Public compliance and COVID-19: Did Cummings damage the fight against the virus, or become a useful anti-role model?

***Jonathan Jackson**, **Ben Bradford**, **Julia Yesberg**, **Zoe Hobson**, **Arabella Kyprianides**, **Krisztián Pósch** and **Reka Solymosi** discuss the latest findings of their 10-city longitudinal panel study on compliance with lockdown measures. They find that adherence continues to be rooted in widespread social norms, but provide supporting data and evidence of how the Cummings affair has produced cynicism around the measures.*

During the first couple of months of the coronavirus lockdown, the rules were clear and compliance was widespread. Restrictions are beginning to be eased across the UK, and the challenge for policymakers is to strike the right balance between minimising the chances of a second wave and creating the conditions for economic recovery. As we wait—and hope—for a vaccine, our ability to manage COVID-19 rests on the voluntary compliance of people all over the UK.

What do we need people to do? Good hygiene and limiting the number of times people come into close contact with each other will be crucial, especially indoors, but we also need people to fully engage with the test-and-trace strategy that the government announced on 27 May. Crucially, for track, trace and isolate to be effective in shutting down contagion, we need people to be willing to tell officials who their contacts have been and to self-isolate, not for their own benefit but in order to protect others in case they have.

Shifting sands

Since April, we have been conducting a multi-site panel study of just over 1000 people in 10 cities across England, Scotland and Wales. A primary purpose of this study is to examine whether and why people comply with the various and shifting mandatory and discretionary restrictions and guidelines in place.

Analysing the first two waves of data collected on 21 April and 11-14 May, we found that adherence to first phase measures was rooted less in fear of the virus and police, and more in social norms backed up by the coordination function of legal requirement.

Wave 3 data have just been collected (2-4 June) and we can now assess some of the potential factors shaping self-reported cooperation and compliance. To measure willingness to cooperate with track, trace and isolate, we presented our research participants with the following question:

- If I tested positive and were contacted by a Tracer, I would share with them the contact details of everyone whom I had contact with (**84% said fairly or very likely**);
- If I did not have any symptoms but were asked by a Tracer, I would stay at home for two weeks (or until being tested) and self-isolate (**80% said fairly or very likely**);
- If the Tracer asked my whole household to stay at home for two weeks (or until being tested), all of us would self-isolate (**81% said fairly or very likely**).

To measure compliance with social distancing guidelines, we asked our research participants: "Since the authorities took measures to stop the spread of the coronavirus, how often did you keep a safe social distance (of 2 meters or more) from…"

- …friends or family outside my direct household (**90% said often or very often**);
- …others when going for a walk or exercising (**95% said often or very often**);
- …my neighbours (**96% said often or very often**);

- …others when going grocery shopping (**90% said often or very often**).

While levels of expressed cooperation and compliance were high, there is a need to maintain very high levels of both, since there could be serious consequences if even a relatively small number of people begin to withdraw from the collective effort against COVID-19. To assess what explains cooperation and compliance, we fitted a series of multivariate models on wave 3 data.

Does cynicism (stemming from the Dominic Cummings saga) damage public cooperation and compliance?

While headlines have now moved on, recall that a widespread response to Mr. Cumming's actions (and government defence of his actions) was that the situation could anger people, undermine the sense that those in power abide by the same public health rules, and reduce compliance with travel and other restrictions. To better understand the situation, we presented research participants with the following vignette:

> There has been a lot of media attention on the actions of the Prime Minister's chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, during lockdown. On 27th March, Mr. Cummings drove from London to Durham, with his wife and child, to be nearer to family, while on 12th April, the family journeyed to the town of Barnard Caste, a round trip of 60 miles. Some people say that his actions were within the rules, while others think them a breach of lockdown regulations.

Unsurprisingly, nearly everybody had heard about this story (96%). Of these, 84% said that Cummings's actions were unjustified; 68% said that Mr Cummings' actions had made them feel angry.

If Dominic Cummings was believed to have bent the rules, and if the people in power who defended him were also therefore believed to bend the rules when they need to, then cynicism might have become an important issue explaining levels of adherence in early June. Because of the particular way in which the Cummings saga seemed to have 'cut through' national debate, we asked participants to agree or disagree to the following attitudinal statements: 'it is ok to bend the rules when I need to' (16% agreed); 'people in my local community bend the rules when they need to' (61% agreed); and 'people in power bend the rules when they need to' (84% agreed).

We found evidence for two, to some degree counterbalancing, effects. On the one hand, the saga may have undermined the collective effort against the virus. We found that a sense that 'I can bend the rules if I need to' was related to lower levels of social distancing compliance and cooperation with track-and-trace. Crucially, rule cynicism was at least as strong a (negative) predictor as all the factors we detail below, and cynicism about the binding nature of the rules was strongly associated with the belief that 'people in power can bend the rules when they need to'.

On the other hand, we found that research participants who were angry about Cummings's actions were *more likely* to comply with social distancing guidelines and *less likely* to believe that it was OK to bend the rules (adjusting for all the other factors). Stephen Reicher may have been right: Cummings may have become a useful anti-role model.

It seems, on this early analysis, that those who predicted that the Cummings affair might damage the fight against COVID-19 were partly correct. While our data are provisional, the story seems to have produced a sense of cynicism regarding public health rules that could prove difficult to 'put back into the box'. Yet, at the same time, Mr Cummings may also have provided a role model of how *not* to behave. Many research participants were angered by his actions, and this seemed to have carried through to an increased propensity to comply and cooperate with the government's rules and policies.

Some other motivational factors underlying cooperation and compliance

In addition to rule cynicism and anger about people in power bending the public health rules, we found that concern about catching COVID-19 was a significant predictor of both cooperation with track, trace and isolate and compliance with social distancing. People who were concerned about contracting the virus also tended to express greater willingness to cooperate and comply.

Social norms continue to play a role. People who agreed with sentiments like 'most people in my local community would disapprove if some individuals were not strictly following social distancing to help prevent the spread of COVID-19' (84% agreed) and 'it is important to the National Health Service that everybody sticks to the guidelines on social distancing' (93% said it was very or extremely important) were (a) more likely to say that they followed social distancing guidelines and (b) more willing to say that they would cooperate with track, trace and isolate measures.

What about the law? Our analysis of waves 1 and 2 data suggested that by making lockdown a legal requirement, the legal system acted as an expressive agent: through its coordination function and expressive quality, the law sent a powerful message about what needed to be done and why. In turn, widespread compliance with the law saw citizens acting as expressive agents; people observed public health guidelines in part to signal collective responsibility and care to others.

In wave 3 we also found that the expressive function of the law was a significant positive predictor of cooperation and compliance. People who agreed with statements like 'making social distancing a legal requirement helped to clarify what we should and should not be doing' (87%), 'introducing the social distancing rules helped communicate to the public the need to do what we can to stop the pandemic from spreading' (86%) and 'observing the social distancing laws shows other people in my community that I care for their safety' (90% agreed) also tended to be willing to comply. It seems that by abiding by the social distancing guidelines, people express to each other a sense of in-group identity in a way that is additive, not reducible, to the role that adherence to social norms plays. Informal rules governing behaviour bind people together, but so too do formal rules—at least in the current public health context.

Finally, we found that legal legitimacy was a positive predictor of social distancing compliance, adjusting for the other factors. People who agreed with statements like 'obeying the law ultimately benefits everyone in the community' tended to say that they complied with two-metre social distancing. Notably, legal legitimacy did not predict the blanket lockdown compliance in force in late April and mid-May, but it did predict compliance in early June. It may be that as public health rules become more complex and less clear—we found for instance that people were less clear about 'who they could or could not come into contact with' in wave 3 compared to wave 2—general motivational factors like legal legitimacy start to play a role.

So where does all this leave us?

As the government pushes more and more to open up the economy and get people moving, the biggest risk is complacency—we need people to adhere to health guidelines and be willing to fully engage in track, trace and isolate. As we adjust to a greater degree of relaxation of restrictions, and as public health measures become increasingly targeted, voluntary compliance will be as important as ever. Yet, while adherence continues to be rooted in widespread social norms and a sense of collective responsibility, there are signs that cynicism about the binding nature of the rules (linked to the Dominic Cummings affair) is starting to become a factor.

This finding suggests that restoring public trust lost in the last few weeks will be vital if the collective effort against COVID-19 is to be maintained and a second wave avoided. It seems unlikely that this will be easy—once lost, trust is hard to regain. Transparency, openness, and maintaining a sense of mutual responsibility will be central to such efforts, as will be clarity over

rules (and the reasons for them) and consistency in their application. Whether the Government has the will or political capital to do this remains to be seen.

About the Authors

Jonathan Jackson is Professor in Research Methodology and Head of the LSE Department of Methodology.

Ben Bradford is Professor of Global City Policing in the Department of Security and Crime Science at UCL.

Julia Yesberg is Research Fellow in the Department of Security and Crime Science at UCL.

Zoe Hobson is a Researcher in the Department of Security and Crime Science at UCL.

Arabella Kyprianides is a Research Fellow in the Department of Security and Crime Science at UCL.

Krisztián Pósch is Lecturer in crime science at the Department of Security and Crime Science at University College London.

Reka Solymosi is Lecturer in Quantitative Methods at the Department of Criminology at University of Manchester.

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