

## Facilitating Adherence to Social Distancing Measures during the COVID 19 Pandemic

Stephen Reicher, School of Psychology, and Neuroscience, University of St. Andrews

Clifford Stott, School of Psychology, University of Keele

John Drury, School of Psychology, University of Sussex

Richard Amlot, Emergency Response Department, Public Health England

Laura Bear, Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics

Chris Bonell, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

Val Curtis, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

Susan Michie, Department of Clinical, Educational and Health Psychology, University College London

James Rubin, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, Kings College London

Lucy Yardley, Department of Psychology, University of Southampton & School of Psychological Science, University of Bristol.

The key policy for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic is social distancing (although, as many, including the WHO, have pointed out, ‘physical distancing’ is a better term<sup>1</sup>). And the effectiveness of such distancing is critically dependent on public levels of adherence. So, our ability to affect the trajectory of the pandemic becomes critically dependent upon our ability to influence adherence to this policy. How, then, can we draw on behavioural science to determine the best means of achieving this?

Here, we argue that there are two broad answers to this question in the context of COVID-19. The first takes a ‘directive’ approach. It starts from the assumption that those who don’t adhere are psychologically unable or unwilling to cope with tough restrictions. The role of authorities is therefore to *make* them do so, with sanctions for non-adherence.

The other takes a ‘facilitative’ approach. It starts by assuming that people by and large want to adhere to social distancing - as long as the policies are perceived as clear, legitimate and equitable. Consequently, the use of force, by setting authorities over and against the public, can actually undermine the motivation to comply<sup>2</sup>. What is more, to the extent that there is non-adherence in the present pandemic, it has more to do with issues of practical opportunity than of psychological motivation<sup>3</sup>. For both these reasons, the authorities will be more effective in securing adherence if they take a ‘facilitative’ approach – one which focusses on increasing the opportunities and providing the resources which help and support people in achieving compliance.

Of course, the use of support and the use of sanctions are not inherently opposed. And, in providing opportunities to help people to adhere to social distancing measures, we are not advocating against the need to keep powers of sanction in reserve for those who refuse to avail themselves of these opportunities. Nonetheless, in this analysis, we do argue for the

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/transcripts/who-audio-emergencies-coronavirus-press-conference-full-20mar2020.pdf?sfvrsn=1eafbff\\_0](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/transcripts/who-audio-emergencies-coronavirus-press-conference-full-20mar2020.pdf?sfvrsn=1eafbff_0)

<sup>2</sup> Tyler, T. (2006) Why people obey the law. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Donner, C., Maskaly, J., Fridell, L., & Jennings, W. G. (2015). Policing and procedural justice: A state-of-the-art review. *Policing: an international journal of police strategies & management*, 38, 153-172.

<sup>3</sup> Michie S, van Stralen MM, West R. (2011). The Behaviour Change Wheel: a new method for characterizing and designing behaviour change interventions. *Implementation Science*, 6, 42.

need to pivot towards a more facilitative approach to social distancing during COVID-19 and we also provide some practical examples of what this would entail.

### *The directive approach to adherence*

Even before distancing measures were implemented to reduce COVID-19 transmission, concerns were expressed that people would be psychologically unable to stick with them over any period of time. They would rapidly become ‘behaviourally fatigued’, adherence would drop off, and therefore imposition of such measures had to be delayed until absolutely necessary<sup>4</sup>. As the weather turned warmer and going out became more tempting, renewed fears were expressed about ‘fatigue’ and this has been accompanied by stringent measures to dissuade or punish those who succumb to such temptations for example, by the police<sup>5</sup>.

Similarly, the media has been full of pictures of people ‘panic-buying’<sup>6</sup> – the term ‘panic’ coming from a long tradition which suggests a breakdown of rational behaviour in the face of a crisis.<sup>7</sup> Since the ‘lockdown’ was implemented on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020, there have also been countless stories of packed tube trains and crowded parks, described again in terms of psychological weakness – selfish ‘covidiot’, for example<sup>8</sup>. The response of the government was (helpfully) to appeal to people to stay at home, but also to threaten harsher restrictions and larger penalties if people they did not.

### *Constraints on adherence*

Despite the traction of this narrative amongst the media, politicians and sections of the public, the evidence for psychological weakness – behavioural fatigue and panic– is thin. To start with ‘behavioural fatigue’, there is some evidence that adherence to preventative measures declines over time, from others that it doesn’t, and from yet others that it fluctuates going up and down in waves<sup>9</sup>. In the case of quarantine, there is evidence that adherence declines over time as boredom, frustration and loneliness increase. But there is no evidence that declines in adherence reflect psychological frailty<sup>10</sup>.

This point is important when it comes to the more specific concerns about buying and crowding behaviour in the current pandemic. To start with, ‘panic’ seems a misnomer for stockpiling behaviour, when others are shown to be buying up important commodities and where one needs to prepare for a period of lockdown<sup>11</sup>. Additionally, polling evidence suggests that, in fact, a very small proportion of the population was stockpiling<sup>12</sup>. The reason

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-11/keep-calm-and-wash-your-hands-britain-s-strategy-to-beat-virus>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/04/uks-covid-19-lockdown-could-crumble-as-frustration-grows-police-warn>

<sup>6</sup> e.g. <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/11228965/coronavirus-panic-buying-continues-tesco-fight/>

<sup>7</sup> Quarantelli, E. L. (2001). Panic, sociology of. In N. J. Smelser & P. B. Baltes (Eds.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences* (pp. 11020–11023). New York: Pergamon Press.

Sime, J. D. (1990). The concept of ‘panic’. In D. Canter (Ed.), *Fires and human behaviour* (2nd Ed., pp. 63–81). London: David Fulton.

<sup>8</sup> e.g. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/coronavirus-madness-thousands-defy-advice-21736195>

<sup>9</sup> Bell, V. (2020) Do we suffer behavioural ‘fatigue’ for pandemic prevention measures. *Mind Hacks*. <https://mindhacks.com/2020/03/20/do-we-suffer-behavioural-fatigue-for-pandemic-prevention-measures/>

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> Reicher, S.D., Drury, J. & Stott, C. (2020). The truth about panic. *The Psychologist*. <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/truth-about-panic>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.warc.com/newsandopinion/opinion/why-stockpiling-is-not-the-crazy-selfish-behaviour-that-it-seems/3483>

for empty shelves was less to do with psychological factors than the fragile ‘just-in-time’ stocking procedures which leave supermarkets very sensitive to relatively small increases in demand<sup>13</sup>. In effect, the notion of ‘panic-buying’ is a misattribution of systemic dysfunctionality to psychological dysfunctionality.

When it comes to people on the Underground and in parks post restriction, both activity tracking<sup>14</sup> and polling evidence suggests that – for all the headlines - this is more the exception than the rule. As of early April, the great majority of people (around 80-90% depending on the poll) are complying with government guidelines<sup>15</sup> and, of the 20% or so who do go out, only 1 or 2% describe it as ‘for fun’ while 14-15% describe it as necessity<sup>16</sup>. And when in depth interviews drilled into the reasons for non-adherence it was mostly to do with practical rather than psychological reasons (although there are some groups such as adolescents who are complying less). People had to travel to get to work to put food on the table. People were told they could go out to exercise but had limited places they could go to in urban areas without being overcrowded.

There is also clear evidence from this pandemic that differences in levels of adherence between groups are strongly related to differences in practical constraints. US data shows that, in dense metropolitan areas, where it is harder to stay distant from others when one goes out, the death rate is some 9 times higher than in rural areas<sup>17</sup>. But, additionally, poor dense places, where people are forced out onto the streets, suffer more than rich dense places, where they are not<sup>18</sup>.

Not surprisingly, then, the US data also show large discrepancies between rich and poor, and also between black and white, in terms of who goes out, gets infected and dies<sup>19</sup>. The same applies in the UK. Data analysed by Christina Atchison and colleagues shows that those with the lowest household incomes were six times less likely to be able to work from home and three times less likely to be able to self-isolate. Equally, ability to self-isolate was lower in black and minority ethnic groups. By contrast, willingness to self-isolate was high across all groups<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Lewis, H. (2020) How panic-buying revealed the problem with the modern world. *The Atlantic*.

[https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/coronavirus-panic-buying-britain-us-shopping/608731/?utm\\_source=twitter&utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_campaign=share](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/03/coronavirus-panic-buying-britain-us-shopping/608731/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=share)

<sup>14</sup> <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-trips-to-the-shops-fall-by-85-since-outbreak-according-to-google-data-11968171>

<sup>15</sup> [19%20DAILY%20SLIDE%20DECK%20PDF%206TH%20APRIL](#) pp. 17-19

<https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/412s271exg/YouGov%20-%20Daily%20coronavirus%20tracker%2023%20Mar%20-%205%20Apr.pdf> pp. 16-21

<sup>16</sup> <https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/412s271exg/YouGov%20-%20Daily%20coronavirus%20tracker%2023%20Mar%20-%205%20Apr.pdf> pp. 22-24

<sup>17</sup> Florida, R. (2020) The geography of coronavirus. *Citylab*.

<https://www.citylab.com/equity/2020/04/coronavirus-spread-map-city-urban-density-suburbs-rural-data/609394/>

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*

<sup>19</sup> Valentino-DeVries, J., Lu, D. & Dance, G.J.X. (2020) Location data says it all: staying at home during coronavirus is a luxury. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/03/us/coronavirus-stay-home-rich-poor.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-52194018>

<sup>20</sup> Atchison, C.J. et al. (2020) Perceptions and behavioural responses of the general public during the COVID-19 pandemic: A cross-sectional survey of UK Adults.

<https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.04.01.20050039v1>

The greater the material inequality, the greater the problems of adherence. This is particularly in evidence in India, where the government ‘lockdown’ meant migrant workers walking, sometimes hundreds of miles, back to their homes<sup>21</sup>. Along the way they were treated as a public health hazard, sprayed with disinfectant as they rested<sup>22</sup>, and blamed for their own plight, and many died. As one widely shared Facebook post complained: “these people cannot listen to instructions. They are so lazy, they don’t want to work, they just want free food. Why are they walking? Why don’t they listen to the government?”<sup>23</sup>.

At a distance, it is easier to see how absurd this complaint is. But, closer to home, we need to be clear about the problems of psychologising non-adherence, of focussing blame on the individual and of responding with punitive measures.

### *The facilitative approach to adherence*

A facilitative approach is rooted in a critique of the notion of psychological fragility, and more particularly the notion that crowds crumble in a crisis. To the contrary, research on behaviour in emergencies and disasters shows that people are characteristically resilient: they act in an orderly way, they support each other, they constitute the ‘first responders’ in a crisis<sup>24</sup>. This is particularly likely to occur if people form a sense of shared identity (of ‘we-ness’) and come together collectively<sup>25</sup>. Indeed, there is a growing body of evidence to show that when people work with each other as members of a group rather than work against each other as individuals, they are more likely to provide mutual support<sup>26</sup> and better able to cope with challenging circumstances<sup>27</sup>. Furthermore, group membership and support act as a powerful prophylactic against subsequent mental and physical ill-health<sup>28</sup>.

In short, contemporary evidence suggests that the public are not a problem that needs to be managed and controlled by the government. Rather, in coming together and helping each other, the public constitute the best resource available in a crisis and that the role of authorities should be to scaffold and not substitute for their self-organisation<sup>29</sup>. In other

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/nishitajha/india-coronavirus-lockdown-migrant-workers>

<sup>22</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/30/india/india-migrant-workers-sprayed-intl/index.html>

<sup>23</sup> <https://twitter.com/GautamGhosh/status/1244730173309603840/photo/1>

<sup>24</sup> Hellsloot, I. & Ruitenbergh, A. (2004) Citizen response to disasters: a survey of literature and some practical implications. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 12, 98–111

<sup>25</sup> Drury, J., Cocking, C., Reicher, S., Burton, A., Schofield, D., Hardwick, A., Graham, D. & Langston, P. (2009). Cooperation versus competition in a mass emergency evacuation: A new laboratory simulation and a new theoretical model. *Behavior research methods*, 41,, 957-970.

Drury, J., Cocking, C., & Reicher, S. (2009). Everyone for themselves? A comparative study of crowd solidarity among emergency survivors. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 48, 487-506.

<sup>26</sup> Reicher, S. D., & Haslam, S. A. (2009). Beyond help: a social psychology of social solidarity and social cohesion. In M. Snyder, & S. Sturmer (Eds.), *The Psychology of Prosocial Behaviour* Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

<sup>27</sup> Haslam, S. A., & Reicher, S. (2006). Stressing the group: social identity and the unfolding dynamics of responses to stress. *Journal of applied psychology*, 91, 1037-1052.

<sup>28</sup> Haslam, C., Jetten, J., Cruwys, T., Dingle, G., & Haslam, S. A. (2018). *The new psychology of health: Unlocking the social cure*. London: Routledge.

<sup>29</sup> Drury, J., & Alfarhli, K. (2019). Social identity, emergencies and disasters. In R. Williams, V. Kemp, S. A. Haslam, C. Haslam, K. S. Bhui, & S. Bailey (Eds.), *Social scaffolding: Applying the lessons of contemporary social science to health and healthcare* (pp. 154-164). London: Royal College of Psychiatrists.  
see also: Reicher, S.D. (2019). Making connectedness count: from theory to practising a social identity model of health. In R. Williams, S. Bailey, B. Kamaldeep, S. A. Haslam, C. Haslam, V. Kemp, & D. Maughan (Eds). *Social scaffolding: Applying the lessons of contemporary social science to health, public mental health and healthcare*. London: Royal College of Psychiatrists.

words, authorities should treat the public as partners in managing a crisis, with more consultation and joint problem-solving and decision-making.

It is important to stress that - in arguing that the public, to the extent that they develop a sense of shared social identity, characteristically act responsibly and pro-socially in disasters - we do not deny that some people may still act selfishly and flout the common good. Rather, our point is that we should not start from a presumption of ill-will. To the contrary, as both the theory, past evidence, and emerging evidence from this pandemic suggest, the way the authorities relate to the public should start from a presumption of goodwill. And, if people's goals are assumed to be positive rather than negative, one can shift from policies and practices focussed on trying to stop people doing what they want to do to policies and practices focussed on enabling people to do what they want to do – in other words, from a restrictive to a facilitative approach.

A useful – and directly related - parallel can be found in work on crowd behaviour and crowd conflict. The traditional approach to policing public order was highly repressive. It started from the assumption that people inevitably become irrational and prone to violence in crowds. The role of the police is therefore to stop such tendencies getting out of hand through prompt and firm action, especially in situations of incipient violence<sup>30</sup>. However, contemporary crowd research challenges this 'irrationalist' perspective (from which notions of 'panic' and of psychological fragility in emergencies derive). It suggests that most crowd members generally act reasonably and meaningfully on the basis of shared group norms. However, if and when the police intervene repressively, this majority becomes more sympathetic to any in the crowd who advocate violence, and conflict thereby escalates<sup>31</sup>.

From this, a number of guidelines were developed to replace repressive policing with facilitative policing – an approach which starts from asking 'how can we help crowd members realise their legitimate goals' rather than 'how can we stop crowd members acting illegitimately'<sup>32</sup>. This has been implemented to considerable effect both in the UK and internationally<sup>33</sup>. It has led to better relations with crowd members and to reduced conflict. Where some in the crowd still remain violent, they become isolated, often controlled by crowd members themselves and, if not, easier to deal with by the police without alienating the majority<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Stott, C., & Reicher, S. (1998). Crowd action as intergroup process: Introducing the police perspective. *European journal of social psychology*, 28, 509-529.

<sup>31</sup> Reicher, S. D. (2001). The psychology of crowd dynamics In M. Hogg & S. Tindale (Eds.). *Blackwell handbook of social psychology: Group processes*. London: Blackwell.

Drury, J. (2020). Recent developments in the psychology of crowds and collective behaviour. *Current Opinion in Psychology*.

<sup>32</sup> Reicher, S., Stott, C., Drury, J., Adang, O., Cronin, P., & Livingstone, A. (2007). Knowledge-based public order policing: principles and practice. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, 1, 403-415.

<sup>33</sup> HMIC (2009) Adapting to protest: Nurturing the British model of policing. London: HMIC – see especially chapter 4. Available at: <https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmicfrs/media/adapting-to-protest-nurturing-the-british-model-of-policing-20091125.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Stott, C., Adang, O., Livingstone, A., & Schreiber, M. (2008). Tackling football hooliganism: A quantitative study of public order, policing and crowd psychology. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 14, 115-141.

Stott, C., Scothern, M., & Gorringer, H. (2013). Advances in liaison based public order policing in England: Human rights and negotiating the management of protest?. *Policing: a journal of policy and practice*, 7(2), 212-226.

What we suggest, then, is taking the successful model of facilitative policing and applying it more broadly as an approach to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is an approach which starts from the question ‘how can we help people adhere to policy’ rather than ‘how can we stop people violating policy’. By listening to the public, respecting them, and being seen to be on their side, the facilitative approach is a means of increasing the motivation to adhere to policy<sup>35</sup>. By focussing on the impediments that people face and on devising creative solutions to their problems, it practically enables them to adhere. And, if after all that, some still violate social distancing policies, it isolates them and makes them much easier to deal with.

The shift from a directive to a facilitative approach is simple. But it has radical implications for how one responds to problems of non-adherence. Let us conclude with a few brief examples of what this might entail. These are not meant to be definitive or comprehensive, but simply illustrations to guide a facilitative way of thinking.

#### *A guide to facilitative thinking*

At the time of writing, in April 2020, there are three principal concerns regarding adherence to social distancing. The first is people congregating in parks and other public spaces, the second is people failing to observe distancing on the way to work and at work, the third is adolescents meeting up with friends. Let us briefly comment on the different implications of a facilitative versus a directive approach on each.

Congregating in parks: Concerns about the numbers of people going to parks, sunbathing, failing to keep the statutory two metres apart has led to cautions by the police and threats from the government to ban people from going out to exercise and to close parks<sup>36</sup>. So how can we help people to go out while maintaining distance? An obvious response is to make more green space available so that densities reduce. A report from 2017, for instance, points to the growing amount of green space in Central London that has been privatised, run by corporations and barred to the general public<sup>37</sup>. Additionally, there are 48,000 acres of golf courses in London<sup>38</sup> and a further large tranche of green open space in school playing fields. These could all be opened to the public. In these, and other ways, it would be possible to facilitate being out and yet staying separate.

Distancing at work and going to work: Anger has been expressed at crowded public transport<sup>39</sup> and at lack of social distancing at work<sup>40</sup>. So, again, how can we help people to avoid such situations? The obvious answers here are to make it affordable to stay at home and, in the case of genuinely essential services, to adapt working practices to enable distancing. In the case of staying at home, some major interventions have been made in terms

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See also: <https://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/public-order/planning-and-deployment/communication/>

<sup>35</sup> Tyler, T. R., & Lind, E. A. (1992). A relational model of authority ingroups. In M. Zanna (Ed.). *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 25, pp. 115–192). New York: Academic Press.

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/05/uk-sunbathers-stricter-coronavirus-lockdowns>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/jul/24/revealed-pseudo-public-space-pops-london-investigation-map>

<sup>38</sup> <https://twitter.com/guyshrubsole/status/1246737754354069506>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-52003076>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52076504>

of guaranteeing sick pay and income<sup>41</sup>. But prompt payment is critical and if it is delayed people will have no option but to go out and work. Additionally, agreements with the power industry and other providers that no-one will be cut off during lockdown could make a major difference. In the case of making workplace practices safe, the proactive surveying of workers and the use of Health and Safety legislation will be crucial.

Keeping adolescents at home: Adolescents have been identified as a particular demographic who are less observant of social distancing, and this has led to calls that their parents should be fined if they go out to meet up with friends<sup>42</sup>. A facilitative approach would ask how we can help young people stay at home and stay in contact with their friends. One answer is to ensure that they have the technical means to do so. Phone companies and internet service providers could be brought together and asked to guarantee that no-one is cut off during lockdown. Another possibility is to ask the entertainment industry to free stream new films, games and other entertainment in order to make being at home a more attractive prospect.

We do not suggest that these are magic bullets. Not all of the suggestions may be feasible. But they do illustrate how fundamentally the answers change if one shifts the question from 'how do we stop people from not adhering' to 'how do we help them adhere'. And, in treating the public as an ally in the efforts to contain COVID 19, it makes adherence and success all the more likely.

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<sup>41</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/mar/20/government-pay-wages-jobs-coronavirus-rishi-sunak>

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/04/02/parents-teenagers-flout-coronavirus-lockdown-rules-should-fined/>