

UK COVID-19 Inquiry

Response to request for information from Professor Stephen Reicher (your ref:M2/SAGE/01/SXR)

1. Qualifications career history and expertise

I am currently Wardlaw Professor of Psychology at the University of St. Andrews

I am also a Fellow of the British Academy, Fellow and Vice-President of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, Fellow of the British Psychological Society and Fellow of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research.

I am a social psychologist with a particular expertise in group processes. My research has covered a range of phenomena including crowd behaviour (including behaviour in emergencies), leadership and social influence, intergroup behaviour, social cohesion and helping.

My publications (of which there are over 300 in total) can be accessed at <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=YoTOg44AAAAJ&hl=en&oi=sra>

Of particular relevance, perhaps, are two books published in 2020. One is *The New Psychology of Leadership* (with Alex Haslam and Michael Platow), published by Routledge. The other is *Together Apart: The Psychology of Covid-19* (with Jolanda Jetten, Alex Haslam and Tegan Cruys). This is available as a free download from <https://www.socialsciencespace.com/2020/05/addressing-the-psychology-of-together-apart-free-book-download/>

2. Membership of relevant groups

SPI-B: throughout its existence

Advisory Group to the Scottish CMO (along with a number of other Scottish Government Groups including the Compliance Advisory Group, the Nosocomial Infections Group, the FE/HE recovery group, the Citizen Participation group). I was mostly involved in these groups throughout their existence.

Standing Committee on Pandemic Preparedness (Scotland): throughout its existence

Covid Adaptations Group: throughout its existence.

Independent SAGE (member of the full group and Chair of the Behavioural Science sub-group : April 2020 – present.

3. Involvement In relevant groups

SPI-B: I became involved through previous work I had done in various Government advisory groups looking at the behaviour of the public in emergencies (e.g. terrorist attacks).

Advisory group to Scottish CMO: I became involved through the Royal Society of Edinburgh when the Scottish Government was looking for behavioural science expertise. I then became involved in other groups in Scotland through my membership of this group.

Independent SAGE: I became involved through personal contacts when Independent SAGE was seeking to enhance its expertise in behavioural science.

I do not have exact records of all the meetings I attended (though these could be found by looking at the minutes). However in the period of interest I did attend nearly every meeting only missing a handful when I had a clash of obligations.

In all these groups I played a number of roles. I was involved in discussions about relevant research and insights – especially from a social psychological perspective. I authored and co-authored papers. Especially in Scotland, I was involved in direct advice to policy makers. I provided a number of briefings to the Cabinet Office, to the UK Government Behavioural Science Network and to PHE about core behavioural science issues (such as how to produce and preserve adherence to Covid-19 regulations and advice.

4. Documents to which I contributed

The way SPI-B generally worked was to have general discussion before papers were drafted, followed by a second opportunity to contribute by making comments when drafts were available. In this way I contributed to some extent in all the papers, seeking to provide social psychological input especially around the following themes: the need to create and sustain a sense of shared identity and community amongst the public; the need to build trust and a sense of common enterprise between policy makers and the public; the need to involve the public in decision making, to understand the barriers to adherence amongst different groups and the need to provide the support necessary for adherence to be possible amongst these various groups.

5. Articles I have written

I have written a large number of academic articles on Covid-19. I have contributed a larger number of academic based opinion pieces to outlets such as the British Medical Journal, The Conversation, The Guardian and The Independent. I given an even larger number of interviews and comments to radio, TV and print media in the UK and internationally. Finally, I have contributed to a number of podcasts on the pandemic.

Here is a small sample to give a flavour of my contributions. I would be able to give more if needed:

Articles:

Using social and behavioural science to support COVID-19 pandemic response:

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-020-0884-z>

Research priorities for the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond:

<https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/bjop.12468>

Pandemic fatigue? https://www.researchgate.net/profile/John-Drury-2/publication/348585809_Pandemic_fatigue_How_adherence_to_covid-19_regulations_has_been_misrepresented_and_why_it_matters/links/606cbdc5299bf13f5d5f895b/Pandemic-fatigue-How-adherence-to-covid-19-regulations-has-been-misrepresented-and-why-it-matters.pdf

On order and disorder during COVID-19 pandemic:
<https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/bjso.12398>

From the fragile rationalist to collective resilience:
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.4997/jrcpe.2021.236>

Opinion pieces:

A collection of the opinion pieces I have written for The Guardian can be found here:

<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/stephen-reicher>

6. Did the Advisory groups meet their aims.

SPI-B: In its early days, SPI-B was exemplary. It had a broad mix of different behavioural science expertise. The discussions were wide-ranging and productive. The whole was definitely more than the sum of the parts. What is more, we were given excellent support by Go-Science. The one significant issue was that the advisory process was very much top-down. Questions were defined for us to answer and these formed the basis for the commissions we were given and the papers we wrote. It was very difficult for us to put questions on the agenda and write papers on issues that had not been put to us.

Later on, my sense was that this productive atmosphere fell apart. The group fragmented. Commissions were taken on by small groups without discussion by all of SPI-B and, as members, we had little insight into what was going on overall. It felt as if the group was being side-lined.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we were rarely given much insight into – the impact of our work: what (if anything) had been taken on board by policy makers and, if our advice was ignored, why this was so. This was very different in the Scottish context where the CMO's group had a number of meetings with the First Minister, Deputy First Minister and other members of Government.

Overall, at a UK level, my sense was that most of the key points we made – especially about engaging with and supporting the public, about the importance of building community and building trust – were not only ignored but (at times) systematically contradicted. So, while the work we did as a group was highly rewarding, the overall experience ended up as highly frustrating.

7. Lessons to be learnt

As a behavioural scientist, I consider that the UK Government response to Covid-19 was based on a mistaken set of assumptions about the nature of human behaviour, of adherence and resilience in the face of regulations that controlled the transmission of Covid. This was exemplified by the controversy over 'behavioural fatigue' which was used to delay the implementation of measures in March 2020 (and thereby allowed the number of infections to rise dramatically).

This idea was rooted in the assumption that individuals lacked the capacities to deal with these regulations. It was subsequently debunked by the high levels of adherence and the fact that cases of non-adherence were by and large because people lacked the resources (not the psychological motivation) to abide by what was asked of them. Moreover, what subsequently became clear that motivation and adherence was a function of an emergent sense of shared identity and community which led people to be concerned for the effects of their behaviours for others and their desire for the community as a whole to emerge well from the pandemic. The key determinants of an effective behavioural response, then, were building community, establishing trust (both horizontally between members of the public and vertically between the public and the authorities) and support.

The 'behavioural fatigue' episode raised another issue about how behavioural science expertise fed into Government decision making. It remains unclear where the idea came from. It certainly did not come from the scientific community which rejected the concept. It didn't come from SPI-B whose members by and large viewed the concept as 'unscientific'. It may have just been an assumption made by the UK CMO (and articulated by him on March 9th). It could have been sustained by other behavioural science sources within or close to Government. But the episode points, first, to the multiple and sometimes contradictory behavioural science considerations which fed into Government decision making (with SPI-B having no knowledge of how its advice might be contradicted by those other, sometimes non-expert, voices closer to the centre); second to the absence of behavioural science expertise at the point where decisions were actually made.

While 'behavioural fatigue' illustrates well problems of both behavioural science approach and process, it is far from the only example. Indeed, the same assumptions of individual frailty amongst members of the public informs almost every key behavioural decision made by the UK Government (many of which were explicitly challenged by SPI-B). These include:

The response to early rule-breaking by criticising members of the public rather than providing resources that made rule-following possible. In particular, there was a failure throughout the pandemic to provide the resources necessary for self-isolation.

The use of large fines as a means of deterring rule breaking

The punitive terms in which local restrictions were framed (as local 'lockdowns') as opposed to determining what forms of local support were necessary, especially in deprived areas (which, due to crowded housing; to public facing jobs such as care and shop-working, to greater use of public transport, were generally the areas of greater Covid transmission).

The failure to develop forms of community engagement to promote vaccine take-up – especially amongst communities generally alienated from authority which were those in which take-up was lower.

In terms of the lessons that should be learnt, there are three key areas which are important for the future.

- *Engaging the public in the development of pandemic policy.* We need to develop forms of community engagement which are both inclusive (so those usually without voice are able to contribute) and agile (so they can feed into policy which often needs to be developed very fast)
- *Addressing diversity and inequality.* We need to understand the impact of policies on different communities and the barriers to adherence they might face. In order to do this, we need to develop procures for a rapid 'diversity audit' of all policies. This is important both in terms of practicality and also in building trust by demonstrating an understand of and a concern for the circumstances faced by different sections of the public
- *Providing support.* Policies which ask the public (particularly those who are more deprived) to do things that they are incapable of doing will be ineffective, alienating and divisive. Again, pandemic policies should require a financial audit with clarity about what resources are needed, for whom, and how they will be provided

In sum, these areas speak to what needs to be done in order to engage the public as a partner in pandemic management rather than treating them as the problem.

8. Documentation

The documentation for these arguments is available in the research we have done (I was involved in a UKRI funded research project on 'group processes in Covid'), in the things I have written and in the literature I have reviewed. To start with, however, two resources may be of use.

One is the aforementioned book *Together Apart* which provides the conceptual framework and some early evidence relating to the overall way of understanding the Psychology of Covid 19.

The second is a paper that I wrote (with Linda Bauld) which summarises many of the points made here: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.4997/jrcpe.2021.236>