

What facemasks tell us about national culture

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'He who would do good to another must do it in Minute Particulars' (William Blake, Jerusalem)

The coronavirus pandemic deals its cards very unevenly. Some individuals get it lightly, if at all, and even countries seem to be spared, at least for now. For others it's a catastrophe. Here in the UK we watch, helpless, as hundreds die each day, following in the sad footsteps of Italy and Spain. So when someone sent me a hopeful video about the potential of facemasks to prevent the disease spreading I immediately pinged it on to friends, acquaintances and sundry WhatsApp groups. The reactions I received tell us a good deal about national culture.

The video

First the video. It comes from a Czech organisation called Masks4All and includes a section from the Minister of Health of the Czech Republic. The gist is that this small European country (pop. 10.6 million) went from no tradition of mask wearing to almost 100% compliance in 3 days. After a successful social media campaign, including celebrity facemask selfies, the government made it compulsory to wear facemasks in public.

Here's the video's message: home-made masks are somewhat less effective than surgical masks at protecting the wearer from the virus, but they do help (how much is a matter for scientists). More importantly, they help even more (essential) in reducing the spread of the disease, thus protecting everyone else from the wearer.



The reaction

So far so simple. Why wouldn't we all start wearing masks in the UK? Well, the social media responses tell their own story. Most were sceptical. Some cited official sources and pointed to other measures such as testing and social distancing. But the heart of this scepticism was (to caricature slightly) 'facemasks won't protect me.' The second, pro-social, motive, 'facemasks will protect others,' didn't feature.

Culture?

What's this got to do with culture? Surely science governs something as crucial as our response to the virus? Yet science requires interpretation and it's humans who do the interpreting. And that's where culture matters. Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede defines culture as 'the unwritten book with rules of the social game that is passed on to newcomers by its members, nesting itself in their minds' (Fn1).

These unwritten rules cover most of our behaviour: how to behave in public, in families and, more commonly featured in this blog, in conflict. Culture goes beyond rules. It also provides unspoken, taken-for-granted assumptions about what matters in life. And so when UK people consider the effectiveness of facemasks they are being no less scientific than Czech people or people in Singapore, Hong Kong or Japan (all countries with a tradition of mask-wearing). It's just that the question they ask of the science is 'Will it protect me?'

Individualism/collectivism

In this regard they are manifesting one of Hofstede's 6 'polarities' of culture (Fn2). The UK comes close to the 'individualist' end of their second polarity, the opposite end being 'collectivism'. Hofstede describes individualist societies as those in which 'the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family' (Fn3). The starting point is the self. It's not that the collective doesn't matter. Economic and political models are constructed on the assumption that if individuals look out for themselves society in turn will thrive.

Collectivist societies, on the other hand, are those in which 'people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty' (Fn4). The starting point is the collective. It's not that the individual doesn't matter. But a core assumption is that if individuals contribute to the good of the group they in turn will thrive.

Culture's consequences?

None of these things is absolute. Hofstede acknowledges that he lumps together large populations for the sake of clarification. Life is full of exceptions. However, this last two weeks have brought into sharp focus the implications of my own national culture, 'the way we do things round here' (Fn5). We simply don't wear facemasks.

It's not that the UK is uncaring. With relatively light policing, social distancing has been pretty successful thanks to the pro-social appeal of protecting the vulnerable and 'our heroic healthcare workers'. But when it comes to the idea of wearing facemasks for the sake of others, we seem to be squeamish.

This may seem to have little to do with mediation or conflict resolution. However, mediators and their clients usually swim in the same cultural waters. Like it or not, our taken for granted assumptions about what we do and why we do it are shaped by these unwritten rules. It pays to know and understand them. And good mediators also know that culture varies almost infinitely, so it's equally important to assume nothing and when in doubt, ask.

However, to be honest, the nuances of mediation technique don't seem terribly important right now. The world faces a terrible threat and many of us have already suffered painful losses. I'm pleased to see my fellow authors on this blog talk of little else: thanks Charlie Woods, Rick Weiler, Bill Marsh, Ting-Kwok IU, Martin Svatoš (also Czech), John Sturrock, Ian Macduff and Greg Bond. Wearing facemasks may be counter-cultural, but my tuppence worth is that the time has come. Mine arrives tomorrow.

FOOTNOTES

1) Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede and Michael Minkler, *Cultures and Organisations: Software of the Mind (3rd Edn.)* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010) p. 36.

2) Hofstede et al claim that the national cultures they studied could be arranged on 6 polarities or scales: power/distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, short-term/long-term orientation and restraint/indulgence.

3) Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (London: Sage, 1980) p. 51.

4) *Ibid.* p. 51.

5) Attributed to Charles Handy.