Narratives on face mask wearing from members of Navigating Knowledge Landscapes Network - the contribution No. 11

Country: **IRELAND**

Ciara Heavin

Business Information Systems, Cork University Business School, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

E-mail: C.Heavin@ucc.ie

There is a sense in the national media that public health experts (in collaboration with the Irish Government) are late making their recommendations on the widespread wearing of face masks in the Republic of Ireland (The Irish Times, 2020). As of May 15th 2020, the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) (medical/health expert team leading Ireland's response to COVID-19), in collaboration with the Irish government, recommend that citizens wear cloth face coverings in situations where it is difficult to practice social distancing. As the lockdown restrictions begin to ease on May 18th, it is suggested that non-medical cloth face masks are worn in social settings to complement the existing good hygiene practices including social distancing (2 metres), covering your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve when you cough and sneeze, washing your hands properly and often, and not touching your eyes, nose or mouth if your hands are not clean (HSE, 2020).

Globally, there has been uncertainty about the wearing of face masks in public during the COVID-19 pandemic. Up to recently, the WHO has indicated that there is little evidence to support the efficacy of wearing masks (unless you have tested positive for COVID-19) and I have been guided by this advice. However, there appears to be a growing body of medical evidence to support the widespread wearing of face coverings as a means of protecting people, particularly in social settings, where practicing social distancing is difficult or even unachievable. With the imminent relaxation of lockdown restrictions in Ireland, I have placed an online order for cloth face coverings for my family including my children and parents. While I do not envisage us wearing masks in public every time we go out, I expect there may be situations where it will be important for us to protect ourselves.

In my local town (population approx. 12,500 citizens), more people are wearing face coverings when doing their grocery shopping. It is difficult to decide whether this behavioural change is due to an increased need to promote personal protection from the virus, out of respect for the community, or if it has been prompted by ambiguity/uncertainty or even fear. I continue to observe people's mask wearing behaviours. As people touch their faces, continually adjust and move masks to their chins to greet their friends, I cannot help but question the efficacy of mask wearing in the community and if people really understand why they are wearing them.

The decision to wear a face mask is not an easy one. Traditionally, face coverings are an indicator of political persuasion and religious belief. I perceive that the widespread covering of ones face in public is a significant cultural and social shift in Ireland. It will require us to develop new ways of communicating including new social cues in public settings. I would prefer not to wear a mask but I will wear one to protect myself and respect others when necessary. I am hopeful that this is a temporary measure.

Education and awareness campaigns are required to promote the efficacious and safe wearing of face coverings. We must reinforce the message that face masks do not remove (or even reduce) the need for social distancing as well as excellent hand and respiratory hygiene. We need to avoid a situation where face masks become a weapon that could negatively impact our fight against this invisible enemy.

References

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