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YOU CAN'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO! OR MAYBE YOU CAN

by Benjamin D. Rosenberg

Teaser: People generally do not like being told what to do, but that might change when they feel uncertain about themselves or the world around them.

“WEAR A MASK. WASH YOUR HANDS. STAY SIX FEET APART.”

All of these mandates have become so commonplace over the past months that we have stopped paying attention because most people are doing all of these things. But looking back at people's responses to these public health messages reveals something slightly different: In reaction to the pressure to conform to public health guidance, some Americans seemed to go out of their way to violate each and every one of these recommendations.

These reactions seem to underscore a fundamental human truth—people generally do not like being told what to do. This observation lines up with a classic idea from social psychology, called *psychological reactance*. When people perceive that they have the freedom to do something, like breathe unmasked air, having someone restrict it causes swift and strong rebellion.

My colleague and I wondered whether this is always the case—do people *always* react negatively when their ability to act freely and autonomously is threatened? One thought is that

people's responses to these freedom threats could be based on their level of certainty and security with what's going on in their lives.

Based on decades of research and theorizing, we reasoned that when people have a little bit of freedom, they feel certain and secure; in these cases, trying to take people's freedom will result in negative responses, like antimask protests and plots to kidnap governors.

On the other hand, we figured that having too much freedom might be overwhelming and cause people to feel threatened, uncertain, and insecure; in these cases, people might not react so negatively to attempts to remove their freedom. In fact, if you believe Erich Fromm, a philosopher from the 1940s, and intergroup relations research from the 2000s, people might actually *prefer* to have their freedom removed when they have too much of it.

To test these ideas, my colleague and I had college students complete a task meant to arouse feelings of certainty or uncertainty and then threatened to take their freedom. Afterwards, we gauged their reactions to the freedom threat.

Our participants were randomly divided into two groups—the *Certain* and *Uncertain* groups. In the first group, students wrote about a time in the recent past when they had felt “very certain about yourself, your life, your future, or your place in the world. A time when you felt very certain and secure.” In the second group, students wrote about a time in the recent past when

they had felt “very uncertain about yourself, your life, your future, or your place in the world. A time when you felt very vulnerable and threatened.”

After writing about their experiences for around four minutes, students read a message that was designed to threaten their freedom, targeting an issue that students care a lot about: freedom of choice in class selection the following semester. They read that the school administration was considering a plan that would remove just about all student control over class selection, so that rather than choosing their own classes, the school would decide instead.

Wait! We Can’t Choose Our Own Classes Anymore?

Then we asked them how they felt about the new policy. Was it a good policy, and how threatened did it make them feel?

The students’ answers depended on whether they had written about a certain or uncertain time in their life. The *Uncertain* group found the message significantly less threatening than the *Certain* group. Similarly, students in the *Uncertain* group had more positive evaluations of the policy than those in the *Certain* group. Thus, even though no one much liked this new policy, being made to feel uncertain about life made it more acceptable.

Uncertainty and Reactions to COVID-19 Mandates

Although the majority of Americans have taken the pandemic seriously from the get-go, some have eschewed, and even rebelled against, public health directives.

We can speculate on why, based on our data. People's level of certainty—about the pandemic or their lives continuing as normal—may have affected their responses to these mandates. Perhaps some of the people who reacted most strongly to being told what to do were those who felt certain—sure about triviality of the pandemic, sure about the lack of threat it posed to their wellbeing. And, on the other hand, perhaps some of the people who followed along with public health guidance were those who felt uncertain—less sure about the seriousness of the pandemic, of its effect on their lives, of whether they might catch a deadly illness.

Knowing the role that people's level of certainty, or uncertainty, can play in their responses to public health mandates can inform policy decisions the next time a crisis hits. For instance, it might be wise to calibrate the framing of a message based on how people are feeling. For those who feel certain and secure, caution should be exhibited: mandates probably aren't going to work very well. However, for people feeling uncertain and threatened, strongly worded mandates stand a better chance of being successful.

For Further Reading

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Tags:

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