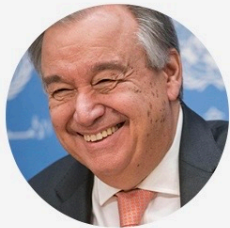


# The return of Covid restrictions?

Psychological techniques as methods of control

Dr Christian Buckland





Behavioural science is a critical tool for the UN to progress on its mandate. It can contribute to combating poverty, improving public health and safety, promoting gender equality, strengthening peacebuilding and all the SDGs.

UN Entities are strongly encouraged to invest in behavioural science and work in a connected and collaborative interagency community to realise its tremendous potential for impact.

António Guterres, UN Secretary-General

## HEALTH

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Behavioural science can help promote good health in a number of areas, including through encouraging better nutrition, medication adherence and vaccination. For example, behavioural science can be applied to make vaccination more convenient and by emphasising social norms and using trusted messengers.

## CLIMATE

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Behavioural science can encourage more sustainable consumption patterns, motivate efforts to end illegal wildlife trade or reduce overfishing. For example, inspiring climate action is challenging because many changes feel like sacrifices without tangible results. Behavioural science can make it easier for people to understand the impact of their actions, offer practical alternatives and promote goal setting and pledges to carry out a behaviour.

## GENDER

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Issues related to gender can be enhanced through behavioural science in many areas, including changing social norms, reducing gender inequalities in the workforce, and preventing intimate partner violence. For example, understanding behavioural barriers faced by “bystanders” of violence against women can help to identify levers for interventions and ensure that bystanders feel more compelled, able and comfortable to report violence.

## MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION/SLUDGE REDUCTION

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There are significant opportunities to apply behavioural science and reduce excessive burdens in administration and programming. For example, behavioural science can shape better social programmes by taking into account the reality of how people access government programmes, streamlining processes by reducing administrative burdens and formulating messaging to encourage uptake.

# This is nothing new

“Under some historical conditions or circumstances and contexts, psychologists and psychological knowledge were in danger of being abused by political powers, largely for clandestine purposes, such as conducting torture or the persecution of political opponents.”

(Maercker A, Guski-Leinwand S, 2018)

# Behavioural science techniques

- Nudges
  - Changing behaviours with predictable outcomes
  - Fear, shame and guilt
- Heuristics
  - Cognitive shortcuts
  - Reinforcing the status quo
  - Let someone else make the difficult decisions
- Commitment bias
  - Committed to the original cause even though goal has changed
  - Doubling down
- Cognitive and availability bias
  - More mental shortcuts
  - Filling in the blanks of information with easiest memories
  - Censorship
- Sludge
  - Two choices: one easy & one difficult
  - Slide with ease or wade through treacle
  - Everyone wants an easy life
- Trusted messengers
  - Celebrities / doctors / scientists

# Psychological techniques – my observations

## Infantilisation

- Coercion & Incentives
- Rewarding or punishment
- Father figure (Prime Minister) Mother figure (NHS) Children (Public)

## Idolisation

- NHS on pedestal
- Enabled cognitive dissonance

## Language style

- War time
- Good vs Evil
- Provided a sense of meaning, purpose and connection with others

## Repetition

- Three-word phrases
- Access into unconscious
- Behave without thinking

## Overriding the mind's protection

- Psychic numbing
- Different issues to be afraid about
- Drip feed fear
- Cycle of fear issues

# What does the literature say?

- “Policy-makers wishing to use these tools summarised in MINDSPACE need the approval of the public to do so” *Mindspace. Influencing behaviour through public policy. P74. Cabinet Office Discussion Document*
- “If governments, or indeed communities or companies, wish to use behavioural insights, they must seek and maintain the permission of the public to do so” *Inside the Nudge Unit. P365. Professor Halpern.*
- Recommendation 18: “an independent assessment and a suspension of HMRC’s use of behavioural psychology / behavioural insights, in light of the ongoing suicide risk to those impacted by the Loan Charge”. *Loan Charge All-Party Parliamentary Group Report on the Morse Review into the Loan Charge. March 2020. p7*

“It was wrong”

Former Chancellor of the  
Exchequer & Current Prime  
Minister

‘In every brief, we tried to say: let’s stop the “fear” narrative. It was always wrong from the beginning. I constantly said it was wrong.’ The posters showing Covid patients on ventilators, he said, were the worst. **‘It was wrong to scare people like that.’** (Sunak R, 2022)

Sunak, R as quoted in the Spectator. 25 June 2022.  
<https://spectator.com.au/2022/08/lockdown-the-inside-story/>



“It’s not ethical”

Educational Psychologist –  
Member of SPI-B

‘Clearly using fear as a means of control **is not ethical**. What you do as a psychologist is co-construction. Using fear smacks of **totalitarianism**. It’s not an ethical stance for any modern government.’ . . . Was it unethical to use fear, I asked? ‘Well I didn’t suggest we use fear’ But your colleagues did. What do you think of that? He paused. ‘Oh God’. ‘Another reluctant pause. **‘It’s not ethical,’** he said (Dodsworth, 2021, pp. 262, 263)

Dodsworth, L. (2021). A state of fear. Pinter & Martin Ltd.

“The most  
egregious and far-  
reaching mistake”

Board member of Behavioural Insights  
Team

‘the most egregious and far-reaching **mistake**  
made in responding to the pandemic was the  
level of **fear willingly** conveyed on the public.’

(Ruda S. 2022) Unherd. January 13 2022)

Ruda, S. *Will nudge theory survive the pandemic*. Unherd January 13 2022.  
<https://unherd.com/2022/01/how-the-government-abused-nudge-theory/>

Harry Truman  
famously said...

*“Once a government is committed to the principle of silencing the voice of opposition, it has only one way to go, and that is down the path of increasingly repressive measures, until it becomes a source of terror to all its citizens and creates a country where everyone lives in fear.”*

*Special message to the Congress on the Internal Security of the United States  
8th August 1950*