

Mask Wearing: Critical Thinking, Evidence-based Decision-making, and Obedience

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Mask-wearing mandates are now easing in many jurisdictions. Seeing the plethora of unmasked visages speaks to the preference for unrestricted access to air.

Yet, writer [Max Fawcett asks](#), “Why were so many people so opposed to wearing face masks?”

There are plenty of reasons. How about that masks interfere with normal breathing; that speech is muffled, making conversation difficult; that the masks are uncomfortable; that the masks might even be harmful to the wearer? Saliently: other than causing a stir among the fearful people who don masks in public, why should one wear a mask if there is no hard scientific evidence that they are preventative against contracting respiratory viral infections?

A more important question the writer ought to have broached is: given the absence of rigorous scientific data in support, why were so many people compelled to wear masks and why was it that so few people uttered a peep against it? They merely complied. This is true throughout society. In education circles, teachers masked up. Granted, if they wanted to work and get along, they had little choice. A stated goal of education is developing critical-thinking skills. Health care workers masked up. Medicine is a field, like education, supposedly driven by evidence-based results, upon which one can apply critical thinking skills.

There is a crucial omission in the opinion piece by Fawcett. Was there any evidence presented in the article as to the effectiveness of mask-wearing prophylaxis? Indeed, Fawcett even admitted, “*There’s also the impact that masking had on last year’s flu season, which was about as non-existent as it’s ever been.*” Thus, he purports that mask wearing had a negligible effect on preventing infection with COVID-19. Fawcett deserves credit for pointing this out, especially since few had ostensibly noticed that despite all the mask wearing and social distancing enforced, COVID-19 cases continued seemingly unabated. So did mask wearing and social distancing work? Did these measures diminish the proliferation of COVID-19?

Despite acknowledging the non-existent impact of mask wearing, Fawcett takes aim at

people resistant to mask wearing:

For those who fetishize freedom and worship at the altar of liberty, the removal of mask restrictions is probably worth celebrating. But for the rest of us, it marks the beginning of an uncomfortable experiment — one that will test the resilience of a dangerous and deadly pandemic and our willingness to put the well-being of others above our own temporary discomfort.

There are plenty of take-aways from this statement. Fawcett calls this the “beginning of an uncomfortable experiment.” If this is an experiment, then members of the public are the unwitting subjects (others might say “guinea pigs”) in the experiment, subjects who have not knowingly consented to partake in this experiment — usually considered a flagrant breach of ethics. And, since this is a beginning experiment, obviously the evidence is not all in.

Moreover, the writer disparages those opposed to mask wearing as fetishizers of freedom and lumps them into one homogeneous class: pro-freedom, anti-mask. Fawcett apparently did not contemplate that there are people who have researched the science and came to oppose mask wearing based on the conclusion that the masks don’t work. These people looked at the evidence and critically appraised the mandates/recommendations put forward by governments. Had they found evidence that supported mask wearing, they would have willingly worn masks.

Randomized control trials are the gold standard of science. Yet, [no RCT indicates a statistically significant difference between the mask-wearing and the control groups](#); this refutes the hypothesis that protection is conferred by mask wearing — including cloth masks, surgical masks, even N95 respirators.

[How about common sense](#)? Is the mesh density of the masks tiny enough to prevent the SARS-CoV-2 virion from entering? No. Even if the mesh were dense enough to prevent entry through the mask, is the mask sealed around the face of the wearer? No. In other words the virions can enter the respiratory orifices of a mask wearer.

Next, the writer criticizes the people opposed to mask wearing — the fetishizers of freedom — of being selfish and insouciant to their fellow citizens. He opines,

But it’s that second test — the one that will reveal just how much we actually care about our fellow citizens — that should worry us most here. Wearing a face mask into a mall, grocery store or other shared public space isn’t exactly a hardship — and our relatives who had to deal with actual hardships in the past would probably laugh at us for making so much of it.

For people with claustrophobia or compromised health circumstances, mask wearing can be exactly that: a hardship. Even worse, it can pose a [health risk](#). Again, Fawcett has not considered that there might be a dissenting group, people who otherwise would agree with and support mask wearing given hard scientific evidence for protecting against viral infection.

Finally, Fawcett concludes,

Canada is the country of “peace, order and good government,” and we don’t see acts of

caring for each other, whether through our publicly funded health-care system or any number of other supports and services, as the kind of creeping socialism many Americans seem to fear. We'd all do well to remember that the next time we think about whether or not we want to put on a mask in public — and what it really says about us.

First, who are “we”? Are Canadians a monolith as alluded to by Fawcett’s “we”? Second, what does it mean to assert that Canada is a country of “peace, order and good government,” especially so soon after a thousand bodies of [Indigenous children in unmarked graves](#) have, *so far*, been revealed by ground-penetrating radar? It is an undeniable fact of public record that Canadian history is blighted by the abduction of Indigenous children from their families through the connivance of government, churches, and the RCMP. Nevertheless, of course, there are “acts of caring for each other” that happen in Canada. But past and current history reveals Indigenous peoples to be [the Other](#), the Other less or uncared for by much of settler society. This is clearly evidenced by, among others, the numerous unsolved cases of disappeared and murdered Indigenous women in Canada, the disproportionate incarceration of First peoples relative to settler Canadians, the higher rates of poverty and the long-term lack of clean drinking water in Indigenous communities, and the lack of respect for First people’s input about how to steward the environment. Third, what does Fawcett mean by “creeping socialism”? Is socialism to be likened to an icky insect? Fourth, do Americans still “fear” socialism? Favorable views toward socialism seem to be [ascendant](#) in the United States, with capitalism on the decline. Fifth, the majority of Americans in recent years have indicated [support for medicare for all](#). Ergo, Fawcett’s conclusion appears to be fallacious.

To conclude, whether one *wants* to wear a mask or not is hardly consequential. People’s attitudes toward wearing a mask ought to be analyzed beyond superficial prejudices. Opposition to mask wearing may well indicate critical thinkers who are conversant with the scientific evidence. One might better ask what unquestioning obedience to mask-wearing dictates from authorities, in the absence of proffered evidence, really says about such people. The dangers of unquestioning obedience are real. Perhaps the most horrific examples are the willingness of soldiers to follow orders and commit atrocities against fellow humans.

Mandates for mask wearing and orders to kill are exceedingly different animals. Nonetheless, epistemology demands that people free themselves from uncritically bending to directives from authority figures. Every thinking person should consider the morality and the evidence that underlie directives.

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