

Freedom Versus Security: Can We Find the Right Balance?

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[Transcript follows]

During the pandemic and when other natural disasters strike, governments may curtail certain liberties in an effort to save lives. These compromises also happen in everyday life, from seatbelt laws to food-safety regulations. A paper published in [Perspectives on Psychological Science](#), however, suggests that restricting freedoms may have other unintended negative consequences for behavior and health. One of the authors, Nathan Cheek with Princeton University, explains how there may be a balance that can be achieved and how psychological science could help policymakers [promote public health](#), safety, and well-being in times of crisis.

Auto-generated transcript

Charles Blue (00:12)

There is an often misstated and misunderstood quote by Benjamin Franklin, which reads, “Those who would give up essential Liberty to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither Liberty nor safety. Though often used rhetorically to denounce impositions or laws restricting certain behaviors, Franklin was actually referring to a specific tax dispute. This quote is therefore more accurately a pro-taxation and pro-defense spending statement than a quote supporting the absolute preservation of freedoms. During the Pandemic and other natural disasters, many actions are taken by governments to save lives at

the cost of certain liberties. This is even in everyday life, from seatbelt laws to food safety regulations. The worthy objective of these restrictions is to protect people by imposing limits on what they are free to do. A new article published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, however, suggests there may be unintended consequences. Restricting freedoms may have negative consequences for behavior and health. This paper suggests that there is a balance that can be achieved and that psychology can help policymakers promote public health, safety, and well being when crises and disasters strike. I'm Charles Blue and you're listening to Under the Cortex today.

Charles Blue (01:33)

I have with me, Nathan Cheek with Princeton University and lead author on this paper. Thank you for joining me today.

Nathan Cheek (01:40)

Thanks so much for having me. I'm happy to be here to set the stage.

Charles Blue (01:44)

Can you tell us what did you set out to study and why?

Nathan Cheek (01:49)

Absolutely. So my co-authors and I started having conversations about the many changes we were seeing in the wake of the Pandemic. So in the first few months, we saw dramatic world changes, extreme public policies that for many of us were relatively unprecedented, whether it was in the form of restrictions, social distancing requirements, work from home mandates, and many other things. And as these were unfolding, we were wondering what the psychological consequences would be of these dramatic changes. And then some early data coming out of Italy suggested that the psychology of freedom needed to be taken more seriously. And in fact, in a nationally representative sample of Italians, the most frequently reported new negative consequence of the lockdown was restricted freedom, even above things like financial burdens and social isolation. So clearly we need to be taking freedom seriously. As we were doing this work, we found that there were two broad clusters of negative consequences that seem to emerge when people face these kinds of new restrictions. The first is a cluster of mental and physical health consequences. It hurts to have freedom taken away, sometimes quite literally. And the second cluster was around negative behavioral responses ranging from things like noncompliance to more extreme manifestations of reactants in the form of, for example, public protest.

Charles Blue (03:08)

Your paper implies that there may be an important middle ground and specific tactics that policymakers could use to protect health. This is sort of balancing out the freedom versus protecting public good. Could you spell those out for us.

Nathan Cheek (03:24)

Absolutely. Yeah. So we suggest that if you, as a policymaker, take the psychology of freedom

seriously, then you realize it's important to balance new restrictions with some other methods of either maintaining a sense of freedom or the very least helping people see the value of increased restrictions. So we try to summarize a lot of behavioral science research around this topic in a set of four easy principles that we call safe principles and that's an acronym for spelling out the benefits of restricting freedom, attaching a moral value to behaviors both desired and undesired, reframing restrictions as freedom from and encouraging freedom in other ways. So I can sort of briefly walk you through each of those one by one.

Charles Blue (04:05)

Yeah, let's go ahead and dive down that path because those all seem to make kind of sense, but I'm not sure how they would be implemented.

Nathan Cheek (04:13)

Yeah. So the first spelling out the benefits of freedom can be implemented in different ways. It's really all about making the reasons why restrictive freedom is a good thing more salient. So you can do this by invoking compelling and memorable narratives, maybe focusing on one particular person and having that be a salient example in people's minds. You can do it by spelling out the many different groups of people who would be benefited by adhering to new restrictions from loved ones, family and friends to children to older adults to compromised individuals and other people who might just be more vulnerable. You can also do it sometimes by effectively invoking threats. So really emphasizing the danger that's posed by the pandemic or by other sources of threat. And what I would say there is that it's important when using those kinds of fear appeals to just make sure that people have a sense of self efficacy, that they can do something about it, because if you just make people scared, then they become resigned and they feel panicked and trapped. But if you make them feel like there's a clear thing they can do, like effectively social distancing or staying at home, then threat might be more effective as well. The second principle is about attaching a moral value, and that's about framing restrictions in terms of right and wrong. And so we know from a lot of work on moral cognition that moral framings are potentially really powerful drivers of behavior. And you've seen examples of this throughout history. So things like littering and drunk driving, there's a lot of activism around making those about right and wrong rather than, say personal freedom. And that's why I think many of us were more accepting of public policies restricting those behaviors. And I think you can see the power of moral framing in everyday actions, like why do we return a shopping cart to sort of the shopping cart Loading spot after grocery shopping.

Charles Blue (06:05)

Or we wish people did.

Nathan Cheek (06:06)

Yeah. Or we wish people did. And that's because we see it as a moral action. So when I do that, it's not because I think I'm going to be punished. No one is going to do anything to me if I just leave it by where my car was parked. But I take the extra steps of bringing it back just because I know it's like the right thing to do. So moral framework, at least for those of us who return our shopping cards, can be

potentially powerful. The third principle is about reframing restrictions as freedom from so many of these public policies aimed at increasing security can be thought of as ways of increasing a different kind of freedom. They might be limiting your freedom to do whatever you want, but they might be increasing your freedom from threats. So, for example, you see this in the history of smoking bans in the United States. For a long time, smoking was thought of as an individual Liberty, and so attempts to ban smoking would be seen as a real restriction on what you're free to do. But then the conversation shifted and became more about secondhand smoke and the danger of smoking posed to other people.

Nathan Cheek (07:09)

And once it became a conversation about protecting others individual freedom from the threat of secondhand smoking or other kinds of security threats, then suddenly it became more defensible and more accepted to have these kinds of smoking bans. And so that kind of reframing can be really effective. And I think sometimes it's so clear to us that we take it for granted. So you don't see public protests around bans on Hasbro for using lead paint and children's toys. And that's because it's so clear to us that we want children to be free from that kind of threat. So it's just about understanding new policies through that same kind of light that we often accept. And then the final principle, encouraging freedom other ways is about finding new outlets for people to exercise freedom. So as you're losing some perceived freedoms to gain security, Maybe there are other ways either at the individual level or the more structural, collective level that you can see ways to increase your freedom as well. So I think when many of us adopted new habits like becoming obsessed with baking sourdough, that was a way of exercising agency, Taking on something new.

Nathan Cheek (08:12)

It was probably about passing the time, But I think also just exercising this freedom of choice. And then I think there's a lot of room for policy makers to facilitate that kind of thing. A couple of examples would just be putting more funding towards resources like online libraries and Museum tours in ways that allow us to virtually explore the world as well as amenities like public parks and hiking trails Where we can get out of the world, exercise our freedom Even as we're also under many restrictions.

Charles Blue (08:39)

I want to go back to something you said earlier. And it struck me that you said that the loss of freedom hurts almost as if it's a physical injury or damage that a person suffers when they were real or not feel they have given up a type of freedom. Could you explain that a little bit more? What do you mean when someone is physically hurt by giving up a freedom?

Nathan Cheek (09:01)

Yeah, so partly I'm invoking metaphor here, but in a sense, we do see a lot of research that connects people's sense of autonomy to their physical wellbeing. And a lot of that work is under the umbrella of self determination theory which argues that a sense of autonomy, a free choice of freedom is one of the fundamental needs that all people have and that can look different across different cultural contexts. But all of us need to feel some kind of sense of agency or freedom to pursue what we want to do. And so when we have that freedom taken away, It causes mental pain and sometimes physical pain as we suffer

the physical and mental health consequences of having that kind of restriction.

Charles Blue (09:42)

This may not come under the umbrella of your research, but has there been anyone who's looked into just changing the term freedom? Because I hear comments Reading online that people no longer have the freedom to go to the store? Well, no, that's not been taken away. You have that freedom, but to exercise that freedom, you are being asked to do something. So even just taking the term freedom off the table, is that such a lightning Rod of a term that even keeping it into the discussion is making it a harder effort to enact policies and to change behavior?

Nathan Cheek (10:22)

I think that's a really interesting suggestion. I think it certainly could be. And I think particularly in the US, freedom is, like you said, sort of a hot button word itself. And it is in some ways a symbolic word for many other political discussions and debates that we have framing that in terms of choice or maybe framing that as. Yeah, not specifically about this sort of magical and powerful word. Freedom might be a way forward. Absolutely.

Charles Blue (10:49)

That ties into my next question, because we are hearing a lot these days about groups and individuals fighting against what they feel are unbearable restrictions on their freedom in the name of safety. This is not a new rallying cry. What does your research tell us about the problem of today?

Nathan Cheek (11:07)

Yeah. I mean, I think the first thing that research tells us and this is exactly what you said, which is that this isn't necessarily a new problem. So when we look at the history of pandemics, the new public policies that emerge in an attempt to increase public health and public safety are almost always met with resistance. We can see that in the protests in California during the early 20th century, flu pandemic, where there was the formation of the California Antimask League. There were riots in Liverpool during the cholera outbreak in the 18 hundreds in England. So there's a history of this kind of resistance. And then we also just see from many other kinds of public policy, attempts to require seat belts, require helmets, banned smoking ban, firearms, and these other freedom related public policies are met with a profound resistance. And so in that way research, we just really see that this is a common recurring theme. The research also suggests, like we've talked about, that there are some ways forward. So we have seen that you can get past this kind of resistance. So with the right kind of collective action and public policies, we are able to move forward.

Nathan Cheek (12:18)

I think relatively few of us feel a lot of resistance when we put on seatbelts today, when we drive, but that wasn't always the case. And so that's changed a lot. And so there are ways forward as well.

Charles Blue (12:28)

I do recall when the seat belt was first coming out. That was when I was in driver education and my parents never had that. So I had to refuse to get in the car until they decided to start wearing their seatbelts. And well, that worked for them. But it's not something that you see any, I guess, knee jerk reactions against anymore that's just accepted.

As we look back two years ago, what could policy makers have done better at the outset of the pandemic, and perhaps what could they do now that they aren't doing?

Nathan Cheek (13:02)

Yeah, it's a great question. And one great thing would have been to, I think, more deeply anticipate some of the consequences that we saw. So in terms of mental and physical health effects of restricted freedom, I think doubling down on government and public infrastructure for things like mental health care resources would have been great. And it would have been also great to start building, even from the beginning a plan to deal with vaccine resistance, which there was a relatively large body of literature on already and could have been, I think, more accurately anticipated. So that when vaccines started to roll out, maybe there was some more effective strategies in place to start dealing with that. I think also building an infrastructure with structural support for things that people need, like health care resources, like financial support for people who are struggling, would have been really helpful because it would lessen the health burdens that we saw. But also it would help people accept new restrictions. So it's easier to accept the consequences of maybe not being able to go into work if that's accompanied by a stimulus check and a rent freeze. So there are other kinds of resources you have at your disposal that make it easier to live under these kinds of new restrictions.

Nathan Cheek (14:11)

I think also one of the most profoundly ineffective things we saw was that the pandemic was politicized, at least in the United States. And so we see that in the ongoing pandemic where research has shown, for example, that counties that had a higher percentage of people voting for Donald Trump in the election or that consume more conservative news have higher rates of death from COVID and also just show less adherence to behavioral restrictions and guidelines. But you also see it with other kinds of disasters. So an affecting example is the trajectory over history of Hurricane evacuations, where it used to be the case that Hurricanes were not very politicized. And so you didn't see any relation between county politics and Hurricane evacuations. But in 2017, a research team found for the first time that the share of Republican voters was related to less compliance with evacuations around Hurricane Irma. So that's an example of disasters don't have to be politicized. They're not necessarily inherently political, but then they also can be politicized over time, if that's what public figures choose to do.

Charles Blue (15:22)

And there is sort of a foundational understanding in strategic communications that you have to get out ahead of other messages. The first message is usually the one that is the most sticky. And once that message becomes politicized, it's too late to pull it back. It's already been us-them'ed. Last question then. So where do we go from here moving forward? What's a good next step if we're to make things just a little bit better?

Nathan Cheek (15:52)

Yeah. I mean, that's the million dollar question, and I think politicization is a huge problem. But I think even with that, there are ways to move forward. We need a government and public policy efforts that build more trust and more infrastructure. So trust is really related to compliance. There's a lot of research where even things like smoking bans, people who have more public trust are more likely to adhere to them. And so I think building that kind of trust is really important, and the government can do that by passing policies that people see as tangibly helping them. So things like stimulus checks, more health care resources, public amenities, and resources like parks, libraries, transportation, voting rights, things like public child care resources can be really useful. When people see that public officials are taking this seriously, but also trying to help people, then that increases the public's will to adhere to these restrictions. And I think good examples of that range from things like cities passing new drinking ordinances where people can drink outside so they don't have to go inside to restaurants and bars to things like rent freezes. And those can be good, but they just didn't seem to be permanent.

Nathan Cheek (16:56)

And then I also think trying to adopt some of these principles, helping people understand that we're probably going to be in this situation for many more months and most likely years to come. And so it's not about finding a fix that lasts just a short amount of time. It's about taking seriously the changes that we need to make long term and so reframing these restrictions, thinking about them in moral terms, finding other ways to exercise free choice and finding ways to really understand the important and ongoing value of these restrictions are going to be really essential going forward.

Charles Blue (17:32)

And hopefully we can find some of those tools and enact them. I wait for the day when we're back to life closer to normal.

Nathan Cheek (17:40)

Me too.

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