

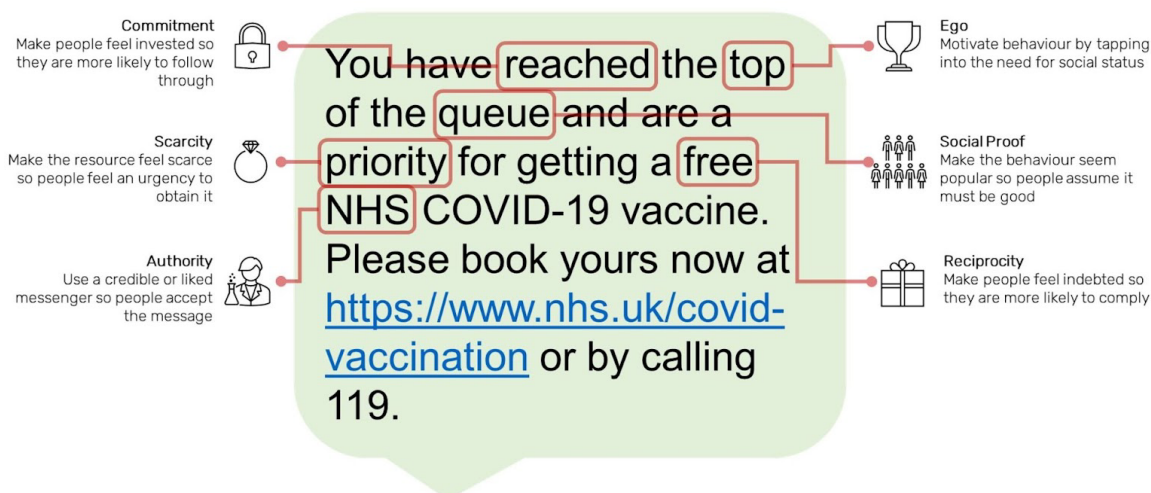
Nudges to Jobs

Patrick Fagan, Behavioural psychologist

We are all what's known as cognitive misers. We have very limited brainpower for paying attention to the world and making decisions. It's been estimated by one researcher that we make 200 food-related decisions every day, and that's just for the food we eat. So if you were to consider every single question carefully - Should I have breakfast? What should I add? Which kind of milk? How much? Should I put it in a bowl? - you would never get anything done. We just don't have the time or the brain power. In our daily lives we rely heavily on what are known as heuristics to make decisions. These are unthinking, automatic shortcuts or 'rules of thumb'.

As an example, if something is very popular, we tend to assume it must be good. Or if somebody in a white lab coat tells us to do something, we assume that they know what they're talking about because they seem to be a qualified 'expert'. Generally speaking, these heuristics serve us well and allow us to navigate the chaos of life into manageable units.

Heuristics in Action



The above text message that you may have seen in 2021 demonstrates the skilled use of heuristics in action.

In this COVID vaccine text, we see at least six heuristics skillfully applied in a very short message. 'You have reached the top of the queue and are a priority for getting a free NHS COVID-19 vaccine'. By saying there's a queue, they've used *social proof* implying that it's

popular. And so it must be good. By saying you've reached the *top of the queue*, they're using a principle called *commitment and consistency*, where if you feel invested in something, you're more likely to do it.

In this instance, it makes you think that you don't want to lose your place in the queue. You've been waiting. By having you reach the top of the queue and calling you a priority, that's an ego nudge to make you feel special. And also by saying you are a priority, they are implying that supply doesn't meet demand and so you'll feel an urgency to go out and get it right now.

By giving it away for free, they're making it as easy as possible, but also potentially using *reciprocity*, where if you feel indebted to somebody, you're more likely to do what they ask. In addition, having it come from the NHS is a *messenger effect*, because we are more likely to do things for people we like and trust, and people like and trust the NHS, or at least they certainly used to.

There's also another 'nudge' here where it says, *please book yours*. That's called the *endowment effect*, by saying, it's *yours*, it's *your* vaccine to claim. A meta-analysis found that this personalisation was the most effective nudge for vaccine uptake. The overall take home though is that our heuristics, our shortcuts, were expertly exploited for the vaccine campaign.

There are countless other examples. '*Join the millions already vaccinated*' is a classic social proof nudge. Everyone else is doing it, so it must be good.

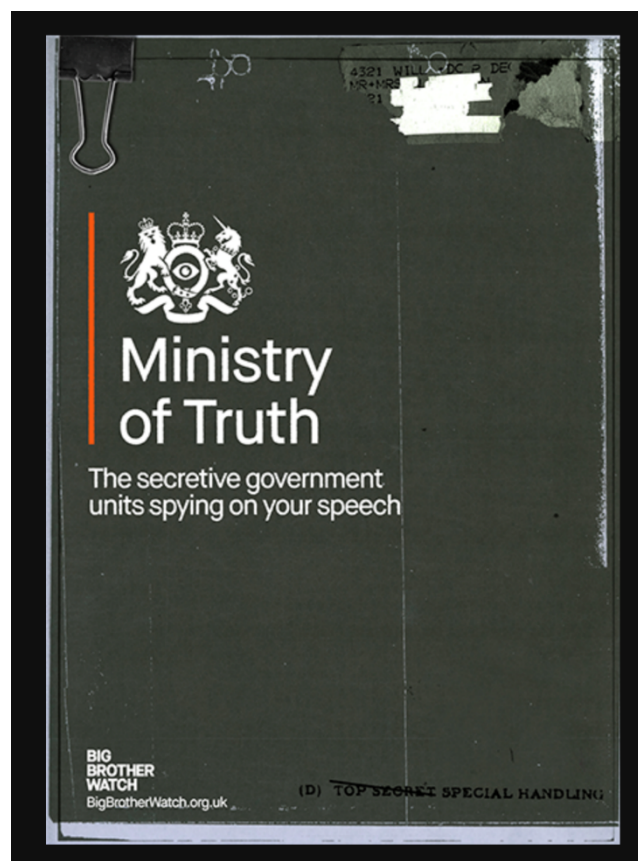


Another example of the *endowment effect*: We'll let you know when *your* COVID vaccine is ready for you.

Or take, 'every vaccination gives us hope'. This really hammers home how these were emotional arguments that were being made to people. People were not being rationally given the evidence, the pros and cons of these products. Instead, they were being engaged through the use of emotional rhetoric.

Behavioural scientists are not shy about talking about their role in all this. There have been lots of papers published about how to use these 'brain hacks' to nudge people to get vaccinated. The Cabinet Office has published papers on how to do it. SPI-B, the 'independent' behavioural science department advising SAGE, has published guidelines on how to nudge people into getting vaccinated. For example, the behavioural insights team, colloquially known as the 'nudge unit', named a number of principles that could be used, such as, saying the vaccine is the route to 'getting our lives back'.

Behavioural scientists were up-front about using behavioural science for the vaccine campaign. But in the world of propaganda, there are various 'shades'. White propaganda is propaganda that is transparent and up-front, but you also have grey and black propaganda, which is more covert. As an example, Big Brother Watch released a report about how the government sponsored companies (with taxpayer money) to spy on speech, especially around the vaccines and lockdowns. It also looked at how to also silence critical speech and dissenting voices. They paid around £1M to an outfit called [Logically, AI](#), who wrote smears on critics. The government became a self-elected *Ministry of Truth*.



There have been various other stories or leaks about how governments conspired to silence dissent and worked to ostracise people who spoke up against or voiced concerns about the vaccine, using very powerful psychological techniques of in-group and out-group biases. No one wants to be left out or ostracised. You also don't want your career to be ruined. There was a weaponization of behavioural science going on behind the scenes that went beyond the techniques outlined in any of the academic papers that were published.

The utilisation of *in-group bias* was extraordinarily clear throughout the entire period. Andrew Neil, for example, saying, it's time to punish Britain's 5 million vaccine refuseniks, or the 'I've had my COVID vaccination' stickers and social media icons, allowing people to build an identity around the vaccine and make it a status symbol or a piece of cultural capital

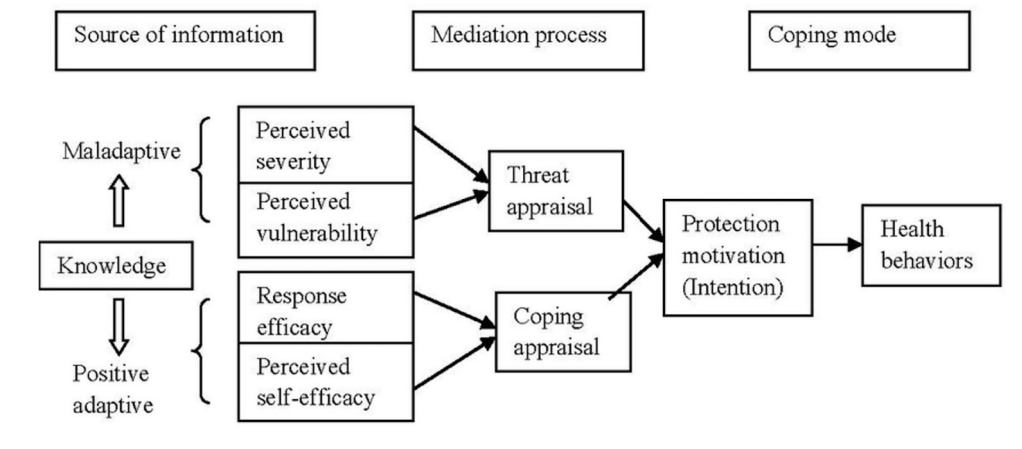


There was also the illusion of choice in a few ways. One is that they never technically forced anyone to take the jab. But, for example in the NHS, they said you have to take the jab or lose your job. Then, just before the cut-off day, they said, actually, no, don't worry about it, you can keep your job either way. So they maintained this illusion of autonomy, that people weren't being forced into something.

There was also an illusion of choice through telling people they could either have Moderna or Pfizer, and that activates a 'which?' mindset rather than a whether to do it or not mindset. Rather than thinking 'yes or no', people were nudged into thinking which vaccine is best? Should I have Moderna or Pfizer? An analogy is when a waiter offers you still or sparkling water. You have that feeling of choice, but you're still doing what the waiter wants and paying for something you might not have ordered otherwise.

There was also the widespread deployment of meta-nudging, which is essentially the use of influencers to deliver nudges for you. Many people don't like or trust the government, but if the nod comes from a beloved celebrity who you idolise, it's more likely to be influential. We saw this with various influencer campaigns, whether through adverts or more indirectly, through people on TikTok being paid covertly to promote the vaccine.

Looking at this in a broader perspective, a really useful model for understanding what potentially happened is the *protection motivation theory*.



This suggests that in order to get people to do a particular protective behaviour (classically this could be something like exercising more or quitting smoking or taking out insurance), there are two levers you need to pull. One is the threat to make people feel scared of something by making it seem like it will happen to them and that if it does happen, the outcome will be severe. The other lever is what to do about it, the efficacy. So make people feel like they can do something about it and if they do that thing, it will have an effect.

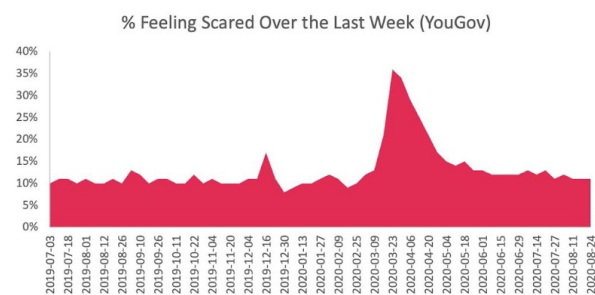
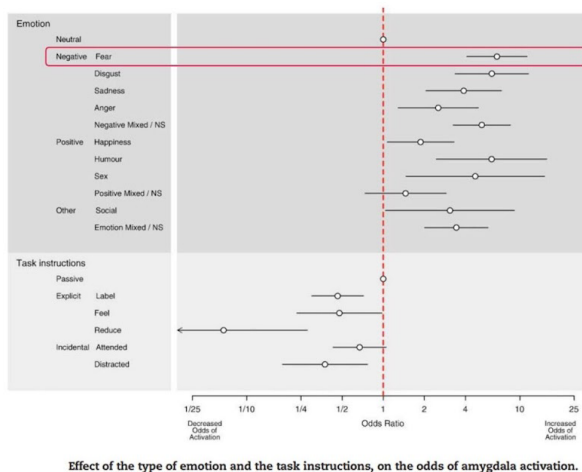
The ‘*Look Them in the Eyes*’ campaign is a great example. It was loaded full of fear and guilt. It really stoked up people's negative emotions and then it directed their behaviour to very specific, concrete actions that would alleviate these unpleasant feelings.

In the example ‘*Look him in the eyes and tell him you always wear a mask*’, the ‘*look him in the eyes*’ is the fear, and the ‘*you always wear a mask*’ is the efficacy. So one way to think about this would be a kettle which applies energy to the water but also contains it. The water heats up more quickly as it has nowhere else to go. As the water molecules heat up, they're kind of bouncing off all the sides and then there's a spout where all of that energy is directed in a particular direction.



We saw this writ large with the COVID vaccine campaign. People were energised through fear and stress. They were contained through confinement and social isolation so they had nowhere for that stress to go. They couldn't go to the pub on a Friday, they couldn't go to football matches. But then, they were given a behavioural point to focus all of that energy onto, which was *the vaccine and nothing else*.

The amount of fear messaging during this time was incredible to witness. Fear, as one meta analysis found, is the emotion most likely to activate the amygdala. This makes sense. It's probably the most crucial emotion for survival. And we can see from YouGov data people were very scared for those first few months of the lockdowns. It was in that first week of that spike of fear that SPI-B, the behavioural science unit in Sage, released a report where they said a substantial number of people still do not feel sufficiently personally threatened. They maintained that the perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased among those who are complacent using hard hitting emotional messaging. In other words, fear was a deliberate tactic and people became extremely stressed.



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- SPI-B, 22nd March 2020

A study came out of Israel where they found that lockdown actually made people's amygdalae physically bigger. It had a measurable physiological effect on them and their fear processing.

After ramping up the fear, you 'direct' this energy. People were given a very focused thing to do, which was, of course, get the vaccine. Perhaps you had the dubious pleasure of seeing the [song](#) from James Corden and Ariana Grande which really sums up how the whole thing went down.

Because all campaigns were very much focused on one particular behaviour (getting the vaccine), all other possible 'spouts' had to be closed off. Natural immunity was called a conspiracy theory and there was the unfounded attack on ivermectin.

As a behavioural scientist, I don't know much about ivermectin, but I do know that this was weapons-grade, persuasive rhetoric. Calling it a horse dewormer was a master stroke, as it's simple, visual and disgusting. For the vast majority of people, thanks to the horse dewormer tweet (which the FDA had to retract once the damage to ivermectin's reputation was already done), their first experience of ivermectin was as a horse dewormer that Joe Rogan takes. It is foolish and bombastic by association. Because people were introduced to this weakened form of the idea of ivermectin first, presenting it as ridiculous, then when any other arguments were presented to them, they would have been inoculated against it. The point being to direct people, to focus people on that one 'spout' that was 'get the vaccine'.

Ultimately, the use of behavioural science during this time was, in my view, unethical. Nobel Prize winning behavioural scientist, xx Richard Thaler, who is famous for the book Nudge, said there are three things that make a nudge ethical. It needs to be optional, it needs to be transparent (and not misleading or deceptive), and it needs to be beneficial to the person being nudged. The vaccine nudges were not optional. They were everywhere. It was fair to say the mood was almost totalitarian. They were not transparent at all. Many people were not aware that they were even being used on them. And as we have heard from other experts, they were arguably not beneficial either. For some, they caused extreme harm.

The most important thing to take away is that behavioural science was very heavily used for vaccine uptake. It is well established that people died from adverse effects of the vaccines. Even the most ardent vaccine supporter would admit that. So how many is too many for the nudgers? Is it okay to nudge people and your nudges kill one person? There was no consideration of any of that. There is no remorse, no contrition from the people involved in this. If we are to learn anything at all from this era, we must first admit what really happened to the minds of the public.