

Is Security Possible? The Use of Face Coverings to Reduce Transmission of Covid-19

Written by Olivia Foster-Wakeling

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The spread of Covid-19 has posed a significant threat, not only to national security, but human security globally. A key cause for the rapid spread of the virus is airborne transmission. The use of face coverings is a security measure designed to tackle this threat and make society safer from the virus. By comparing both the United Kingdom's and the United States' approach to face coverings, the importance of various components within the Securitisation Theory will be examined. Although this measure does create greater health security, it can cause other human security threats such as an increase in crime and societal polarisation. Despite this, face coverings can make security from airborne transmission possible, if there is the imbuelement of governmentality within society and the responsabilisation of citizens. When individuals believe that they hold a stake in the issue and therefore desire security from the measure, face coverings can become a viable means to achieving greater security.

The Use of Face Coverings as a Security Measure

The rapid spread of the Covid-19 has been attributed to transmission via droplets from the nose or mouth.[1] The virus spreads due to an individual being exposed to these droplets at a distance of less than six feet. Research has further outlined that transmission can occur over a distance further than six feet in spaces which are enclosed and less ventilated. This has been referred to by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as airborne transmission, whereby these droplets can 'remain suspended in the air over long distances and time'.[2] As a result, by wearing a face covering, exposure to these respiratory particles can be reduced, improving the security of the individual as well as the community they pertain to. Due to this, face masks have been recommended as an effective 'non-pharmaceutical intervention' which can help to reduce transmission.[3] These coverings also reduce the risk of transmission from those who are unaware that they are carrying the virus. The possibility for asymptomatic transmission is a key threat to health security. [4] As a consequence, the universal use of face coverings is a measure designed to protect human security. They are viewed as a preventive measure which can be widely enforced at a low-cost by both carriers and non-carriers of the virus.

The Securitisation Theory

Through the Securitisation Theory, it is possible to investigate why certain issues, such as airborne transmission, are able to become politicised and thus framed as a security threat. This theory, forefronted by Copenhagen School theorists Buzan and Waever, established three components, consisting of the 'securitising actor, the referent subject or object and/or the audience'.[5] Balzacq believes that the role of the securitising actor involves 'investing the referent object' in the idea that there is a threat, of an unprecedented nature, which therefore requires immediate action. This can lead to the presentation of a 'customised policy' involving the use of extreme measures.[6] The theory draws attention to the discursive nature of securitisation, viewing it as the 'intersubjective representations' of issues. The construction of an issue as a security threat, is considered to be significant in legitimising the use of security measures to tackle it. Balzacq states that the Securitisation Theory links the ways in which threats are confronted, to perceptions of threats amongst political actors.[7] The use of Constructivism within this theory highlights that security is indeed possible, if the securitising actor effectively depicts an issue as having caused or having the potential to cause insecurity.

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In order for face coverings to be effectively enforced, the governing body of a nation has to discursively present the measure as one in which each citizen can provide and benefit from the increased security provided. The government is also able to promote the idea that should this measure not be followed, the individual is challenging the 'successful provision of security'.^[8] This links to the theory of 'governmentality', attributed to Foucault, which dictates that responsibility can be transferred from the government to individuals. This suggests that the government can 'act remotely' through individuals who henceforth act upon their own self-accord to make society safer. This further relates to the concept of 'responsibilisation', whereby individuals are called upon to take responsibility and care for themselves.^[9] Within the Covid-19 pandemic, the threat of transmission originates with each individual. Due to this, certain governments have called upon their citizens to take responsibility for keeping the wider community safe.

The idea of investing individuals in a security threat has been explored by Jarvis and Lister, who have referred to the concept of 'stakeholder security'. Their work focuses upon a government's attempts at enlisting 'ordinary individuals' into modes of security, as a way of combatting a security threat from a lower level. In doing so, governments are able to imbue governmentality from the 'bottom up', promoting responsibilisation and making the individual a stakeholder in the security measure.^[10] This is corroborated by Cheng et al. who state that face coverings signify the shift from 'self-protection to altruism', thus becoming a 'symbol of social solidarity'.^[11] This affirms the notion that theoretically, the securitising actor can invest the audience in the measure by appealing to altruism and solidarity. This will promote the responsibilisation of society, providing each individual with a stake in the security measure.

The Use of Face Coverings in the United Kingdom

To contextualise the theory of securitisation, the transmission of Covid-19 was, in the United Kingdom, presented as a threat to human security. This is due to the virus affecting an individual's mental and physical health, as well as economic security. The widespread nature of the threat meant that it was also considered a national security issue. The securitising actor, the British Government, was responsible for saving lives by lowering the infection rate and protecting institutions such as the National Healthcare Service.^[12] The Government used televised speeches and conferences to emphasise the threat of airborne transmission, securitising this issue and presenting extreme measures to prevent it. One of these extreme measures was the compulsory enforcement of face coverings in enclosed spaces, with a fine of £100, later raised to £200, for non-compliance. During press conferences, government figures appealed to the concept of altruism, encouraging citizens to take responsibility for making society safer. On 23 June 2020, the Prime Minister referred to the need for society to 'do our bit to control the virus'.^[13] Through discourse promoting individual responsibility to prevent transmission within our communities, the Government encouraged the responsibilisation of British citizens.

Moreover, the Government invested individuals in the security threat, making them more receptive to the use of extreme measures. This is evidenced by an Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) from 12 August until 16 August 2020, in which 69% of adults interviewed believed that the police 'should be very strict or strict in enforcing rules to help reduce the spread of coronavirus'. With the consensus within the audience for the greater enforcement of these rules, there was the mandate present to allow the use of extreme measures aimed at making society safer from the virus. This implies that if the population desires the enforcement of the security measure the ability for face masks to provide security is possible. This is reinforced by OPN surveys taken during the period from 18 September until 16 October 2020, where more than 9 in 10 adults stated that they had 'worn a face covering to slow the spread of Coronavirus'.^[14] This high level of compliance highlights the impact of government discourse and enforcement in promoting the responsibilisation of the British people and imbuing governmentality from the bottom up.

Exemptions

Nevertheless, despite face coverings becoming a universal security measure, some individuals are legally exempt. The official Government guidelines outline various exemptions, including disability, mental illness and in cases where using a face covering would cause the individual 'severe distress'. However, some of these conditions are not always outwardly visible, meaning other individuals may doubt the exemption. It is the prerogative of the individual to carry a sign, card or badge which acts as a visible symbol of their exemption.^[15] The decision to forgo such a symbol, can provoke antagonism and insecurity, as another individual wearing a mask may feel as though the rules

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are not being upheld by all of the community. As a result, whilst mass mask wearing can foster greater selflessness, it can also lead to the societal polarisation of those perceived to be the antonym of this.

This is exemplified by the case of Georgina Fallows, who experienced verbal abuse from members of the public for not wearing a mask. As a survivor of rape, Georgina finds it difficult to cover her mouth as it provokes memories of her attack. However, she has struggled with her exemption not being regarded by others as legitimate or 'official'. She stated that she was accused of being the reason why a member of the public's family member had been killed by the virus. Due to this, Georgina feels as though she needs to avoid using public transport or entering shops.[16] The responsabilisation and governmentality of society can in fact lead to isolation for those who do not appear to be exemplifying responsible behaviour and protecting the community. As a result, whilst face coverings can create security for the majority, it can lead to greater insecurity for a minority.

Crime

Human insecurity has also been evidenced by the rise in hate crime during the year 2020, which can be linked to the increased governmentality in British society. Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Nick Ephgrave, stated to the London Assembly Police and Crime Committee that there had been a correlation between face masks and increased hate crime. Ephgrave stated that in London, between January and September 2020, hate crime had seen a 17 per cent increase whilst the national level had increased by 25 per cent. It was explained that debates which began with a focus on face coverings had frequently led to arguments in which there was racist abuse.[17] Governmentality can empower individuals to voice their concerns, however the expression of hate can result in the victimisation of others. This is due to the security measure having generated greater societal tension which can, as a consequence, act as a trigger for hate crime. Although governmentality can ensure compliance, it can also single out individuals, creating human insecurity.

Furthermore, Northamptonshire Police reported that although cases were rising in the county, select individuals continually disregarded the regulations aimed at combatting the spread. Concern from members of the public had been expressed regarding particular individuals refusing to cover their face on public transport. As a consequence, the police were given additional powers to enforce the wearing of face masks. From 27 March until 19 October 2020, Northamptonshire Police issued 9 Forced Penalty Notices for 'failure to wear a face covering on public transport'. [18] As shown by this public denunciation, the offences committed by those who do not wish to abide by these regulations, created insecurity. Yet, there is a mandate in place to deal with non-compliance, enabling authorities to reduce this insecurity. Furthermore, the reports by members of the public highlight the responsabilisation of the British public to hold others accountable for upholding the security measure.

The Use of Face Coverings in the United States

Conversely, in the United States, security from this threat has not been universally possible. Whilst certain health authorities labelled the airborne transmission of Covid-19 a security threat, this was not consistent nationally. However, on 3 April 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention publicly recommended Americans to wear face masks.[19] Following this recommendation, from 8 April until 15 May 2020, 15 US states as well as Washington D.C, brought in a state-wide face mask mandate in public spaces. In a model created by Wei and Wehby, it was projected that due to the mask mandates in place, by 22 May 2020 it could be approximated that potentially 230 0000 – 450 000 cases of Covid-19 had been averted.[20] Although these rates may have also been influenced by other preventive measures such as social distancing, the data affirms that mask mandates do have a direct impact on the rate of transmission, increasing both individual and community security.

In addition to this, research by Chernozhukov et al. has confirmed that US citizens are safer from the virus by wearing face coverings. They estimated that if a national face mask mandate for those employed in public businesses had been enforced on 14 March 2020, the rate of growth of Covid-19 cases and subsequent deaths, could have resulted in a reduction of around 10 per cent by the end of April 2020. They went further to state that this measure could have saved 34 000 lives by late May.[21] It can therefore be deduced that a national mask mandate, for public business employees in particular, would have slowed the spread of the virus and provided greater human

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security. This shows that security from face coverings is possible, albeit contingent on the securitising actor enforcing the measure through a national mandate.

Civil Liberties

Nevertheless, civic compliance for overall societal security is particularly challenging due to the issue of individual liberty. The face mask has become a symbol of collective action in order to protect the wider community from transmission of the virus. However, in the United States, the responsabilisation of the population has been prevented due to the principle of self-determination. For some individuals, they believe that it is their right to choose whether they wish to partake in wearing face coverings. The Self-Determination Theory focuses on autonomy as one of the 'basic psychological needs'. Scheid et al. propose that with mask wearing having been recommended and even legalised, this can 'impact perceptions of autonomy', provoking a psychological reaction which can subsequently translate into a negative reaction.[22] This can result in attempts to re-instil the freedom which has been perceived to have been threatened, leading to responses such as anger and non-compliance.

This has been exemplified by 'anti-mask' protests in the United States. According to anti-mask protestors, a key reason for protest was the removal of individual freedoms and rights.[23] This demonstrates that these individuals feared that their autonomy was threatened, which provoked a negative reaction in the form of protest. This movement can serve to undermine efforts at achieving security from face coverings and confirms that security is only possible where there is a receptive audience. As a consequence, if security from face coverings is not desired, security is not possible for every individual. To ensure security, it is perhaps imperative to therefore focus upon the role of the securitising actor in presenting the security issue and promoting public compliance.

National Disparities

Although the majority of states have a statewide mask mandate, there are still large states such as Wyoming, which do not. Contrast to this is New York, which is inhabited by nineteen million more people than Wyoming.[24] In April 2020, a state-wide face mask mandate was introduced in New York. In the document produced by the City Health Department, it was stated that 'face coverings are critical to stopping the spread of COVID-19'. The Department recognised the security threat posed by airborne transmission, explaining that by using a face covering, the 'exposure to respiratory droplets which may contain the virus' would be reduced.[25] Whilst Wyoming saw 145.0 cases per 100 000 in the period 12-19 November 2020, New York reported 27.4 cases despite having a larger population.[26] The widespread use of face coverings within New York was promoted by the Mayor and invested in by the state's population. This therefore demonstrates that security through the wearing of face coverings is possible, however it is dependent upon the issue of airborne transmission being securitised by the securitising actor.

The effect of conflicting information upon the population has also been examined by Goldberg et al. They researched the attitudes of 3933 people towards mask wearing over the period 3 April to 7 April. As the CDC recommendation was disseminated by the media and news outlets on 4 April, this research was able to measure the impact of the recommendation on public attitudes. The findings showed a significant increase in the wearing and purchasing of masks between 5 April to 7 April when compared to data recorded from the 3 April to the 4 April. Goldberg et al. also stated that on 4 April, the term 'face mask' had a peak number of searches on the web, YouTube and news.[27] This proves that the receptibility to a security measure can be improved, where there is recognition by an authoritative body that greater security is possible through such an extreme measure. This signifies the discursive nature of securitisation, as authority is needed to present a security threat as such. Until then, the sporadic and inconsistent use of face masks prevents the possibility of widespread security from the use of face coverings.

The inconsistency of mask mandates across state lines is due to divisions among political figures regarding the necessity of face coverings.[28] This lack of consensus was subsequently reflected in the attitudes of the public. From 4 June until 10 June 2020, the Pew Research Center measured the opinions of a panel of 9654 adults from across the United States.[29] Of those interviewed, 71 per cent of moderate Democrats stated that they wore face coverings 'all or most of the time' within the last month, with this percentage increasing to 83 per cent for Liberal Democrats. In direct contrast to this is the figure for moderate Republicans which stood at 60 per cent, decreasing to

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49 per cent for Conservative Republicans[30]. This data exemplifies that political tendencies can influence whether an individual decides to wear a face covering. On 8 September 2020, a Trump campaign rally took place in North Carolina, yet despite the state having a mask mandate in place since June, Republican President Donald Trump chose not to wear a face mask. This contrasted with the approach of Joe Biden, the Democrat President-elect, who encouraged voters to wear face masks.[31] The division of opinion and lack of adherence due to political partisanship has led to certain sections of society believing that face coverings are not essential in making society safer from the virus. Without securitisation from the securitising actor, divisions regarding face coverings have deepened, preventing the achievement of widespread security from the virus.

The Continued Securitisation of Face Coverings

A consensus regarding the necessity of face coverings has been created in the United Kingdom, with it being accepted across the political spectrum that society must adhere to the extreme security measures put forth by the Government. This is exemplified by the 'hands, face, space' slogan, which highlights that face coverings are a fundamental component in the fight against Covid-19 transmission.[32] Conversely, in the United States, despite health officials establishing that greater security is possible with the widespread use of face coverings, this idea has still not been universally accepted. This emphasises the significance of discourse in securitising an issue and promoting the responsabilisation of citizens in order to effectively combat it. Nonetheless, airborne transmission is a contemporary issue. As a result, although we can measure the security already provided by face coverings, we cannot be certain if greater security is possible.

This means that the threat of airborne transmission is not able to be desecuritized and moved back into 'normal politics'.[33] Until there is the universal distribution of the vaccine, the use of face masks will continue, in order to slow the spread of the virus. Desecuritisation is therefore a long-term process, rather than a singular event. With rates currently rising in both the United Kingdom and the United States, face coverings will continue to be used in conjunction with other security measures such as social distancing. As Lerner et al., state, to return to normal conditions, there needs to be both the 'widespread acceptance and adoption of mask wearing' as well as the use of other intervention methods.[34] The effect of both this acceptance and adoption has been developed upon by Abaluck et al., who state that in nations with 'pre-existing norms' regarding the need to wear a face mask when sick, these rates were 8-10 per cent lower than in nations without these preceding norms.[35] This emphasises the need for a population to invest in certain ideas which are then disseminated enough for the idea to transform into a norm. This can result in the longer-term responsabilisation of citizens through creating an internalised norm to continually provide greater health security.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude, the use of face coverings does make security possible, as they prevent airborne transmission, proving them to an effective measure in reducing the threat they were designed to combat. Yet the enforcement of face coverings has posed a challenge to human security, as such a mandate can provoke insecurity when they are not worn, threaten our individual liberties and lead to an increase in crime. However, the use of face coverings is effective when there is a consensus regarding adherence to the security measure. For security from the measure to be possible, it is necessary for the idea that they are effective and imperative, to become a widespread norm throughout society. This can occur where there has been the imbuelement of responsibility and governmentality from the bottom up, enabling citizens a stake in the security measure. The power of such discourse is demonstrated through the cases of the United Kingdom and the United States, where the former was able to securitise the threat of airborne transmission and enforce an extreme measure in response to this. Conversely, in the US, the divisive nature of the issue means security from the wearing of face masks is not possible. Perceptions of face masks are therefore intrinsic to the success of such a security measure, as without the consensus of the audience, the threat cannot be securitised and thus contained.

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