

Report points to intergroup tensions from different interpretations of social distancing

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Over recent weeks, scenes of packed sunny beaches have filled newspapers, leading some to question the sense of others in view of the easing of lockdown restrictions. Credit: mtreasure/

Changes to lockdown measures in the UK and around the world in an effort to restart the economy could lead to wide disparity in how the public adheres to social distancing, according to a new report from psychologists at the University of Bath.

In a [paper](#) published in the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, the researchers warn of emerging tensions that will arise between groups who interpret messages about [social distancing](#) in different ways and the challenge this poses to policymakers.

They suggest that in March, strict [lockdown](#) guidelines supported by legal and policy changes, meant that most people adhered to the same mitigating practices including isolation and distancing.

Now that lockdown is easing in many parts of the world, with policies becoming more ambiguous, many practices now need to be negotiated on an interpersonal level, they argue. This means that ensuring compliance will increasingly rely on informal, social policing between individuals: both for those who do, versus those who do not uphold social distancing.

Over recent weeks in the UK, scenes of packed sunny beaches have filled newspapers, leading some to question the sense of others, labeled 'covidiot.' For the researchers this is a sign of mixed messaging surrounding the relaxation of lockdown with different interpretations by individuals.

They warn that morally blaming individuals for the impact of their behavior on the pandemic—as evidenced in the recent threat to close beaches—may detract from a much-needed discussion over whether guidelines are fit for purpose and their effect on infection rates.

Equally, they draw attention to moral challenges faced by others who wish to maintain strict distancing or isolation and the challenges they now face under pressure to socialize without wanting to appear rude or overdramatic. The researchers suggest that how individuals continue to differently interpret public health messages about COVID-19 will lead to increased tensions between groups moving further into summer.

Lead researcher Annayah Prosser from the Department of Psychology at the University of Bath explains: "Strict lockdown guidelines meant that until recently everyone was adhering to the same mitigating practices such as isolation and distancing. However, now that lockdown is easing, and policy is becoming more ambiguous, many practices now need to be negotiated on an interpersonal level. For example, at the height of lockdown you didn't need to decline an invitation to a social gathering, because it was technically against the law. Now, if you decline an invitation, you could be perceived as rude, or as a 'do-gooder' who thinks they're better than everyone else."

In their report, the team outline how this person-to-person informal regulation poses difficulties for people who want to continue to maintain strict practices over time, who may increasingly face social derogation and ostracism from others who behave differently.

Annayah Prosser added: "Our main recommendation for individuals is to avoid portraying others as morally 'good' or 'bad' for their actions. People may have complex reasons for their behavior, that may not be visible on sight or through a short social media post. These choices are tough and simplifying behavior as 'good' or 'bad' without knowing the full story could lead to increased tensions and polarization at a time when communities need to work together constructively to address the crisis."

More information: Annayah M. B. Prosser et al, 'Distancers' and 'non-distancers'? The potential social psychological impact of moralizing COVID-19 mitigating practices on sustained behaviour change, *British Journal of Social Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/bjso.12399](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12399)

Provided by University of Bath

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