

Covid-19 and Prohibiting
Spitting in Public: The Challenge
Psychologists Should Accept
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Since March 24, 2020, the D-day when India marched towards curbing Covid-19, the four phases of lockdown threw several challenges that needed and continue to need intervention by social scientists. Unfortunately, as you know, our planning and policy mechanism does not involve social scientists, except economists. Historically, India relied on us in the aftermath of mass killings following partition. The famous humanistic psychologist, Gardner Murphy, and his Indian collaborators did a wonderful job (for details see Bhushan, 2017). However, in my opinion, we the psychologists missed the bus. The opportunity is knocking our doors after 73 years. We have a challenge, in fact many more, that the psychologists should accept.

The evolving situation in first half of the twenty first century has brought back the stalwarts of behaviourism. Although behaviourism emerged in the first half of the twentieth century and massively affected our understanding of human behaviour, it has to undergo a litmus test during the current pandemic. But why?

On May 5, 2020, the Union Health Ministry communicated to the chief secretaries of all states and union territories that “Chewing smokeless tobacco products, paan masala and areca nut (supari) increases the production of saliva followed by a very strong urge to spit. Spitting in public places could enhance the spread of the COVID-19 virus” asking them to prohibit the use and spitting of smokeless

tobacco in public places. According to media reports, the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) has also appealed to people to refrain from consuming smokeless tobacco products and spitting in public places. All of this was done to minimize the risk of coronavirus pandemic. In a follow-up exercise, the Union Home Ministry made this a punishable offence under Section 51 (b) of the Disaster Management Act in its revised guidelines for lockdown.

Spitting in public has been declared an offence by several local bodies under their municipal laws. I have stayed in a famous city in north India for nearly one and half decade and spitting paan, gutka, or even simply spitting in public space was like a thumb rule. The current move reminds me of the provision of wearing helmet mandatory while driving a two-wheeler. How many Indians actually wear helmet or understands its seriousness? You know the answer well. When compliance to such existing provisions is so poor, what is the guarantee that people will comply this time? Is it just a provision like many others or can one think that the fear and uncertainty during the pandemic will compel people to comply to this provision? The data of fatal accidents involving absence of helmet shows that fear of death does not work as deterrent. In fact, majority of the people start wearing helmet only when cops enforce it by applying punitive measures. However, the moment checking becomes lenient, the same set of people stop doing so.

One might wonder why we are like that! Can this inability to adhere to such rules be permanently modified? Studies in psychology suggest that conformity involves change in the belief or behaviour in response to either a real or imaginary group pressure. Imaginary group pressure involves expectation arising out of social norms. When we do not have such social norms for spitting in public, imagined group pressure is nullified here. Now the real group pressure will be instrumental only in the physical presence of others. These 'others' are either non-compliant or simply ambivalent to such incidents. Thus, we come back to a helmet checking kind of a situation with respect to spitting in public as well.

I see a scope where psychologists can help such policy framing and implementation. Let us talk about conformity. The first experimental study of conformity was conducted way back in 1932 by Jenness. This controlled laboratory experiment forcing people to estimate beans in a bottle has to pass the open field

trial in India now where spitting in public has prevailed since time immemorial. Psychologists have suggested the path to conformity. The first form is normative compliance wherein a person conforms to the expectation in public, although not agreeing with it privately. Such behaviour is exhibited expecting a favourable reaction from others such as approval of that behaviour, specific reward, or even avoidance of specific punishment. So, even if we have some sensible people who would advocate against spitting in public, the larger society is not likely to change its behaviour.

The other form is internalization which involves both public and private conformity. It is all about bringing a change in one's behaviour not only to fit to the group expectation, rather the person finds it intrinsically rewarding. This is the best one can achieve. As the person will be self-regulated, she/he will conform to the new provision of not spitting in public. But the real challenge is to make this an intrinsically rewarding behaviour.

Identification is the third form of conformity wherein a person accepts the expectations in order to begin or sustain a satisfying self-defining association with the group. Here the person conforms to the expected social role. For instance, in the current scenario, the role of doctors or policemen does not necessitate change in their private opinion; they just have to play the expected social role.

So, what is the way forward to make people conform to the new provisions? The problem with compliance is that it is temporary in nature and stops in the absence of group pressure. In that case, we are left with internalization and identification. Given the nature and magnitude of the behaviour, we need to adopt a two-fold strategy. Internalization is the deepest level of conformity involving one's belief system. My considered opinion is that although it would progress slow, it is the best choice as it will yield everlasting outcome. The current set of youngsters in schools can be made to integrate it into their belief system and this would make India have those who would not only practice it but would create the future generations who are averse to spitting in public. These youngsters would force their parents and significant others to identify, thus getting this resolve implemented. But yes, this is a long process.

For immediate relief there is a need for a second track as well. This is more for the adults who are accustomed to spitting in the public. Cultural differences in conformity is best known to the psychologists and other social scientists. Human beings are not alike in their susceptibility to conform. Given the variation within this huge country, the second track might borrow from behaviourism. This school has elaborated on punishment and reinforcement, both. Although it might sound like an oxymoron to the non-experts, psychologists make a distinction between positive and negative punishment. In simple terms, if a behaviour is encouraged it is reinforcement and if it is discouraged, it is punishment. Now, if something is added to influence the behaviour, it is considered positive and if something is withdrawn to influence the behaviour, then it is termed as negative. So, positive punishment would mean reduction in the likelihood of reoccurrence of a behaviour if one becomes familiar with its unpleasant consequence. On the other hand, negative punishment involves removal of something pleasant to discourage a behaviour. This stops the behaviour from reoccurrence. A combination of positive punishment to decrease and subsequently eradicate unacceptable behaviour like spitting and negative reinforcement which will encourage desired behaviour might work.

Besides the three forms of conformity discussed above, a person may conform only to gain favour. Here the motivation is to gain social reward instead of threat of rejection. Thus, the pressure to adopt group's view does not affect one's decision to conform. This has been termed as ingratiation conformity. So, if those accustomed to spitting in public are not going to be affected by threat of rejection, let there be a plan for social reward to encourage conformity. Psychologists have long been kept at periphery in policy design and implementation. Give them a chance. Let a real-life social experimentation prove the worth of their theories.

Reference

Bhushan, Braj, ed. 2017. Eminent Indian Psychologists: 100 Years of Psychology in India. New Delhi: Sage.

