part aims to foster knowledge (from climate science to eco anxiety) and the potential role of psychology in these processes (from mitigation to adaptation). Concretely, it means exchanging existing approaches and material across universities and organizing cross-university courses on psychology and climate change. At the research level, we want

to facilitate collaborations on various psychological aspects on climate change (i.e., behavioral, social, emotional, cognitive, and motivational) and the individual and contextual factors affecting these psychological aspects (e.g., political trust, values). In this perspective, we work on a Motivation Barometer 2.0 version that will also include items regarding the preparedness for future pandemics (e.g., readiness to re-adopt health behaviours, factors that influence this readiness and evaluation of these behaviours on individuals' well-being, and relation to democratic governance).

## References

- Luminet, O., & Cordonnier, A. (2024a). Changes and stabilities in emotional memories. In A. Samson, D. Sander, & U. Kramer (Eds.), *Change in emotion and mental health* (pp. 71-96). Cambridge, MA: Elsevier.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. New York, NY: Guilford Publications.
- Vansteenkiste, M., Waterschoot, J., Morbée, S., Van Oost, P., Schmitz, M., Brisbois, M., Raemdonck, E., Klein, O., Luminet, O., Yzerbyt, V., & Van den Bergh, O. (2024). Psychological science and its societal mission during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic: The motivation barometer as an evidence-informed policy instrument in Belgium. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 18, 59-88. DOI: 10.1111/sipr.12101
- Waterschoot, J., Morbée, S., Van den Bergh, O., Yzerbyt, V., Raemdonck, E., Brisbois, M., Schmitz, M., Klein, O., Luminet, O., Van Oost, P., & Vansteenkiste, M. (2023). How the stringency of the COVID-19 restrictions influences motivation for adherence and well-being: The critical role of proportionality. *International Journal of Health Policy and Management*, 12, 8021. DOI: 10.34172/ijhpm.2023.8021
- Wollast, R., Schmitz, M., Bigot, A., Speybroeck, N., Lacourse, E., de la Sablonnière, R. & Luminet, O. (2023). Trajectories of health behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic: A longitudinal analysis of handwashing, mask wearing, social contact limitations, and physical distancing. *Psychology & Health*. DOI: 10.1080/08870446.2023.2278706



### Olivier Luminet

Research Institute for Psychological Sciences, UCLouvain

Fund for Scientific Research (FRS-FNRS), Belgium

[Olivier.luminet@uclouvain.be](mailto:Olivier.luminet@uclouvain.be)