The Cummings row undermines the sense of collective solidarity on which the lockdown relies

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The Cummings row undermines the sense of collective solidarity on which the lockdown relies

The so-far widespread compliance with lockdown measures is driven by social identity and collective responsibility, new data confirms. This substantiates further the argument that by defending Dominic Cummings, the government risks undermining the fight against the virus, write **Jonathan Jackson**, **Reka Solymosi**, **Chris Posch**, **Ben Bradford**, **Zoe Hobson**, **Arabella Kyprianides**, *and* **Julia Yesberg***.*

Soon after the easing of lockdown measures on 13 May, Boris Johnson is said to have quipped to colleagues: 'I've learnt that it's much easier to take people's freedoms away than give them back.' With the government now announcing the next stages of lockdown release (e.g. more shops will reopen on June 15), officials may be wondering whether widespread fear of the virus will leave people reluctant to take advantage of their new-found freedoms and get the economy moving again.

Over the next few weeks and months, it is likely that lockdown will be replaced with contact-tracing, testing, and quarantine. Implementing this will require high levels of public support, and there is early evidence that people comply with public health measures not because of individualised fear, but because of a sense of shared identity and common fate with others. Thinking about the issue in this way turns the question of compliance on its head: it shifts the focus away from individual risk and responsibility, towards ensuring that people collectively adhere to health measures on behalf of the common good.

It is no wonder, then, that the Dominic Cummings scandal is stimulating so much heated debate. To comply with the rules is to signal to others a sense of solidarity. To go against them implies that 'there is one rule for them and another rule for us', and some are wondering whether the actions of the PM's Chief Strategist – backed by the PM himself – risks damaging public trust and compromising widespread solidarity in the fight against the deadly virus.

What does 'the science' say about fear and group bonds/coordination?

We have previously presented evidence that self-reported adherence to lockdown requirements was rooted not in fear of the virus, police or law, but in a widespread sense of duty and solidarity. We analysed data from the first wave of a multi-wave panel study to track the experiences, attitudes, and behaviours of 1,200 people recruited on the platform Prolific Academic – 300 living in London and 100 living in each of Edinburgh, Newcastle, Cardiff, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield and Glasgow.

We now have second wave data, collected on 11-14 May, just on the cusp of the easing of lockdown. For enthusiasts of longitudinal research, the attrition rate was an astonishing 8%, with 92% of people taking part in wave 1 continuing in the study to wave 2.

Wave 2 fielded questions designed to reflect some of the nuances of emotional and behavioural responses to risk. We find that just under two-thirds (64%) said that they had felt worried about getting COVID-19 in the past three weeks. Of the 699 people who said they had worried, around a half (51%) said that their quality of life had been reduced either 'not at all' or 'a little' by their worry about getting COVID-19.

Criminological work has found that, while some instances of worry can be destructive and paralysing, some people and some communities have the potential and the willingness to convert worry about crime into constructive action. In our study, the majority of people said 'yes' (91%)

when we asked 'do you take any precautions against getting COVID-19?'. These precautions seemed to make people feel safer as a result (81% said 'moderately', 'quite a bit' and 'very much'), but for some it also reduced their quality of life (55% said 'moderately', 'quite a bit' and 'very much').

Based on their worries about catching the virus, as well as the self-reported effect of their worries and precautions on quality of life, we can divide research participants into one of four groups:

- The 'unworried' group (36%): those who had not worried once about catching COVID-19 over the previous three weeks;
- The 'seemingly confused' group (3%): those who had worried about catching COVID-19 but did not take any precautions against the virus;
- The 'worried but wellbeing-unaffected' group (31%): those who had worried, took precautions, and quality of life was not affected;
- The 'worried and wellbeing-affected' group (30%): those who had worried, took precautions, and quality of life was affected.

Does 'fear' shape lockdown compliance?

This categorisation allows us to assess the relationship between emotional and behavioural responses to risk and lockdown compliance. To measure lockdown compliance (just before the recent easing), we asked participants 'How often during the past week have you engaged in each of the following behaviours during the COVID-19 outbreak?':

- 'socialised in person with friends or relatives whom you don't live with?' (74% said never, 17% rarely, 6% sometimes and 3% often or very often),
- 'went out for a walk, run, or cycle and spent more than a few minutes sitting somewhere to relax?' (57% said never, 15% rarely, 15% sometimes, and 13% often or very often), and
- 'travelled for leisure (e.g. driven somewhere to go for a walk)?' (82% said never, 10% rarely, 5% sometimes and 3% often or very often).

It's not about fear of the virus or fear of the police

We find no difference in levels of lockdown compliance, comparing the 'unworried', the 'seemingly confused' and the 'worried but wellbeing-affected'. Some people admit bending the rules, but for these groups the presence or absence of worry about catching COVID-19 does not seem part of the explanation. We find that the 'worried but wellbeing-unaffected' group actually had higher levels of lockdown compliance, adjusting for the many other factors in the statistical model.

As in wave 1 (data collected in late April), we find no evidence that deterrence plays a role in compliance. Unsurprisingly, given the police's 'enforcement as last resort' policy centred on procedural fairness, perceptions of the likelihood that the police would step in (if people were flouting the rules) decreased between late April and early to mid-May. But while levels of lockdown compliance were also lower in wave 2 than they were in wave 1, this decrease in perceptual deterrence does not seem to explain the decrease in compliance.

Compliance is about social identity and collective responsibility rooted in legal requirement

Just like in late April, we find that social norms backed up by symbolic legal force are crucial.

Norms guide behaviour and attitudes in a number of different ways: people look to the behaviour of others to determine what is normal, beneficial, and accepted; people benefit from acting in certain ways through social approval and refrain from acting in certain ways via social disapproval; and by defining 'who we are', norms define social groups, and are especially powerful when people identify with the particular social group. By helping to make people accountable to each other, norms solve collective action problems.

There is also symbolic import to the fact that something is made legally required/prohibited. By turning social distancing into legal requirement, the legal system acts as an expressive agent: it sends the message to the nation that the threat is to the group rather than the individual, and that we collectively need to take the virus seriously. It also clarifies how citizens need to act to fight the pandemic.

This seems to have worked among our sample, with 94% agreeing with the statement 'by making it a legal requirement, the government sent the message that social distancing is important to fight the pandemic' and 92% of people agreeing with the statement 'introducing the social distancing rules helped communicate to the public the need to do what we can to stop the pandemic from spreading'. Stronger agreements with these statements was associated with greater compliance.

Our research participants also seem to act as expressive agents in response to legal requirement. We find that 87% of people agreed with the statement 'observing the social distancing laws shows other people in my community that I care for their safety' and 82% of people agreed with the statement 'following the social distancing rules helps me feel that I am part of the collective fight against the pandemic'. The law seemed to have helped frame the threat and the solution at the group rather than the individual level.

According to our multivariate analysis, when people comply with lockdown law, they signal to each other a sense of collective solidarity and shared identity in a way that works *in addition to* the role that social norms play. Acting in unison binds people together, especially when there is a legal requirement to coordinate at the group level against a common threat.

Routes ahead

So what does all this mean as lockdown eases, as track and tracing begins, and as the message from government is increasingly one of individual choice rather than collective solidarity? At a time when the PM's defence of Dominic Cummings risks undermining the sense that 'we truly are all in it together', what are some plausible roads of travel?

Our findings suggest, at least looking back to the height of lockdown when the restrictions were rigid, that it was not fear of COVID-19 that drove adherence to the public health measures that are needed to control the virus. It was, instead, a sense of shared identity and collective responsibility, backed up by the extraordinarily popular laws underpinning lockdown.

Looking forward to the coming few weeks and months, we will need people to be collectively willing to act appropriately in terms of social distancing and hygiene, to tell officials who their contacts have been, and to isolate if they get the disease. Voluntary public compliance will be as important as it ever was, as we adjust to greater degree of relaxation. Adherence to guidelines relies on solidarity rather than fear, and we will need people to trust the government if we are to fight the virus and come out of this together.

Our data are consistent with the concerns of key members of SPI-B – that by defending Cummings and failing to communicate effectively, the government risks undermining the message of social solidarity and jeopardising the widespread support that has served the nation so well thus far. Will this occur among our sample of people? Wave 3 will be in the field next week, so watch this space!

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