

UK Government Use of Behavioural Science Strategies in Covid-Event Messaging:

Responsibility and Communication Ethics in Times of ‘Crisis’

Dr Gary Sidley

Retired NHS Consultant Clinical Psychologist

Summary

Throughout the Covid event the UK Government, in keeping with many other countries, drew on behavioural-science interventions – often referred to as ‘nudges’ – to strengthen their public-health communications, and thereby increase compliance with the pandemic restrictions and subsequent vaccine roll-out. These psychological methods of persuasion often operate below people’s conscious awareness, and frequently rely on inflating emotional discomfort to change behaviour. In particular, the state’s often-covert deployment of fear inflation, guilt/shame and peer pressure/scapegoating to strengthen the Covid communications strategy has evoked ethical concerns. Focusing on the controversial ‘Look them in the eyes’ messaging campaign, this paper presents a critical analysis that: (1) identifies the behavioural scientists, and other key actors, responsible for the tone and content of the materials used in this campaign; (2) reveals the rationales offered by the creators to justify the use of the emotionally disturbing advertisements; and (3) confirms that the harrowing messages and videos were developed without any ethical oversight. The implications of these findings for future state-funded public communications during times of ‘crisis’ are discussed.

Introduction

Since the emergence of the novel SARS-CoV-2 virus in early 2020, the people of Western democracies have endured heightened levels of state-sponsored propaganda (Robinson, 2022), involving a range of ‘non-consensual persuasion’ techniques (Bakir et al., 2018) intended to aggressively promote the official Covid narrative while suppressing alternative viewpoints. An important element of this campaign has been the deployment of behavioural-science strategies – or ‘nudges’

(Institute for Government, 2010) – to strengthen public-health communications and thereby increase compliance with the pandemic restrictions and subsequent vaccine roll-out. As these techniques of persuasion often operate below people’s conscious awareness, and frequently rely on evoking emotional discomfort to change behaviour, the state’s use of these techniques on its own citizens has been perceived as ethically problematic by both psychological specialists and the general public (Sidley, 2022a).

Presently, there is uncertainty regarding the sources of behavioural-science guidance during the construction of the Covid messaging, the specific actors responsible for development of the nudge-infused posters and videos, and the degree of ethical oversight of the pandemic communications process. Clarity around these three issues is crucial in order to inform the discussion of how to ensure that the state's future use of nudge strategies in their messaging campaigns – be they in relation to health or climate 'crises' – remains within the bounds of ethical acceptability.

Behavioural Science: Nature and Origins

Modern-day behavioural science is a derivative of 'behaviourism', a paradigm that gained prominence over a century ago with the work of John B. Watson, who viewed the main goal of psychology to be 'the prediction and control of behaviour' (Watson, 1913). The behaviourist approach constituted a rejection of the previously dominant introspectionist movement (which studied subjectivity and inner consciousness) by its exclusive focus on observables: the environmental stimuli that make a particular behaviour more or less likely, the overt behaviour itself, and the consequences of that behaviour (referred to as 'reinforcement' or 'punishment').

Essentially, behaviourism asserts that all behaviour is learnt from the environment through a combination of *classical conditioning* (learning by association) and *operant conditioning* (learning by consequences). Over the years, the theory has undergone some minor refinements – most notably the 'radical behaviourism' of B.F. Skinner (Cherry, 2023) – resulting in strategic regulation of environmental stimuli and reinforcement being the prominent approach to the psychological treatment of phobias and other clinical problems throughout the 1960s and 1970s (albeit less so today).

A current manifestation of the paradigm, behavioural science, similarly relies upon a range of strategies – 'nudges' – to influence people's behaviour by shaping a combination of the environmental triggers and the consequences of our actions. According to a Cabinet Office and Institute for Government 'MINDSPACE' report in 2010, nudges provide 'Low cost, low pain ways of "nudging" citizens... into new ways of acting by going with the grain of how we think and act' (Institute for Government, 2010). Exploiting the fact that human beings spend 99 per cent of their time on 'automatic pilot', making moment-by-moment decisions without conscious reflection, these techniques – often operating below the level of conscious awareness – can exert a powerful influence upon behaviour.

The most visible sources of behavioural-science guidance throughout the Covid event were the Scientific Pandemic Insights Group on Behaviours (SPI-B) and the Behavioural Insight Team (BIT). The SPI-B was a sub-group of SAGE – the primary source of pandemic advice to the Government – and was mainly composed of experts in psychology, sociology, anthropology and behavioural science. Convened on the 13 February 2020, its remit was to advise on 'Strategies for behaviour change, to support control of and recovery from the epidemic' (GOV.UK, 2020a).

The BIT has a longer history. Since its advent in 2010 it has acted as an ongoing source of expert advice to government. Conceived in the Prime Minister's Office of David Cameron, the team claims to be 'The world's first government institution dedicated to the application of behavioural science to policy' (BIT website). According to the BIT website, their team rapidly expanded from a seven-person unit working with the UK Government to a 'social purpose company' operating in many countries around the world.

The Nudges of Concern

The armoury of behavioural science is furnished with a wide range of strategies for influencing the actions of others. The literature is peppered with various acronyms as aide-mémoires for the specific techniques, and discussion can sometimes be confusing because terms can overlap, and a message or image can be illustrative of more than one nudge. Arguably, the most influential framework is provided by the MINDSPACE (Institute for Government, 2010) report, detailing nine nudges, three of which have evoked significant ethical concerns. In the language of behavioural science, these more contentious nudges are described as ‘affect’, ‘ego’ and ‘norms’ (experienced by many as fear inflation, shaming and peer pressure, respectively). A brief explanation of each of these strategies, together with some illustrative examples of how each was used during the Covid event, is given below.

AFFECT: Our feelings will significantly influence how we think and act. Sadness will spawn self-criticism and behavioural inertia, anger will encourage negative evaluations of others and a propensity to act aggressively, and fear will focus our attention on to potential dangers in our environment, and make us inclined to avoid perceived threats. It was this latter element that was prominent during the Covid-19 communications campaign, presumably based on the premise that a frightened population is typically a compliant one. Examples of messaging during the pandemic that inflated fear included: non-contextualised death counts, displayed daily on the TV, purportedly keeping a running total of the number of people who had perished from Covid-19; recurrent images of acutely unwell patients in Intensive Care Units in Lombardy (Italy’s pandemic hot-spot); reports of bodies littering the streets in Ecuador (Mail Online, 2020); the shock-and-awe presentation of Professors Whitty and Vallance (Chief Medical Officer and

Chief Scientific Advisor, respectively) in 2020, with their speculative prediction of 50,000 new Covid cases per day (Triggle, 2020); and scary slogans such as, ‘IF YOU GO OUT YOU CAN SPREAD IT. PEOPLE WILL DIE.’

EGO: Human beings strive to maintain a positive view of themselves and preserve a virtuous self-image. This inclination appears to have been exploited during the pandemic, as evidenced by our political leaders and public-health experts routinely implying that following the Covid restrictions was akin to being a good person. Examples included: slogans such as, ‘STAY HOME, PROTECT THE NHS, SAVE LIVES’ and ‘VACCINATIONS PROTECT US ALL’; the then Health Secretary Matt Hancock quipping, ‘Don’t kill your gran’ to university students returning home for the summer break; Professor Whitty stating, in a 2020 press conference, that anyone who increased their own risk of exposure ‘increases the risk of everyone’ (Triggle, 2020); and mask-promotion advertisements where actors said, ‘I wear a face covering to protect my mates’.

NORMS: Awareness of social norms – the prevalent views and behaviour of our fellow citizens – can exert pressure on us to conform. We are strongly influenced by what others do; awareness of residing in a deviant minority is a source of discomfort. The UK Government has repeatedly used normative pressure throughout the Covid event to gain the public’s compliance with restrictions. The most straightforward example is how, during interviews with the media, government ministers often told us that the ‘vast majority have complied with the rules’ (GOV.UK, 2020b), or that 90 per cent of those eligible have already had the first dose of the Covid vaccine (Gye, 2021). However, normative pressure as exerted by these pronouncements is more effective in changing the behaviour of the deviant

minority if there is a *visible* indicator of pro-social compliance rooted in communities. Mandatory masking admirably fulfilled this purpose by enabling people to instantly distinguish the rule breakers from the rule followers.

Specific Ethical Concerns

The Government's deployment of behavioural-science infused messaging during the Covid-19 event was ethically problematic. Areas of concern can be understood in relation to four aspects.

1 The Methods Per Se

Is it morally acceptable for the government of a Western liberal democracy to strategically inflict emotional discomfort upon its citizens in order to lever compliance with its edicts? Civil servants harnessing fear, shame and scapegoating to change minds can be construed as an ethically questionable practice that in some respects resembles the tactics used by authoritarian regimes, where the state inflicts pain on a subset of its population in an attempt to eliminate beliefs and behaviours they perceive to be deviant.

Another ethical consideration associated with the methods arises from their unintended consequences. Elevated levels of fear may have discouraged people from attending hospital with non-Covid illnesses (Cusick, 2020), and is likely to have significantly contributed to the non-Covid excess deaths (ONS, 2021) witnessed during the Covid event. The loneliness of older people will have been exacerbated by the heightened levels of community anxiety (Spada, 2021), potentially leading to premature death (APA, 2017). And it is plausible that the state-sponsored shaming and scapegoating of those deviating from the directives of the dominant Covid narrative will have been primarily responsible for the vilification of the unvaccinated minority (Sidley, 2022b).

2 The Absence of Informed Consent

The second source of ethical concern derives from the lack of any attempt to acquire the informed consent of the British people prior to the mass implementation of these psychological methods of persuasion. Obtaining informed consent of the recipient before administering any medical or psychological intervention has always been a cornerstone of ethical clinical practice. Professor David Halpern (the BIT Chief Executive and member of SPI-B) explicitly recognised the significance of this issue. The previously mentioned MINDSPACE document – of which Professor Halpern is a co-author – states that 'Policymakers wishing to use these tools... need the approval of the public to do so' (Institute for Government, 2010, p. 74).

More recently, in Professor Halpern's book *Inside the Nudge Unit*, he is even more emphatic about the importance of consent: 'If Governments... wish to use behavioural insights, they must seek and maintain the permission of the public' (Halpern, 2015, p. 375).

3 The Contentious Goals of the Messaging Campaign

The perceived legitimacy of using subconscious nudges to influence people may also depend upon the behavioural goals that are being pursued. The imposition of lockdowns, community masking, school closures and other restrictions was a major deviation from long-established pandemic-management measures. It is questionable whether the deployment of fear, shame and peer pressure to achieve compliance with unprecedented and non-evidenced public-health policies that infringe basic human rights and freedoms would have found favour with the British people.

4 The Lack of Transparency

As many of the nudges employed impact on their targets below their level of awareness, a further ethical question relates to the lack of transparency. This is in contrast to more democratically acceptable methods of government persuasion that rely mainly on information provision and rational argument. The covert mode of action of many behavioural-science strategies lends weight to the accusation that they are manipulative.

The 'Look Them in the Eyes' Campaign

In order to clarify the sources of the behavioural-science advice that shaped the Covid communications campaign and identify any ethical oversight of the process, scrutiny of – arguably – the UK's most controversial messaging campaign is likely to be the most fruitful. On the 21 January 2021, YouGov announced (GOV.UK, 2021a) the introduction of the new 'Look them in the eyes' (LTITE) campaign created by the advertising agency, *MullenLowe* (MullenLowe, 2021). Described as 'hard hitting' and a 'stark reminder to the public of the ongoing impact of Covid-19', this public-messaging initiative involved a series of close-up images of acutely unwell patients – wearing surgical masks and ventilation masks – and a voice-over saying, 'Look them in the eyes and tell them you are doing all you can to stop the spread of coronavirus'.

According to the YouGov publication, these powerful advertisements represented a shift in tone from previous communications towards 'encouraging people to take personal responsibility and consider the impact of their behaviour on others' – a strategic change of direction that could be construed as adding guilt and shame (ego nudge) to the preceding reliance upon fear inflation. Arguably, close scrutiny of the highly emotive LTITE campaign, to clarify the behavioural-science input and the degree of ethical guidance, could reveal conclusions that might

reasonably be taken as the UK's *modus operandi* when messaging its people in times of national 'crisis'.

In light of the above, the current critical analysis aimed to answer the following specific questions:

- 1 Which behavioural-science experts provided advice & guidance during the development of the LTITE adverts, posters and videos?
- 2 Which other actors (politicians, civil servants, advisors, advertising personnel) were primarily responsible for decision-making in regard to the LTITE campaign?
- 3 What ethical guidance was sought/given during the production of the LTITE campaign?

Methods

Using the LTITE messaging campaign as a case study, the critical analysis presented in this paper involved: in-depth online searches with terms such as 'behavioural science', 'nudges', 'ethics', 'Covid messaging' and 'Covid communications'; scrutiny of the 'What do they know?' database of the responses to historical Freedom of Information (FoI) requests; inspection of the notes and minutes of government scientific and ethical advisory groups that were active during the Covid event; 40 original FoI requests to government departments; and an exploration of the documented outputs of prominent behavioural scientists, potentially key politicians, civil servants, relevant advertising companies and senior advertising executives.

Results

The key findings of this research initiative are now presented.

1 The state-sponsored deployment of behavioural science is ubiquitous in the UK

As previously mentioned, the advisory sub-group, SPI-B, was active throughout the Covid event. Among its membership were

prominent UK behavioural scientists such as Professors Susan Michie and David Halpern. However, our analysis revealed that behavioural scientists are embedded in several other locations within the sphere of government activity, thereby representing a range of additional potential sources of nudge advice during the development of the LTITE messaging campaign.

Many government departments employ their own in-house behavioural scientists. In 2019, the UK Department of Work and Pensions hosted 16 staff members in their ‘behavioural science’ team (WhatDoTheyKnow, 2019a), while the UK Department of Revenue and Customs had 54 employees in their ‘Behavioural Research and Insight’ team (WhatDoTheyKnow, 2019b). Moreover, a recent FoI to the Department of Transport found that in 2022, they were employing the equivalent of six full-time behavioural scientists at a total annual cost of £299,000 per annum (WhatDoTheyKnow, 2023a).

As for the Government departments most closely involved in Covid messaging – the Cabinet Office and those responsible for health and social care – the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), the Office of Health Improvement and Disparities and the Cabinet Office each confirmed that they housed a small behavioural-science team incorporating no more than five members (WhatDoTheyKnow, 2023b, 2023c & 2023d). As for the UK Health Security Agency, they acknowledged the existence of a ‘Behavioural Science and Insights Unit’ within the department, currently comprising 24 behavioural and social scientists, two business support professionals and three Ph.D. students, and with an annual budget of £958,000 (WhatDoTheyKnow, 2023e).

In addition to in-house resources, the UK Government also entered into contractual arrangements with the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) during the period of the Covid event. Thus, as examples, the Cabinet Office

allocated up to £4 million to the BIT for a three-year contract (2019–22) to provide ‘Behavioural Insights Consultancy and Research Services’ so as to furnish the heart of government with ‘frictionless access to behavioural insights to match central priorities’ (GOV.UK, 2019). Clearly, Covid communications would have been the priority during this time period. As for the DHSC, they paid BIT £1 million for a 13-months contract (1 March 2020 to 31 March 2021) for ‘Various work for Test, Trace, Contain and Enable agenda’ (WhatDoTheyKnow, 2021).

A further potential source of nudge advice is a large group of civil servants, the ‘Government Communication Service’ (GCS), that employs ‘over 7,000 professional communicators across the UK’ (GCS website). The service incorporates a ‘GCS Behavioural Science Team’ based in the Cabinet Office. In 2021, the GCS published a new guidance document titled *The Principles of Behaviour Change Communications*, the content of which relies heavily upon the work of prominent British nudgers such as Professors Susan Michie and Robert West (who were both members of the SPI-B during the Covid event). The report claims that members of the GCS Behavioural Science Team can offer both ‘expert support to central government campaigns and behavioural science consultancy services across government, covering communications, policy and operations’ (GCS, 2021).

Finally, *MullenLowe* – the advertisement agency primarily responsible for the LTITE campaign – will, in all likelihood, employ personnel with behavioural-science expertise. The company, which received £16 million (GOV.UK, 2020c) of government funding in the period April to October 2020 and £40 million (GOV.UK, 2021b) for the year August 2021/August 2022, has not responded to our requests to confirm or deny the accuracy of this assumption, and the details of contractual arrangements between them and Government representatives are often

redacted. However, a recent comment by Julia Bainbridge – a founder member of the Freuds agency (Freuds website), one of several advertising companies commissioned by the UK Government – is consistent with the premise that nudgers now form a core element of the advertising company workforce: ‘Behavioural science is now mainstream and high profile, particularly in my field, which seeks to change people’s behaviour for their own, and the social good’ (Bainbridge, 2023).

2 The actors directly responsible for the LTITE messaging campaign were the Cabinet Office behavioural-science team, Conrad Bird, MullenLowe personnel and Matt Hancock

Senior civil servant Conrad Bird is Director of Campaigns and Marketing at the Cabinet Office, and – by his own admission - was centrally involved in the development of nudge-infused messaging during the Covid event. In a November 2020 presentation, Bird celebrates his use of ‘Embedded evaluators, behavioural insight specialists and decision scientists ensuring constant improvement’ (GCS, 2020).

Similarly, in a September 2021 blogpost, he states, ‘We’ve learned how to deploy behavioural insights from scientists to improve our major campaigns’ (WIREDGOV, 2021). Importantly, a response to an August 2023 FoI request confirmed that Bird led the commissioning team responsible for the LTITE campaign (WhatDoTheyKnow, 2023f).

When asked in August 2023 (via a personal email) about his role in the genesis of the videos and posters used in the LTITE project, Bird replied:

Regarding a specific creative brief, this would have been given orally by my team in response to government and scientific advice concerning the rise of the Covid Delta variant. As our advertising agency, MullenLowe will have worked on a number of creative routes in

response to the challenge, which would then have been researched in focus groups for their potential effectiveness. The most promising route (Look me in the Eyes) would then have been developed further and signed off by colleagues from Health, the Chief Medical Officer and responsible Ministers. (Personal communication)

Clarification about the source of behavioural-science expertise to inform Bird’s oral brief to *MullenLowe* was provided in a response to another FoI request: ‘the internal Cabinet Office Government Communication Service Behavioural Science team provided insight and guidance to Conrad Bird’ (WhatDoTheyKnow, 2024). And as for signing off the LTITE campaign, Matt Hancock (the then Health Secretary) held the ultimate responsibility (WhatDoTheyKnow, 2023g).

3 The published outputs of the SPI-B and the BIT endorsed the nudges of concern

Although not directly involved in the production of the materials used in the LTITE advertisements, close scrutiny of their documented outputs during the Covid event, and other evidential sources, reveal that both the SPI-B and BIT endorsed the deployment of the affect, ego and normative pressure strategies.

The SPI-B’s most strident endorsement of fear-inflation (affect nudge) was contained in a document, published on the 22 March 2020, titled ‘Options for increasing adherence to social distancing measures’. Within the text are the following statements:

A substantial number of people still do not feel sufficiently personally threatened; it could be that they are reassured by the low death rate in their demographic group.

The perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased among those who are complacent, using hard-hitting emotional messaging. (GOV.UK, 2020d)

At the Covid-19 Inquiry, Professor James Rubin (SPI-B co-chair) confirmed that Professor Susan Michie was the group member primarily responsible for compiling this paper (Covid-19 Inquiry, 2023a).

Another SPI-B paper (GOV.UK, 2020e) explored the key elements that predict adherence to public-health advice. Drawing heavily on ‘Protection Motivation Theory’, the authors describe one important aspect promoting compliance with guidance as being that ‘perceptions of the risk of Covid-19 to self and others are high’, thereby drawing the attention of policy-makers to the assumed benefit of maintaining elevated levels of fear in the target population.

The premise that the SPI-B supported the deployment of fear within the Government’s Covid-19 communications is given further credence by the subsequent comments of two of its members. Dr Gavin Morgan (an educational psychologist) is cited in Laura Dodsworth’s book *A State of Fear* as saying: ‘They went overboard with the scary message to get compliance. They were pushing at an open door because there was already fear.’ (Dodsworth, 2021, p. 91) Another – this time anonymous – SPI-B participant echoed Dr Morgan’s view:

There were discussions about fear being needed to encourage compliance and decisions were made about how to ramp up the fear. The way we have used fear is dystopian.... The use of fear has definitely been ethically questionable. It’s been a weird experiment. Ultimately it backfired because people became too scared. (ibid., p. 94)

As for the ego nudge, where following the Covid-19 edicts is strategically implied to be synonymous with virtue, examples within the SPI-B summaries included:

Messaging needs to emphasise and explain the duty to protect others (GOV.UK, 2020d).

People will be willing to continue to adhere to rules and guidance once a vaccine is available if they are made aware that this is still necessary to protect others (GOV.UK, 2020f).

Encouragement for government communicators to deploy norms, involving the harnessing of peer pressure to change the behaviour of a dissenting minority, was a common SPI-B recommendation. Here are two examples:

Social approval can be a powerful source of reward... members of the community can be encouraged to provide it to each other.

Social disapproval from one’s community can play an important role in preventing anti-social behaviour or discouraging failure to enact pro-social behaviour. (GOV.UK, 2020d)

Communications should draw upon social norms of effective adherence by emphasising what other peers are doing (descriptive, e.g. your peers are switching to socialising online) and approved perceptions of behaviours (injunctive, e.g. your peers think you should start socialising online).

Communications should avoid giving visibility to non-adherence. (GOV.UK, 2020g)

Similarly, examination of the BIT’s documented outputs during the Covid years provides evidence of their promotion of the nudges of concern. In relation to the endorsement of the affect/fear-inflation nudge, in December 2020 the BIT and the National Health Service (NHS) collaborated to produce a document (later redacted) titled ‘Optimising vaccination roll out – the dos & don’ts of messaging’. The advice given to front-line healthcare staff responsible for administering the vaccines included the suggestion to tell people over 65 years of age that they are ‘3 times more likely to die if you get COVID’ (NHS England, 2020).

This reliance on conveying relative risk, rather than absolute risk, would undoubtedly work to inflate the recipient’s perception of the level of danger posed by contracting

Covid-19. Furthermore, in his Covid-19 Inquiry statement, Halpern (BIT's Chief Executive Officer) says that in February 2020, the team's primary brief was to advise the Government on how to 'communicate Covid-related messages so that the public recognised the severity of the virus' (Covid-19 Inquiry, 2023b)

Halpern goes on to detail how one aspect of this work involved a collaboration with the Cabinet Office to produce a television advertisement that incorporated visual graphics of 'vapour permeating around the room' – content that could reasonably fall into the category of fear-inflation.

Outputs of the BIT also support the premise that they advocated for the use of the ego/virtue nudge in Covid messaging. One example is contained within the previously mentioned 'Optimising vaccination...' document, where front-line health staff are advised to tell young people: 'Normality can only return for you and others, with your vaccination. / The vaccine is not 100% effective, so if only your older relative has it you could still give them the virus if you are not vaccinated.' (NHS England, 2020)

Another instance where the BIT encouraged the association of virtue with adherence to Covid edicts is evident in their description of a study in the USA that tested a range of messages intended to increase vaccine uptake. The researchers found that 'Helping loved ones' was the most effective. Armed with this finding, they say that, 'Moving forward, we are working to get these results out to policymakers and other stakeholders who can translate our recommendations into real-world outreach' (Behavioural Insight Team, 2021).

As for the BIT experts recommending norms / peer pressure as a means of changing behaviour during the Covid event, a March 2020 article on their website describes how they had nurtured 'organisational social norms' within private companies so as to

make people stay at home when symptomatic; one specific aspiration was to construct a social milieu where being at work with a cough will be 'perceived negatively' (Behavioural Insight Team, 2020).

The collective wearing of masks in community settings can enhance compliance with pandemic restrictions as a whole (Sidley, 2022c). A key reason for this is that highly visible face coverings instantly identify the rule followers and the rule breakers, thereby harnessing the power of normative pressure. It is clear from Halpern's evidence to the Covid-19 Inquiry that the BIT was strongly advocating for the imposition of face coverings in the weeks prior to the political U-turn on the issue in May/June 2020. Thus, Halpern states that on the 31 March 2020, the BIT prepared an internal note on 'Why the UK general public should use face masks' that argued that 'the UK's position... at that time was wrong, and they should be considered as part of the strategy to unlock the UK' (Covid-19 Inquiry, 2023b).

Furthermore, in June 2020 the 'BIT arranged the testing of masks at Porton Down, and found that even cloth masks were effective' (ibid.). Halpern believed these results to be so important that he 'sent them directly to Chris Whitty, Patrick Vallance and Simon Case'. Given that the Government mandated masks on public transport and in healthcare settings on the 15 June 2020, it is reasonable to conclude that the BIT may hold a significant degree of responsibility for the imposition of this poorly evidenced restriction.

Taking these examples as a whole, one can conclude that the experts in both the SPI-B and the BIT endorsed the nudges of concern in their guidance about how these techniques could enhance the persuasive power of messaging. Given that this guidance was easily accessible throughout the Covid event, it is conceivable that the actors directly involved in the development of the LTITE campaign could have been influenced by

these recommendations from behavioural-science experts.

4 Official justification for the emotionally disturbing advertisements used in the LTITE campaign included the existence of a ‘complacent minority’ and people making pragmatic decisions to get on with their lives

The Cabinet Office’s own ‘qualitative insight research’ – involving seeking the views of panels each comprising six laypeople – had found the materials used in the LTITE project to be ‘gripping’, ‘unsettling’, ‘harrowing’, ‘arresting and disrupting’ (WhatDoTheyKnow, 2023h). An article on the website of *MullenLowe*, the company who generated the advertisements, revealed that the creators had focused on the people who had ‘experienced the very worst of the pandemic’ (MullenLowe, 2021). The disturbing tone and content of the LTITE posters and videos evokes questions as to the moral justification for displaying them to the UK populace.

One justification – as detailed on the *MullenLowe* website – was their belief that 20 per cent of the population underestimated the risk of Covid-19, and they wanted to make the risk real for those who were unsure or didn’t believe it (MullenLowe, 2021).

A subsequent Cabinet Office response to our FoI request in August 2023 confirmed that the LTITE initiative was developed with the not-frightened-enough sub-group in mind, the stated objectives of the communications being:

To continue the ‘Stay Home’ campaign, encouraging people to stick to the rules and take personal responsibility for their behaviours.

To make those people who are ‘unsure’ of the coronavirus risks, or who believe the risks are exaggerated, to reappraise their behaviour and not bend the rules. The focus on ‘Risk Sceptics’ requires a shift in gear: from ‘Authoritative

Command’ (Phase 1a & b) to a more emotionally triggering ‘People to People’ approach (Phase 2).

Most importantly, it proves to be effective in forcing reappraisal of behaviour even among those who currently believe that risks are exaggerated; ‘directly prompting them to seriously consider their small transgressions or stretching of the rules’.

(WhatDoTheyKnow, 2023i)

Another Cabinet Office justification for the tone and emotional power of the LTITE campaign, based once again on their own qualitative research, was that people were generally less frightened of the virus in January 2021 as compared to the time of the first lockdown in March 2020. An FoI response (on the 6 October 2023) conveyed details of the official thinking:

Level of perceived risk and concern is not as high as March 2020. March a shock to the system but now have learned to live alongside COVID.

Younger can be more fatalistic, stronger belief in personal strength and ability to recover/experience less severe symptoms.

Strong evidence of Covid fatigue across the sample. They have settled into their own level of ‘acceptable behaviour’ and perceived risk that fits with their lifestyle, their specific needs and circumstances.

Significant and visible difference in behaviour and attitude between the two lockdowns. More people on the streets, more businesses open, more traffic on the roads.

Fearful but much less panic this time around.

The challenge is in overcoming people’s established ways of managing their lives within the lockdown rules as by & large they believe they are mostly compliant.

(WhatDoTheyKnow, 2023j)

5 There was no input from ethical specialists into the development of the videos and posters used in the LTITE campaign

The conclusion that no ethical expertise was sought by the individuals involved in the creation of the LTITE communications campaign can reasonably be drawn from a Cabinet Office response to our FoI request, submitted on the 2 October 2023, that specifically asked for details about any specialist ethical input into the making of the advertisements and videos. The reply from the Cabinet Office to our FoI stated that, ‘Ethical approval on government campaigns is not a standard requirement’, and there was a reliance on ‘audience testing via insight research to inform development and ensure accuracy of message take-out’. The Cabinet Office went on to say that ‘Research findings did not indicate that additional, non-standard approvals – such as ethical approval – were required’ (WhatDoTheyKnow, 2023k).

The conclusion to be drawn from this response is clear. Apart from exceptional circumstances where members of the general public on their six-person audience panels pro-actively raise specific ethical concerns about an advertisement, no ethical advice will be sought.

The neglect of ethical considerations during the making of the LTITE materials is perhaps less surprising in light of the broader finding that none of the dedicated groups of ethical specialists active during the Covid event made any direct reference in their outputs to the appropriateness and acceptability of the Government messaging. For example, the Moral and Ethical Advisory Group (MEAG) – a group with a primary remit of providing an ethical perspective into Government decision-making processes – met on 23 occasions between March and November 2020, yet made no explicit mention of behavioural-science strategies in their minutes, and very little reference to Covid communications in general (GOV.UK, 2022).

In addition to MEAG – a group embedded within the government infrastructure – there was a range of ethicist organisations operating outside of government, who were also active during the Covid event: the Nuffield Council on Bioethics; the Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics; the Wellcome Centre for Ethics and Humanities; and the UK Pandemic Ethics Accelerator. Nonetheless, their outputs also neglected consideration of the moral questions associated with the state’s use of behavioural-science strategies.

Clearly, throughout the Covid event the Government’s use of nudge-infused communications, both in regard to the LTITE campaign and their pandemic messaging as a whole, was an ethics-free zone.

Discussion

The critical analysis presented in this paper constitutes an in-depth investigation of the ways in which the UK Government drew on behavioural-science strategies to strengthen its public-health communications during the Covid event. Focusing on the powerful – and controversial – LTITE messaging campaign, little-known and previously unknown information has been revealed in regard to three broad areas: (1) in elucidating the degree of influence of behavioural scientists upon government communications, by highlighting their prevalence within the government infrastructure and, more specifically, determining which of them were responsible for infusing Covid messaging with ethically problematic nudges. (2) by exposing the official rationales proffered by the key actors in an attempt to justify the indiscriminate use of fear and shame (implicit to the LTITE communications) on the British public. (3) by confirming the dearth of ethical oversight during the creation of the emotionally disturbing LTITE advertisements. Each of these research findings will now be discussed, followed by consideration of their broader implications.

1 The Ubiquity and Reach of Behavioural Science

Whether it be in the form of in-house departmental resource, pandemic advisory groups, contractual arrangements with the BIT or advertising agency personnel, one issue is clear: state-funded behavioural science impacts on virtually every aspect of our day-to-day lives. As highlighted in this study, policy-makers across many areas of government activity – including tax collection, employment and pensions, transport – have routine access to nudge expertise. The hubs of decision-making during the Covid event, the Cabinet Office and the various health-related departments, are characterised by a significant behavioural-science resource, with the UK Health Security Agency alone employing 24 full-time qualified practitioners. Rather than rational argument and open debate, it is reasonable to conclude that we are being furtively influenced on an unprecedented scale.

This high prevalence of nudgers within the UK Government has not emerged by chance; it has been *a strategic goal*. A 2018 document by Public Health England (the forerunner to the UK Health Security Agency) announced that, ‘The behavioural and social sciences are the future of public health’. With a vision of creating a ‘strong and vibrant’ community of behavioural scientists, the organisation’s explicit priorities included the aspirations to ‘Make knowledge and skills from the behavioural and social sciences mainstream in all our organisations.... Embed behavioural and social science skills, tools and frameworks across sectors of the public health workforce’. (Public Health England, 2018)

Other elements of government have also strategically increased their behavioural-science resources. The Government Communication Service (GCS) incorporates its own ‘Behavioural Science Team’, based in the Cabinet Office. In 2021, the GCS published a new guidance document titled *The Principles of Behaviour Change*

Communications. In the foreword to the guidance, Alex Aiken (Executive Director of Government Communication) states:

At the start of 2018, one of the eight challenges I set for communicators was for the profession to adopt behavioural science techniques to enhance the effectiveness of our campaigns. Coronavirus has made this challenge all the more urgent, and has demonstrated how communications is a powerful and flexible lever to create and sustain behaviour change. (GCS, 2021)

Aiken goes on to celebrate how the GCS Behavioural Science Team has accelerated progress towards the ‘goal of embedding behavioural science expertise across the Government Communication profession’ (GCS, 2021).

The question of which individuals from this sizable resource of nudgers were responsible for promoting and endorsing Covid messaging that exploited fear, shame and peer pressure has been a point of contention. Particularly noteworthy has been the denials of ever promoting fear inflation (‘affect’ nudge) by a succession of prominent UK behavioural scientists. Thus, when the SPI-B co-chair, Professor Ann John, appeared in front of the Government’s Science and Technology Committee on the 30 March 2022, she was challenged by MP Graham Stringer about the strategic decision to indiscriminately ramp up fear (as referenced in the SPI-B minutes of the 22 March 2020). During her interview, Professor John claimed that her group advised against using scare tactics as a way of increasing compliance with Covid-19 restrictions, stating, ‘We never advised on upping the level of fear. I think it was presented as part of the evidence base... we absolutely advised that fear does not work’. (Science and Technology Committee, 2022)

A similarly worded denial of responsibility for fear inflation was provided by Professor James Rubin (another SPI-B co-chair) in his

testimony to the Covid-19 Inquiry. When asked directly about his group's involvement in scaremongering, Rubin claims that they 'argued against it on multiple occasions', and also sent a series of papers to senior Government officials in both the Cabinet Office and the DHSC advising against the use of fear as a means of promoting compliance (Covid-19 Inquiry, 2023). Similarly, Professor Lucy Yardley (another SPI-B co-chair), during her Inquiry interview, also rejected culpability for fear inflation; when asked specifically about her reaction to Matt Hancock's 'Don't kill your gran' quip, Yardley cautioned against the use of such language, saying 'My instinct would probably not because it is trying to draw on fear and shame' (Covid-19 Inquiry, 2023a)

A further emphatic denial of responsibility came from four core members of the SPI-B (Professors Reicher, Michie, Drury and West) in a March 2023 opinion piece in the *British Medical Journal*. In the article these behavioural-science experts explicitly state that the pervasive fear-mongering witnessed during the Covid event had nothing to do with them, instead suggesting that the politicians were culpable (Reicher et al., 2023). Likewise, Professor Halpern has denied responsibility for the posters used in the LTITE campaign (*Telegraph*, 2023); and in his witness statement for the Covid-19 Inquiry, Halpern laments what he believes to be false accusations directed at the BIT: 'Frustratingly – given our internal advice, and that we didn't have anything to do with campaigns such as "Stay Alert" (or "Look into her eyes") – BIT was later blamed for encouraging HMG to pursue a fear-based campaign' (Covid-19 Inquiry, 2023b).

The current study has clarified the identities of most of the actors responsible for the genesis of the LTITE communications. As for government officials, Conrad Bird (Director of Campaigns & Marketing at the Covid-19 Hub and the commissioning lead for the LTITE project) played the central role, with

then Health Secretary Matt Hancock accountable for the final sign-off of the advertisements. Bird – who has since acknowledged how he has learnt to 'deploy behavioural insights from scientists to improve our major campaigns' (WIREDGOV, 2021) – orally related the creative brief to *MullenLowe*, the advertising agency involved. And crucially, it was the Cabinet Office Behavioural Science Team who were the primary source of expert advice to Bird.

These insights into the actors proximally involved in compiling the LTITE campaign go some way to validating the denials of culpability for fear-mongering issued by prominent behavioural scientists in the SPI-B and BIT. Instead, a less visible group of nudgers secreted in the Cabinet Office are implicated, possibly along with *MullenLowe* personnel, whose degree of creative autonomy remains unknown. However, several observations included in the analysis presented here suggest that it would be premature to exonerate members of SPI-B and BIT from responsibility for fear inflation and other ethically contentious nudges during the Covid event.

First, as detailed in this report, the published outputs of these two high-profile groups of behavioural scientists confirm that both forums have endorsed the use of fear, shame and peer pressure/scapegoating in government communications. With regards to fear inflation (the 'affect' nudge), the SPI-B members were collectively responsible for the now-infamous March 2020 minutes that included the statement that 'The perceived level of personal threat needs to be increased among those who are complacent, using hard-hitting emotional messaging' (GOV.UK, 2020d).

This blatant statement of intent, together with the multiple examples of their promotion of messaging underpinned by the ego and normative pressure nudges, would have been

freely available to Bird and other actors involved in the construction of the LTITE videos and posters. It is plausible, therefore, that the outputs of the SPI-B and BIT may have realised some indirect influence on the tone and content of this most contentious of campaigns.

Secondly, the documented comments of Halpern – the BIT lead and a member of the SPI-B – suggest that he holds a degree of ambivalence about the appropriateness of fear inflation as a means of persuasion, accepting its legitimacy under certain circumstances. For example, in a 2023 newspaper article he wrote, ‘Fear-based campaigns are generally not where you want to start unless you think people are really, really mis-calibrated’ (*Telegraph*, 2023), citing the HIV era as an instance when fear was needed to ‘cut through in a way other things didn’t’. When asked directly about the posters produced for the LTITE campaign, Halpern is again equivocal: ‘I can perfectly understand why they were developed – it was aimed at the “superspreaders” who were out and about thinking they were “invincible”... for lots of people this would seem complete overkill’ (*Telegraph*, 2023).

These comments suggest that if he agrees with the goals, Halpern will perceive fear inflation, and other ethically dubious forms of persuasion, as acceptable.

Thirdly, the guidance emanating from the GCS Behavioural Science Team – the group of behavioural scientists most directly involved in the LTITE campaign – relies heavily upon the work of SPI-B members Professors Susan Michie and Robert West (GCS, 2021).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is the collective silence of the prominent behavioural scientists regarding the Government’s use of scare techniques during the Covid event. Despite a heavy media presence (involving legacy media, newspaper

interviews and social media) providing multiple opportunities to openly condemn the widespread fear-mongering, this author cannot retrieve a single example of where, during the Covid event, a SPI-B or BIT expert publicly criticised this unethical tactic. And this failure to act is even more striking for the eight SPI-B members (including Professors Susan Michie, Robert West and Stephen Reicher) who, in June 2020, defected to ‘independent SAGE’ (Indie_SAGE website) – a group of zero-Covid advocates who were publicly and recurrently critical of Government policy (Covid-19 Inquiry, 2023a).

2 The Inadequacy of the Official Rationales to Justify the Indiscriminate Use of Fear and Shame on the British Public

The current study has revealed that the key actors involved in the development of the LTITE communications put forward three justifications for inflicting this emotionally disturbing content on the British populace: (1) the presumed existence of a sub-group of ‘risk sceptics’ who were not sufficiently frightened of the prospect of developing the Covid-19 illness; (2) younger people were less alarmed, and held stronger beliefs in their powers of recovery, should they contract the SARS-CoV-2 virus; and (3) the observation that, in January 2021, many people felt less frightened (as compared to the March 2020 lockdown) and had made corresponding adaptations to their life styles. Each of these justifications can be challenged on the grounds of irrationality, dubious ethics, or both.

MullenLowe, the advertising agency that produced the LTITE adverts, worked on the assumption that 1 in 5 of the population had underestimated the risk of Covid-19, and therefore it was desirable to ‘make the risk real for those who were unsure or didn’t believe it’ (MullenLowe, 2021).

It is unclear as to the source of this risk estimate. And given that Covid-19 had already been recognised to be a mild disease in all but a small minority of cases – with an infection fatality rate (IFR) of less than 0.15% for those under 60 years of age (Ioannidis, 2021) – it is doubtful whether one can validly identify a subset of the population as complacent. Furthermore, even if a not-frightened-enough sub-group could be reliably distinguished, it is ethically problematic to use the existence of this minority as justification to scare and shame everybody, most of whom (as a result of the media-driven nudge operation) would, by this stage, be overestimating their levels of personal risk. Strategically opting to further frighten and shame the already overly fearful is an action that would be very difficult to defend on moral grounds.

Similarly, referencing younger people's invulnerability beliefs as a rationale for releasing the emotionally disturbing LTITE videos and posters can also be criticised with regard to both its irrationality and its unethicity. The researchers involved in developing and disseminating the LTITE materials referred to younger people as possessing a 'stronger belief in personal strength and ability to recover / experience less severe symptoms' (WhatDoTheyKnow, 2023h), as part of their justification for the tone and content of their campaign. Yet this assumed belief is a perfectly rational one: healthy individuals under the age of 30 were at no appreciable risk of dying of Covid-19. The IFR for 20–29 year-olds was 0.0088% and, for the under 19s, 0.0013% (Ioannidis, 2021). In the context of the multiple risks present in day-to-day life, these levels are negligible; anyone who implies otherwise is exhibiting a severe form of risk aversion.

The third justification of the LTITE creators – that people were less scared as compared to March 2020, and had adapted their behaviour so as to function within the restrictions – is, arguably, even more disingenuous. To view

the observations that many had 'learned to live alongside COVID', and had 'settled into their own level of "acceptable behaviour" and perceived risk that fits their lifestyle' (WhatDoTheyKnow, 2023h), as negatives (and as valid reasons for scaring and shaming them) is both perverse and ethically indefensible. A more rational interpretation of these behavioural changes would be that people were increasingly making their own individualised, balanced risk assessments, and making pragmatic decisions about how best to function in difficult circumstances and get on with their lives.

3 The Lack of Ethical Oversight during the Creation of the Emotionally Disturbing Covid-19 Communications

The critical analysis in this paper has revealed that there was no input from ethical specialists into the development of the videos and posters used in the LTITE campaign. As noted earlier, in response to our FoI, the Cabinet Office unambiguously asserted that 'ethical approval on government campaigns is not a standard requirement', and that their in-house research 'did not indicate that additional, non-standard approvals – such as ethical approval – were required' (WhatDoTheyKnow, 2023k). Given that the LTITE project is widely regarded as the most provocative UK example of Covid messaging, it seems doubtful that other communication campaigns – such as the 'All in, All together' newspaper project (MG website) – would have incorporated ethical consideration of their materials.

The current research also found that none of the dedicated groups of ethical specialists active during the Covid event made any direct reference in their outputs to the appropriateness and acceptability of the Government messaging. Given the sizeable academic literature addressing the ethical questions associated with behavioural-science techniques (for example, Sunstein, 2016; Schmidt & Engelen, 2020), the critiques of their deployment during the Covid event (for

example, HART, 2022), and the public's 'negative sentiment toward behavioural science and its policy counterpart' (Sanders et al., 2021), this omission is surprising.

Placing these findings in a wider context, recent revelations by the 'Us For Them' campaign group (Kingsley et al., 2023) indicate a fundamental neglect of ethical oversight across the broad range of Covid communications. In the drive to promote the Pfizer vaccine to children and young adults, the Government did not even follow the basic advertising guidance regarding the targeting of minors, instead claiming exemption from legislative rules relating to the promotion of medicines on the grounds that their messaging did not constitute advertisements. In light of this level of evasion of fundamental governance, the absence of ethical input into the LTITE initiative is less remarkable.

Many ethics experts have bemoaned their lack of influence during the Covid event. As early as April 2020, a statement by the *Nuffield Council* claimed:

The Westminster Government does not seem to want to engage or take on board other views on any of these issues; nor is it evident that they are thinking about them, or taking advice on them from a social and ethical perspective.... [A]s far as we can see, neither the UK Government nor any of the devolved administrations have taken advice from their own Moral and Ethical Advisory Group. (Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 2020)

Ethicists have consistently suggested that a blinkered reliance on the recommendations of scientists – 'following the science' – was a major reason why policy-making remained an ethics-free zone. For example, at an 'Ethics Accelerator' conference in May 2022, Professor Coggan observed:

There has remained a tendency, particularly within Westminster, to frame difficult decisions as ones that are simply led by 'the science'.... But there are values at play when a Minister

decides which science to follow. And there are value judgements in weighing up the costs and benefits of doing so, and in understanding whether and how this acceptably bears on people's basic rights. (UK Ethics Accelerator, 2022a)

This assumption – sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit – about the primacy of 'the science' in determining policy may bear significant responsibility for what Jamrozik (2022) describes as 'an ethical crisis in public health', where many pandemic interventions could be considered 'unacceptable according to pre-pandemic norms of public health ethics'. Clearly, policy decisions throughout the Covid event have typically been made within an ethical vacuum.

Despite a sizeable resource of ethical specialists embedded *within* the government infrastructure during the Covid event, they achieved minimal influence across the range of pandemic policy decisions, and raised no concerns at all about the appropriateness and acceptability of nudge-infused messaging. Two such ethicists – Professors Montgomery and Parker – have said that they felt to some degree constrained by their membership of formal government advisory groups.

Professor Jonathan Montgomery (a co-chair of the MEAG), in an article for the *Pandemic Accelerator* in May 2022, wrote: 'If you're an advisory body within the Department of Health and Social Care, as the Moral and Ethical Advisory Group was, you are bound by the framework of your terms of reference and accountability' (UK Ethics Accelerator, 2022a).

The constraints of formal group membership are also described by Professor Michael Parker (a member of MEAG, SPI-B and other SAGE groups). In an October 2022 publication, he expresses the view that 'the role of senior adviser comes with some responsibilities', and goes on to discuss the 'difficult balance' between his individual perspective (and written outputs) and his

collective responsibility as a member of a forum (UK Ethics Accelerator, 2022b). It can, however, be argued that Parker's appeals to the constraints of formal membership of a government advisory body as a reason for his lack of influence is unconvincing; for as a participant in full SAGE meetings and the SPI-B sub-group (the latter a forum dedicated to advising government on their communications strategy), it is reasonable to assume that he had every opportunity – or perhaps even an obligation – to proactively raise issues of ethical concern. A similar critique can be made of Montgomery, who, as co-chair of the one ethics group dedicated to advising government on their policy-making, held a formal responsibility to draw the attention of government actors to ethically questionable practices.

In addition to obligations associated with their appointed roles within government advisory bodies, one can legitimately argue that both behavioural scientists and ethicists also carry professional responsibilities to question and – if necessary – challenge the deployment of ethically dubious public-health communications. For instance, members of the British Psychological Society (the lead organisation for practising psychologists in the UK) are professionally bound to adhere to the organisation's Code of Conduct, that includes:

3.1 Statement of values: Members value the dignity and worth of all persons, with sensitivity to the dynamics of perceived authority or influence over persons and peoples *and with particular regard to people's rights*. In applying these values, Psychologists should consider issues of *power: ... consent... self-determination*.

3.3 Statement of values: Members value their responsibilities... to the general public... including the avoidance of harm and the *prevention of misuse or abuse of their contribution to society*. [My emphases] (British Psychological Society – Ethical principles)

Many members of the SPI-B (including the aforementioned Michie, West and Reicher) are obliged to follow these ethical guidelines. It is reasonable to question whether the promotion of, or collusion with, often covert psychological strategies of persuasion – that often rely on leveraging emotional discomfort to promote people's compliance with contentious goals – is consistent with these explicit moral principles.

In conclusion, the critical analysis set out in this paper has: (1) demonstrated the ubiquity of behavioural science that makes nudge expertise routinely available to multiple UK Government departments; (2) identified some key actors, and the sources of behavioural-science advice, proximally responsible for the creation of the controversial LTITE public-health communications; (3) provided documented evidence that both the SPI-B and the BIT promoted the use of ethically questionable behavioural-science strategies in the Government's Covid-19 messaging campaign; (4) explicated the flawed reasoning evident in the Cabinet Office's attempts to justify the emotionally disturbing LTITE campaign; and (5) confirmed that the process of creating the LTITE materials – and, by reasonable extrapolation, all the nudge-infused Covid messaging – was devoid of any ethical oversight.

It is apparent that currently, the UK Government sees no reason to incorporate ethical values into their communication outputs during purported times of 'crisis', and is happy to covertly shape our behaviour in line with their (often dubious) goals, routinely deploying methods that rely on fear, shame and scapegoating. Meanwhile, the plentiful supply of behavioural scientists and ethicists within the government infrastructure seems incapable, or unwilling, to challenge this unacceptable state of affairs.

State-sponsored nudging, devoid of ethical oversight, is now impacting on all aspects of our lives. As things stand, we can expect the

same tone and content in government communications the next time our political leaders choose to declare a ‘global crisis’, whether it be in regards to health, climate, pollution or some other assumed world-wide threat. Drawing on the findings of the critical analysis in this paper, we must begin the process of instilling ethical values – and, perhaps, some red lines – into this ever-expanding realm of government activity. The British people deserve no less.

Acknowledgements

For the purpose of this article, the ‘Covid event’ refers to the period January 2020 to December 2022.

Thanks to Sarah Lakin for her help with accessing the relevant information for the critical analysis offered in this paper.

Thanks also to Professor David Seedhouse, Dr Piers Robinson, Maryam Ebadi and Dr Colin Alexander for comments on earlier drafts of this article.

References

- APA (2017). So lonely I could die. American Psychological Association. Available at <https://bit.ly/37gnhqX> (accessed 31 January 2024).
- Bainbridge, J. (2023). Behavioural science and the communications industry: we’ve come a long way, but why did it take so long? Available at <https://bit.ly/3sehwat> (accessed 1 February 2024).
- Bakir, V., Herring, E., Miller, D. & Robinson, P. (2018). Organized Persuasive Communication: a new conceptual framework for research on public relations, propaganda and promotional culture. *Critical Psychology*, 45 (3): 311–28.
- Behavioural Insight Team (2020). Covid-19: the role of corporations in spreading or containing the pandemic, 12 March blog; available at <https://bit.ly/3p3J69r> (accessed 2 February 2024).
- Behavioural Insight Team (2021). Four messages that can increase uptake of the Covid-19 vaccines, 15 March, blog; available at <https://bit.ly/3X9Ne4l> (accessed 2 February 2024).
- BIT website; available at <https://bit.ly/33qVTUB> (accessed 31 January 2024).
- British Psychological Society – Ethical principles; available at <https://bit.ly/4bq9flV> (accessed 2 February 2024).
- Cherry, K. (2023). B.F. Skinner’s life, theories, and influence on psychology. *Verywell Mind*, 12 March blog; available at <https://bit.ly/48UFw30> (accessed 31 January 2024).
- Covid-19 Inquiry (2023a). Transcript of 18 October; available at <https://bit.ly/482PA8X> (accessed 1 February 2024).
- Covid-19 Inquiry (2023b). Witness statement of David Halpern, 5 May; available at <https://bit.ly/486NdBL> (accessed 2 February 2024).
- Cusick, J. (2020). UK coronavirus guidance could cause spike in child deaths, doctors warn. *Open Democracy UK*, 5 April; available at <https://bit.ly/39UtUiA> (accessed 31 January 2024).
- Dodsworth, L. (2021). *A State of Fear: How the UK Government Weaponised Fear during the Covid-19 Pandemic*. London: Pinter & Martin.
- Freuds website. Available at <https://bit.ly/3Ovpgxk> (accessed 1 February 2024).
- GCS (2020). Campaigns and marketing in times of Covid-19: lessons learned to date; available at <https://bit.ly/49gqLr2> (accessed 1 February 2024).
- GCS (2021). The principles of behaviour change communication; available at <https://bit.ly/3UoYE4Q> (accessed 1 February 2024).
- GCS website; available at <https://bit.ly/4biEHT7> (accessed 1 February 2024)
- GOV.UK (2019). Contracts Finder, 14 February; available at <https://bit.ly/481ubgh> (accessed 1 February 2024).
- GOV.UK (2020a). Scientific Pandemic Insights Group on Behaviour (SPI-B): Terms of Reference; available at <https://bit.ly/3SDRkRj> (accessed 31 January 2024).

- GOV.UK (2020b). Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19), 22 September; available at <https://bit.ly/3HHyNh0> (accessed 31 January 2024).
- GOV.UK (2020c). Contracts Finder, 12 June; available at <https://bit.ly/3Ezyp2r> (accessed 1 February 2024).
- GOV.UK (2020d). Scientific Pandemic Insights Group on Behaviour (SPI-B): Options for increasing adherence to social distancing measures, 22 March; available at <https://bit.ly/43TvM5Y> (accessed 1 February 2024).
- GOV.UK (2020e). Scientific Pandemic Insights Group on Behaviour (SPI-B): Theory and evidence base for initial SPI-B recommendations for phased changes in activity restrictions; available at <https://bit.ly/3HLdHhM> (accessed 1 February 2024).
- GOV.UK (2020f). Scientific Pandemic Insights Group on Behaviour (SPI-B): Possible impact of the COVID-19 vaccination programme on adherence to rules and guidance about personal protective behaviours aimed at preventing spread of the virus; available at <https://bit.ly/3sVjvMP> (accessed 1 February 2024).
- GOV.UK (2020g). Scientific Pandemic Insights Group on Behaviour (SPI-B): Increasing adherence to COVID-19 preventative behaviours among young people; available at <https://bit.ly/44lzhTw> (accessed 1 February 2024).
- GOV.UK (2021a). New hard-hitting national TV ad urges the nation to stay at home; available at <https://bit.ly/3OqiSYd> (accessed 31 January 2024).
- GOV.UK (2021b). Contracts Finder, 3 December; available at <https://bit.ly/486MHnj> (accessed 1 February 2024).
- GOV.UK (2022). Moral and Ethical Advisory Group; available at <https://bit.ly/3w3iM2k> (accessed 2 February 2024).
- Gye, H. (2021). Covid vaccine: 90% of people in eligible groups have already had first jab as UK roll-out accelerates; available at <https://bit.ly/48WAGSK> (accessed 31 January 2024).
- Halpern, D. (2015). *Inside the Nudge Unit: How Small Changes Can Make a Big Difference*. London: W.H. Allen, Penguin / Random House.
- HART (Health Advisory & Recovery Team) (2022). Ethical concerns arising from the Government's use of covert psychological 'nudges'; available at <https://bit.ly/48h0Crn> (accessed 2 February 2024).
- Indie_SAGE website; available at <https://bit.ly/3OOqZ0r> (accessed 2 February 2024).
- Institute for Government (2010). *MINDSPACE: Influencing Behaviour through Public Policy*; available at <http://tinyurl.com/msktdbhr> (accessed 7 February 2024).
- Ioannidis, J.P.A (2021). Reconciling estimates of global spread and infection fatality rates of COVID-19: an overview of systematic evaluations. *European Journal of Clinical Investigation*, 51 (5); available at <http://tinyurl.com/m4jkxzua> (accessed 7 February 2024).
- Jamrozik, E. (2022). Public health ethics: critiques of the 'new normal'. *Monash Bioethical Review*, 40 (1): 1–16; available at <http://tinyurl.com/bdj9cbzn> (accessed 7 February 2024)..
- Kingsley, M., Skinner, A. & Kingsley, B. (2023). *The Accountability Deficit: How Ministers and Officials Evaded Accountability, Misled the Public and Violated Democracy during the Pandemic*. Whitley Bay, Tyne and Wear: UK Book Publishing.
- Mail Online (2022). Bodies of Covid-19 victims lie in the streets of Ecuador as virus death toll across Latin America passes 15,000 with the pandemic yet to peak in the region. Available at <https://bit.ly/3w3XGRa> (accessed 31 January 2024).
- MG website (mgomd.com); available at <https://bit.ly/49k2W1r> (accessed 2 February 2024).
- MullenLowe (2021). Look me in the eyes. MullenLowe website; available at <https://bit.ly/3ZciKzr> (accessed 1 February 2024).
- NHS England (2020). Optimising vaccination roll out: dos and don'ts for all messaging, documents and 'communications' in the widest sense; available at <https://bit.ly/3wxIy9o> (accessed 2 February 2024).

- Nuffield Council on Bioethics (2020). COVID-19 and the basics of democratic governance; available at <https://bit.ly/489CerC> (accessed 2 February 2024).
- ONS (2021). Deaths registered weekly in England and Wales, provisional – Office for National Statistics; available at <https://bit.ly/3l4Rr6o> (accessed 31 January 2024).
- Public Health England (2018). Improving people's health: applying behavioural and social sciences to improve population health and wellbeing in England; available at <https://bit.ly/3Sp659B> (accessed 2 February 2024).
- Reicher, S., Drury, J., Michie, S. & West, R. (2023). The UK government's attempt to frighten people into covid protective behaviours was at odds with its scientific advice. *British Medical Journal*, 380: 652.
- Robinson, P. (2022). Deafening silences: propaganda through censorship, smearing and coercion. *PANDA Science, Sense, Society*. [Pandata.org](https://pandata.org).
- Sanders, J.G., Tossi, A., Obradovic, S., Miligi, I. & Delaney, L. (2021). Lessons from the UK's lockdown: discourse on behavioural science in times of COVID-19. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12: 647348; available at <http://tinyurl.com/44dkescy> (accessed 7 February 2024)..
- Schmidt, T. & Engelen, B. (2020). The ethics of nudging: an overview. *Philosophy Compass*, 27 February; available at <https://bit.ly/3HK9dI0> (accessed 2 February 2024).
- Science & Technology Committee (2022). Oral evidence: UK Science, Research and Technology Capability and Influence in Global Disease Outbreaks, HC 93; available at <https://bit.ly/39SdtaO> (accessed 2 February 2024).
- Sidley, G. (2022a). The dubious ethics of 'nudging': we urgently need a public inquiry. Coronababble, 18 January blog; available at <https://bit.ly/3KrXeyO> (accessed 31 January 2024).
- Sidley, G. (2022b). The persecution of the unvaccinated: are the behavioural scientists culpable? Coronababble, 2 February blog; available at <https://bit.ly/48VUKF1> (accessed 31 January 2024).
- Sidley, G. (2022c). Let's face it: governments use masking to force compliance, not fight viruses. *The Critic*, 17 January; available at <https://bit.ly/3vWY3wZ> (accessed 2 February 2024).
- Spada, M. (2021). COVID-19 Anxiety Syndrome: a pandemic-related phenomenon. Health Advisory & Recovery Team; available at <https://bit.ly/42iXBoM> (accessed 31 January 2024).
- Sunstein, C.R. (2016). *The Ethics of Influence: Government in the Age of Behavioural Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Telegraph (2023). Britain drilled to accept lockdown in future pandemics, says 'nudge unit' chief; available at <https://bit.ly/3HI1lGT> (accessed 2 February 2024).
- Triggle, N. (2020). Coronavirus: last throw of the dice. BBC News; available at <https://bit.ly/47Vuf11> (accessed 31 January 2024).
- UK Ethics Accelerator (2022a). Collection of contributions from conference: the proper place of value judgments in public health policy and practice – reflections on the UK experience during the Covid-19 pandemic, 19 October; available at <https://bit.ly/3ZA60my> (accessed 2 February 2024).
- UK Ethics Accelerator (2022b). Michael Parker: the challenges of 'real-time public ethics': incorporating ethics expertise in public decision-making, 20 October; available at <https://bit.ly/49CO12P> (accessed 2 February 2024).
- Watson, J.B. (1913). Psychology as the behaviorist views it. *Psychological Review*, 20 (2): 158–77.
- WhatDoTheyKnow (2019a). DWP Policy Group Freedom of Information Team, 8 March, FoI response; available at <https://bit.ly/3Osc24a> (accessed 1 February 2024).
- WhatDoTheyKnow (2019b). HM Revenue & Customs, 2 April, FoI response; available at <https://bit.ly/483Qq5c> (accessed 1 February 2024).
- WhatDoTheyKnow (2021). Department of Health and Social Care, 10 March, FoI response; available at <https://bit.ly/3SF5phz> (accessed 1 February 2024).

WhatDoTheyKnow (2023a). Department for Transport, 11 September, FoI response; available at <https://bit.ly/486Z3MA> (accessed 1 February 2024).

WhatDoTheyKnow (2023b). Department of Health and Social Care, 6 October, FoI response; available at <https://bit.ly/4bnxCB0> (accessed 1 February 2024).

WhatDoTheyKnow (2023c). Department of Health and Social Care, 23 October, FoI response; available at <https://bit.ly/3SGtZhZ> (accessed 1 February 2024).

WhatDoTheyKnow (2023d). Cabinet Office, 12 October, FoI response; available at <https://bit.ly/4bhFjIJ> (accessed 1 February 2024).

WhatDoTheyKnow (2023e). UK Health Security Agency, 1 November, FoI response; available at <https://bit.ly/3OpXP84> (accessed 1 February 2024).

WhatDoTheyKnow (2023f). Cabinet Office, 29 August, FoI response; available at <https://bit.ly/3u93Jnf> (accessed 1 February 2024).

WhatDoTheyKnow (2023g). Cabinet Office, 6 December, FoI response; available at <https://bit.ly/3w1bUCF> (accessed 1 February 2024).

WhatDoTheyKnow (2023h). Cabinet Office, 2 August, FoI response; available at <https://bit.ly/49gyaqi> (accessed 2 February 2024).

WhatDoTheyKnow (2023i). Cabinet Office, 29 August, FoI response; available at <https://bit.ly/3w1eCrP> (accessed 2 February 2024).

WhatDoTheyKnow (2023j). Cabinet Office, 6 October, FoI response; available at <https://bit.ly/3SJoaAD> (accessed 2 February 2024).

WhatDoTheyKnow (2023k). Cabinet Office, 2 October, FoI response; available at <https://bit.ly/47WvJYN> (accessed 2 February 2024).

WhatDoTheyKnow (2024). Cabinet Office, 4 January, FoI response; available at <https://bit.ly/3SIvSL8> (accessed 1 February 2024).

WIREDGOV (2021). Reflections from the centre: marketing in a pandemic. GCS, 1 September, blog; available at <https://bit.ly/4bAfBQ3> (accessed 1 February 2024).

About the contributor



Dr Gary Sidley is a former Consultant Clinical Psychologist, retiring early from his post of Professional Lead/Consultant Clinical Psychologist in 2013 after 33 years in the UK's National Health Service. A psychiatric nurse from 1980, Gary qualified as a clinical psychologist in 1989, and gained his Ph.D. on the psychological predictors of suicidal behaviour in 2000. In early 2020, he became extremely concerned about the Government's response to the 'coronavirus crisis', his writings on which can be found on his 'CORONABABBLE' blog. A member of the Health Advisory & Recovery Team (HART), PANDA, and the Smile Free campaign to lift all mask mandates, Gary currently leads on a research project into the UK's deployment of behavioural-science strategies during Covid, and the ethical implications of the state using these methods on its own people.