Finding the trees in the wood: Behavioural science and the UK's response to COVID-19

*If the government's response to the pandemic appears opaque and chaotic, that is not the fault of behavioural science, writes **Adam Oliver**. He emphasises the importance of distinguishing between behavioural science as a subfield of public policy and the processes by which experts advise governments.*

The UK Government's early response to the coronavirus pandemic led to a lot of criticism of behavioural science as a tool for informing policy. That criticism, insofar as it was targeted at behavioural science, was largely misplaced, but it was essentially related to a perceived delay in the government's decision to impose a lockdown. That is, it was focussed principally on the type and timings of the interventions embedded in the government's response.

In that behavioural scientists study systematic patterns in human behaviour in response to various stimuli, it seems not unreasonable for governments to solicit advice from them on what to do in the face of a pandemic and when to do it. This does not mean that all behavioural scientists will offer the same advice, because a single stimulus might push behaviour in more than one direction. In an untested environment – such as that experienced with the sudden onset of a major new infectious disease – balanced judgment, informed by reasoned arguments from a broad spectrum of behavioural scientists, is a logical strategy to pursue; that there is likely to be disagreement among the behaviouralists does not invalidate their arguments.

The government receives its behavioural science advice from the Independent Scientific Pandemic Group on Behaviours (SPI-B), which was resurrected from a similar collective that was charged with giving advice during the 2009/10 swine flu pandemic (which, perhaps unlike the current outbreak, caused a significant overreaction from the government). The government stated explicitly that it did not wish for the SPI-B to comment on the 'what' and the 'when'; it wanted it to advise on only the 'how'.

As an aside, the composition of the SPI-B merits some comment. In terms of its disciplinary mix, it has representatives from health psychology, social psychology, anthropology and history (with some of its members also sitting on the Government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies – SAGE). An economist might say that this mix is suboptimal for its purposes. The relatively new subfield of behavioural public policy is highly multidisciplinary, and encompasses fields from anthropology to zoology, lexicographically speaking. But many of the most robust systematic patterns in human behaviours used in that subfield were uncovered by behavioural economists and cognitive psychologists. It may be that because health psychologists have 'health' and 'psychology' in their description of themselves, the government sees them as the 'go-to' behaviouralists during a pandemic. It would be churlish to deny that they ought to be one group in the mix, but the breadth of disciplines consulted should be widened.

That being said, after trawling through the reports of the SPI-B meetings, it appears that they did offer the government some sound advice. For example, for illustrative purposes a selection of the advices offered by the SPI-B up to the beginning of April included them regularly emphasising the importance that the government give clear, transparent, unambiguous reasons for its actions (or lack thereof) and clear expectations of how the policy response would develop, and that the government should promote a sense of collectivism and duty to others – that 'we are all in this together' – and a sense of social disapproval, without victimisation, of those who might transgress. The SPI-B also advised that the public health messages ought to be relayed to the population by people whom the public might trust (e.g. health care professional rather than politicians), and that concerns about the length of time over which people would be able and willing to sustain social distancing should not be used as an excuse *not* to convey the message that social distancing was/is important. In terms of easing the lockdown, with a nod to some successful interventions that have been used in the past to highlight the calorific content of food items, the SPI-B mooted the idea that a traffic light system be used to clarify which activities gradually become acceptable in a post-lockdown society.

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The above are all seemingly sensible suggestions, and the government acted consistently with some of them, at least some of the time. For example, the slogan to 'Stay at Home – Protect the NHS – Save Lives', was clear, transparent, and unambiguous, and underpinned that one's individual behaviour ought to be directed towards the collective good – and on the whole, it worked. But the government has faced criticism for a lack of transparency also, particularly with respect to its widely perceived failure to explain its decision to delay the lockdown in the UK with sufficient clarity, when many other countries were locking down before us. And as the lockdown started to ease, even the slogans have become opaque, with that stated above replaced by 'Stay Alert – Control the Virus – Save Lives', which is perhaps designed to instil a collective wartime spirit, without fully acknowledging that it is difficult to stay alert against an invisible threat. But if the government's response to the pandemic appears, to many, opaque and chaotic, that is not the fault of behavioural science.

Much of the (misplaced) criticism that has been targeted against the use of behavioural science has been directed at the UK's Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), but the BIT, I feel, has been unfairly maligned. Admittedly, there are members of BIT who have unwittingly put themselves in the firing line (and there are no less than three BIT employees on the SPI-B), but there are also BIT team members who have been working quietly, diligently, tirelessly and with a great deal of skill towards informing public policy with insights from behavioural science for many years – indeed, since the early development of behavioural public policy as a distinct subfield of public policy a decade ago. The BIT continues to undertake much useful work in relation to the issues that are relevant to the current pandemic, such as the most effective ways to present public health messages.

However, it is also important to acknowledge that there are plenty of other behavioural public policy analysts who have likewise been working on these issues who are less 'heard' within policy circles, and yet who might have important insights to offer on social distancing, handwashing, hoarding and the like (and even on what interventions to implement and when, and not just how to implement interventions picked by politicians). Moreover, many of these analysts are university-based scholars, and are perhaps better positioned to highlight the possible caveats, limitations, and unintended consequences of behavioural interventions than those whose livelihoods depend on 'selling' the approach.

Behavioural scientists study systematic patterns in human behaviour, and thus they can bring forth crucial insights and knowledge when attempting to deal with a pandemic (and indeed any other public policy challenge). And yet it is also important, when offering advice, to openly acknowledge – indeed to highlight with enthusiasm – the caveats, limitations, and unintended consequences of behavioural science and its associated policy applications. That is, after all, what makes for good social – and behavioural – science.

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