

# After Covid

**Stephen Reicher**

*University of St Andrews*

*What the pandemic has taught us about groups and  
democracy*

## BEFORE COVID

Back in 2019, I wrote a piece for *Progressive Review* on the role of group psychology in democracy.<sup>1</sup> Often, the two are seen as in tension. Groups, we are told, are bad for us.<sup>2</sup> They are inimicable to rational deliberation, reasoned debate and respect for the other. They turn us into sheep, willing fodder for any passing demagogue. Accordingly, mobocracy is held up as the antithesis of democracy. In the words of Gustave Le Bon, whose 1895 book on mass psychology has been described as the most influential psychology text of all time,<sup>3</sup> crowds are only powerful for destruction.<sup>4</sup>

### **“They turn us into sheep, willing fodder for any passing demagogue”**

These Victorian views, born out of a fear of the masses in the period of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation,<sup>5</sup> continue to hold broad sway. But, over recent decades, empirical studies of groups and crowds have begun to paint a very different picture. It has been shown that, far from group membership degrading our intellect and will, it is through groups that we gain a positionality and a perspective that allows us to make sense of and evaluate our world.<sup>6</sup> It is through groups that we gain a sense of common cause,

1 Reicher S (2019) ‘The role of group psychology in democracy’, *Progressive Review*, 25(4): 348–357

2 Brown R (2001) *Group Processes* (2nd edition), Blackwell

3 Moscovici S (1981) *The Age of the Crowd*, Cambridge University Press

4 Le Bon G (1895/1947) *The Crowd: A study of the popular mind*, Ernest Benn

5 Giner S (1976) *Mass Society Theory*, Martin Robertson

6 Turner J C, Oakes P J, Haslam S A and McGarty C (1994) ‘Self and collective: cognition and social context’, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 20(5): 454–463

which allows us to reach consensus with others.<sup>7</sup> And it is through common membership of groups that we generate the trust, cooperation and mutual support that empower us to turn our ideas into realities.<sup>8</sup>

This is not to suggest that the collective is always a force for progress. Clearly not. Depending on the beliefs and values that inspire them, groups can use their power to create thoroughly toxic realities. When some are excluded from being part of ‘us’ – and, even worse, constituted as a threat to ‘us’ (as ‘invaders’, for instance) – then the solidarity we experience within groups can give way to antagonism between groups.<sup>9</sup> But the key point is that such toxicity is not an inevitable consequence of group psychology in itself. It derives from particular constructions of group culture and group boundaries. It is a matter of what humans have made (and hence can unmake) rather than of how humans are made.

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In my previous *Progressive Review* piece, I drew two out two implications of this perspective for understanding the relationship between groups and democratic politics. The first is that the formation of any political constituency depends on people seeing each other as members of a common social group. It is this which allows them to act together effectively and which is the source of their social power. This shared group membership may be based on different categories – class or nation or religion or gender or whatever. But in this sense, as a starting point for action, all politics is necessarily identity politics. Whether the end point of action is oriented to the position of the group (for example, as feminists, we are specifically concerned with the position of women) or to more general outcomes (for example, as feminists, we are committed to a fairer world in which the disempowered have a voice) is a different matter.

The second implication is that the very possibility of democratic debate also depends on viewing each other as being part of the same community

7 Haslam S A, Turner J C, Oakes P J, McGarty C and Reynolds K J (1997) ‘The group as a basis for emergent stereotype consensus’, *European Review of Social Psychology*, 8(1): 203–239

8 Drury J and Reicher S D (2009) ‘Collective psychological empowerment as a model of social change: researching crowds and power’, *Journal of Social Issues*, 65(4): 707–725

9 Reicher S D, Haslam S A and Rath R (2008) ‘Making a virtue of evil: a five-step social identity model of the development of collective hate’, *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2(3): 1313–1344

and, even if we disagree about the means of doing so, equally oriented to progressing the cause of that community. In this context, robust debate can be tolerated, or even embraced as a means of testing our ideas without degenerating into hostility and conflict. However, once those who disagree with us are cast as outgroup members, whose interventions are designed to advance alien interests and undermine our own, debate becomes impossible.<sup>10</sup> Disagreement then constitutes an assault on us rather than an asset for us. Tolerance gives way to repression.

This relationship between group inclusion and democratic debate – or rather, between exclusion and threats to democracy – has been powerfully illustrated in recent years by the rise of right-wing movements which fuse a populist distinction between ‘people’ and ‘elite’ with the practice of ‘enemyship’ by which political competitors are cast as the witting or unwitting dupes of external foes. This has long been exemplified by Donald Trump who, in the run-up to the 2016 US presidential election, asserted that “Hilary Clinton and her friends in global finance want to scare America into thinking small”.<sup>11</sup>

By January 2021, Trump had radicalised his position to the point where not only were those who opposed him ‘unAmerican’ (and therefore an election defeat was necessarily a coup) but also even those Republicans who refused to actively support him in overturning the election were enemies of the nation. As he put it in his infamous speech to a rally on 6 January: “If you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore.”<sup>12</sup> The result was an insurrectionary attack on the institutions of American democracy and the increasing difficulty of democratic debate within the country and also within the Republican party.

It would be hard to have a more graphic illustration of my 2019 argument that groups are a condition of democracy and hence how the splintering of groups threatens to dismantle democracy. But 2019 now seems a very long time ago. A different era. The assault on the Capitol is not the only shock to democracy that has occurred since then. There is war in Europe and pestilence across the world. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, parliaments

10 Hornsey M J, Oppes T and Svensson A (2002) “‘It’s OK if we say it, but you can’t’: responses to intergroup and intragroup criticism”, *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 32(3): 293–307

11 Cited in Reicher S D and Haslam S A (2017) ‘The politics of hope: Donald Trump as an entrepreneur of identity’ in Fitzduff M (ed) *Why Irrational Politics Appeals*, p 32, Praeger

12 For the full text of the speech, see Naylor B (2021) ‘Read Trump’s Jan. 6 speech, a key part of impeachment trial’, npr website, 10 February 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial>

closed, businesses were shut and the public were ordered to stay at home – all by executive fiat and without parliamentary debate. Many of our cherished beliefs have been shattered and we cannot presuppose that previously solid assumptions have not melted into thin air.

**“Many of our cherished beliefs have been shattered and we cannot presuppose that previously solid assumptions have not melted into thin air”**

So how do my arguments about groups and democracy fare during this age of the pandemic? I will argue not only that they stand up well, but also that the experience of Covid has been an object lesson in the importance of understanding collective psychology and the costs (including to democracy) of getting it wrong.

### COVID: MISUNDERSTANDING GROUPS

On 9 March 2020 – the day that Italy became the first European country to lock down, when Covid infections were starting to rise rapidly in Britain and people were beginning to die – England’s chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, spoke to the nation in a televised address. He explained that:

“Anything we do, we have got to be able to sustain. Once we have started these things we have to continue them through the peak, and there is a risk that, if we go too early, people will understandably get fatigued and it will be difficult to sustain this over time.”<sup>13</sup>

This notion, which became known as ‘behavioural fatigue’, assumed that people lacked the ability to abide by the measures needed to suppress Covid transmission for any length of time. It justified a reluctance to act early for fear that measures would become ineffective by the time they were really needed. It was taken as fact by government ministers and played a part in delaying the UK lockdown for two more weeks until 23 March.<sup>14</sup>

13 Cited in Mahase E (2020) ‘Covid-19: was the decision to delay the UK’s lockdown over fears of “behavioural fatigue” based on evidence?’, *BMJ*, 370: m3166

14 Conn D, Lawrence F, Lewis P, Carrell S, Pegg D, Davies H and Evens R (2020) ‘Revealed: the inside story of the UK’s Covid-19 crisis’, *The Guardian*, 29 April 2020. [www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/29/revealed-the-inside-story-of-uk-covid-19-coronavirus-crisis](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/29/revealed-the-inside-story-of-uk-covid-19-coronavirus-crisis)

‘Behavioural fatigue’ was not a concept recognised by behavioural scientists in general, 681 of whom wrote to the government asking for evidence to support it.<sup>15</sup> It did not come from the government’s own behavioural science advisory group SPI-B (of which I was part). Indeed it was publicly dismissed as ‘unscientific’ by some of SPI-B’s participants.<sup>16</sup> And it is at odds with the recent literature on behaviour in crises and emergencies.<sup>17</sup>

This literature shows that people do not fall apart, as is commonly assumed. They do not act dysfunctionally, excessively or irrationally – thus exacerbating an already difficult situation. They do not become helpless, needing to be rescued by the state and its functionaries – the police, ambulance workers and firefighters, often referred to as ‘first responders’. Characteristically, they self-organise, support each other and safeguard the weak and vulnerable to the extent that some have taken to calling the public themselves the ‘zero-responders’ in a crisis.<sup>18</sup>

**“They do not become helpless, needing to be rescued by the state and its functionaries”**

This literature also explains such solidarity and resilience in a crisis as resulting from the emergence of a collective psychology.<sup>19</sup> Common experiences and common threats lead to the emergence of a sense of psychological community. There is a developing sense of ‘we-ness’ and this leads to empathy and, as we have already discussed, solidarity. To put it slightly differently, resilience is not something people do (or don’t) have within them and this determines their response to challenging times. It is something that *develops* between them in challenging times. But such communal sensibilities are fragile. They can easily be disrupted if official interventions set some against others and thereby disrupt the emergent group processes.<sup>20</sup>

15 Hahn U, Chater N, Lagnado D, Osman M, Lewandowsky S, Mujic R and others (2020) ‘Open letter to the UK government regarding Covid-19’, 16 March 2020. <https://sites.google.com/view/covidopenletter/home>

16 Michie S and West R (2020) ‘Behavioural, environmental, social, and systems interventions against Covid-19’, *BMJ*, 370: m2982

17 Drury J (2018) ‘The role of social identity processes in mass emergency behaviour: an integrative review’, *European Review of Social Psychology*, 29(1): 38–81

18 Cocking C (2013) ‘The role of “zero-responders” during 7/7: implications for the emergency services’, *International Journal of Emergency Services*, 2(2): 79–93

19 Drury J (2012) ‘Collective resilience in mass emergencies and disasters: a social identity model’ in Jetten J, Haslam C and Haslam S A (eds) *The Social Cure* (pp 195–215), Psychology Press

20 Ntontis E, Drury J, Amlôt R, Rubin G J and Williams R (2020) ‘Endurance or decline of emergent groups following a flood disaster: implications for community resilience’, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 45: 101493

In the event, what happened in the Covid pandemic followed this well-worn pattern. The levels of resilience and adherence to measures remained high for a prolonged period<sup>21</sup> – and this was despite the fact that roughly half the population was suffering economically and psychologically in the lockdown. Adherence didn't come easy, but people still adhered. If anything they felt the government should be doing more to control Covid.<sup>22</sup> The problem, then, was less a government let down by inadequate public reactions than a public let down by inadequate government action.

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Equally, we saw in the Covid pandemic, as in other crises, the development of social solidarity among the population.<sup>23</sup> In the UK, some 5,000 local mutual aid groups were formed involving some 12–14 million people. And this was just the tip of the iceberg, with Facebook groups springing up in almost every town in the country and neighbours looking out for each other. The public themselves provided all the small but vital services to those in need – delivering food, fulfilling caring responsibilities, walking the dog – that the state could never provide on such a scale.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, the development of these ‘communities of practice’ was underpinned by an emergent sense of psychological community – the ‘witness’ or group identity to which I have been referring.<sup>25</sup> However, the impact of shared identity was not limited to mutual aid. A range of

21 Reicher S D and Drury J (2021) ‘Pandemic fatigue? How adherence to Covid-19 regulations has been misrepresented and why it matters’, *BMJ*, 372: n137

22 Duffy B and Allington D (2020) *The Accepting, the Suffering, and the Resisting: The different reactions to life under lockdown*, Policy Institute, King's College London. [www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/Coronavirus-in-the-UK-cluster-analysis.pdf](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/Coronavirus-in-the-UK-cluster-analysis.pdf)

23 Carstensen N, Mudhar M and Munksgaard F S (2021) “Let communities do their work”: the role of mutual aid and self-help groups in the Covid-19 pandemic response’, *Disasters*, 45: S146–S173

24 See Tiratelli L and Kaye S (2020) *Communities vs. Coronavirus: The rise of mutual aid*, New Local. <http://newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Communities-vs-Coronavirus-New-Local.pdf>

25 Perach R, Fernandes-Jesus M, Miranda D, Mao G, Ntontis E, Cocking C, McTague M, Semlyen J and Drury J (2022) ‘Can group-based strategies increase community resilience? Longitudinal predictors of sustained participation in Covid-19 mutual aid and community support groups’, 3 October 2022. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/m4wpu>

studies<sup>26</sup> have shown that it was equally critical to following Covid measures. People adhered more out of a sense of social connection, social concern and social responsibility – that we want to come out of this together – than out of personal concern.<sup>27</sup>

All this underpins the fact that, in its assumption of public fragility and its failure to appreciate group psychology, the government got it wrong. These errors came at great cost. It has been estimated that, had the UK locked down a week earlier, on 16 March, it would have reduced Covid cases by 74 per cent and saved up to 34,000 lives. Had we locked down two weeks earlier on 9 March – the day Italy acted and Chris Whitty invoked ‘behavioural fatigue’ as grounds for delay – it would have reduced cases by 93 per cent and the death toll by up to 43,000 lives.<sup>28</sup> It is worth adding that going a week earlier would also have substantially reduced the time we needed to spend in full lockdown, from 69 to 35 days.

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While it might be the most egregious example, ‘behavioural fatigue’ is far from the only example of policy mistakes that flowed from the government’s mistrust of the public. Another was the failure to provide adequate practical support for people to do the things that were asked of them, such as self-isolating when ill with Covid. This was the one area where adherence was low due to the financial and practical difficulties of doing so.<sup>29</sup> From early on in the pandemic,

26 Muldoon O T, Liu J H and McHugh C (2021) ‘The political psychology of Covid-19’, *Political Psychology*, 42(5): 715–728

27 Van Bavel J J, Cichocka A, Capraro V, Sjästad H, Nezlek J B, Pavlović T and others (2022) ‘National identity predicts public health support during a global pandemic’, *Nature Communications*, 13(1): 1–14

28 Arnold K F, Gilthorpe M S, Alwan N A, Heppenstall A J, Tomova G D, McKee M and Tennant P W (2022) ‘Estimating the effects of lockdown timing on Covid-19 cases and deaths in England: a counterfactual modelling study’, *Plos ONE*, 17(4): e0263432

29 Reicher S D, Drury J and Michie S (2021) ‘Contrasting figures on adherence to self-isolation show that support is even more important than ever’. *BMJ* blog, 5 April 2021. <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/04/05/why-contrasting-figures-on-adherence-to-self-isolation-show-that-support-to-self-isolate-is-even-more-important-than-we-previously-realised/>

SPI-B called for comprehensive support for self-isolation<sup>30</sup> and these calls were consistently ignored (the government did eventually agree to a £500 grant, but only one in eight workers was eligible for it and it was so beset with bureaucracy that seven in ten of those who applied for it were turned down<sup>31</sup>). We struggled to understand the reasons for this reaction, in contrast to the support schemes available in many other countries.<sup>32</sup> The answer was provided by the then Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, in his evidence to the joint Science & Technology and Health & Social Care committees of the House of Commons. Asked precisely why the government refused more support for self-isolation, he replied: “The challenge that we had with that proposal is the extent to which it might be gamed.”<sup>33</sup>

As a consequence of this distrust, support was withheld, sick people could not afford to stay at home and so Covid spread further. More infections. More lives lost. More disruption to society and the economy. But that’s not all. The cost of distrust is not simply a matter of making policy errors but of failing to harness the potential of the public as a partner in tackling the pandemic. And that in turn has to do with failures of democratic governance.

**“As a consequence of this distrust, support was withheld, sick people could not afford to stay at home and so Covid spread further”**

## COVID: DENYING DEMOCRACY

David Nabarro, special envoy on Covid-19 for the World Health Organization (WHO), argues forcefully for a ‘people centred’ pandemic

30 For example, SPI-B (2020) ‘The impact of financial and other targeted support on rates of self-isolation or quarantine’, GOV.UK website, 16 September 2020. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/925133/S0759\\_SPI-B\\_The\\_impact\\_of\\_financial\\_and\\_other\\_targeted\\_support\\_on\\_rates\\_of\\_self-isolation\\_or\\_quarantine\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/925133/S0759_SPI-B_The_impact_of_financial_and_other_targeted_support_on_rates_of_self-isolation_or_quarantine_.pdf)

31 Collinson A (2021) ‘High rejection rates show the self-isolation payment scheme isn’t fit for purpose’, TUC website, 15 February 2021. <https://www.tuc.org.uk/blogs/high-rejection-rates-show-self-isolation-payment-scheme-isnt-fit-purpose>

32 Nuffield Trust (2021) ‘International comparisons of isolation support and enforcement’, Nuffield Trust website, 6 January 2021. <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/chart/international-comparisons-of-isolation-support-and-enforcement-1>

33 Science and Technology Committee and Health and Social Care Committee (2021) *Oral Evidence: Coronavirus: Lessons learnt, HC 95*, parliament.uk. <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/2318/pdf>

strategy, one in which “people are the solution; they are not the problem. Don’t disempower, empower them. See them as the primary strength in your response.”<sup>34</sup> I have already detailed some of the ways in which people are indeed a solution when they are constituted as a psychological group: in terms of personal adherence and in terms of providing the support to others which makes it possible for them to adhere.

In both cases, though, realising the potential of the public as a partner is dependent on developing appropriate forms of democratic engagement. In terms of adherence, measures can only be effective if they are accompanied by the information and resources to make them practicable for diverse communities.<sup>35</sup> That requires an understanding of the needs of these communities, the barriers to adherence that they face, and how these barriers differ for different groups (being especially acute for those who are more marginal, vulnerable and deprived<sup>36</sup>). Such an understanding in turn requires the development of innovative structures that enable rapid input into policy processes by those who are typically under-represented in public participation initiatives.<sup>37</sup>

**“realising the potential of the public as a partner is dependent on developing appropriate forms of democratic engagement”**

Moving on to support groups, for all their achievements, they are hard to sustain over time due to the burden on organisers: burnout, a lack of resources and a lack of time.<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, rather than leaving it up to the government to look after people or leave it to the public to look after each other, there is again a need for democratic innovation whereby the government can scaffold the self-organisation of communities.

34 Nabarro D (2020) ‘VCSEP Network Call Summary – Thursday 3rd December, 9:45 – 10:45’. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60539edbc36b936b4ff448ad/t/60578f3ba8460e79be6c8ea6/1616351035771/Dr\\_David\\_Nabarro\\_Notes\\_Dec\\_2020.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60539edbc36b936b4ff448ad/t/60578f3ba8460e79be6c8ea6/1616351035771/Dr_David_Nabarro_Notes_Dec_2020.pdf)

35 Michie S, Van Stralen M M and West R (2011) ‘The behaviour change wheel: a new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions’, *Implementation Science*, 6(1): 1–12

36 Denford S, Morton K S, Lambert H, Zhang J, Smith L E, Rubin G J, Cai S, Zhang T, Robin C, Lasseter G, Hickman M, Oliver I and Yardley L (2021) ‘Understanding patterns of adherence to Covid-19 mitigation measures: a qualitative interview study’, *Journal of Public Health*, 43(3): 508–516

37 Ghai Y P (2001) *Public Participation and Minorities* (Vol. 1), Minority Rights Group

38 Fernandes-Jesus M, Mao G, Ntontis E, Cocking C, McTague M, Schwarz A, Semlyen S and Drury J (2021) ‘More than a Covid-19 response: sustaining mutual aid groups during and beyond the pandemic’, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4809. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.716202/full>

However, perhaps the most spectacular example of a failure of response deriving from a failure of engagement, which in turn was rooted in misunderstandings of group process, comes from the one area where the government parades its paternalistic achievements: the vaccine programme. The official narrative is that Johnson's administration was highly successful in funding, developing and rolling out new Covid vaccines that protected the public and changed the course of the pandemic.<sup>39</sup> There is some validity to this, but vaccines achieve nothing unless people get vaccinated. And while, overall, by Autumn 2021 vaccination rates were high (around 90 per cent), they were very much lower among a range of deprived and marginalised groups – especially Black Britons (around 60 per cent).<sup>40</sup>

The roots of these differences clearly lie in mistrust, which comes from historical abuses and failures of engagement.<sup>41</sup> For instance, a 2020 report of the House Commons and House of Lords showed that 60 per cent of Black Britons believed that health services were less concerned with their health than with that of the white population.<sup>42</sup> The obvious response was to try to rebuild trust through respecting the doubts of alienated populations and working with and through them to roll out vaccines. As the WHO stated, community engagement should be at the core of any vaccine programme.<sup>43</sup> A range of local initiatives demonstrated the effectiveness of such an approach,<sup>44</sup> but it was never consistently implemented at a national scale. Instead of addressing their collective relations to marginalised communities, the comments of government

- 39 Knight S (2021) 'Boris Johnson's vaccine miracle', *The New Yorker*, 18 March 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-the-uk/boris-johnsons-vaccine-miracle>
- 40 Dolby T, Finning K, Baker A, Fowler-Dowd L, Khunti K, Razieh C, Yates T and Nafilyan V (2022) 'Monitoring sociodemographic inequality in Covid-19 vaccination uptake in England: a national linked data study', *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 76(7): 646–652
- 41 Burgess R A, Osborne R H, Yongabi K A, Greenhalgh T, Gurdasani D, Kang G, Falade AG, Odone A, Busse R, Martin-Moreno J M, Reicher S and McKee M (2021) 'The Covid-19 vaccines rush: participatory community engagement matters more than ever', *The Lancet*, 397 (10268): 8–10
- 42 Joint Committee on Human Rights (2020) *Black People, Racism and Human Rights: Eleventh report of session 2019–21*, House of Commons and the House of Lords. <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/3376/documents/32359/default/>
- 43 World Health Organization and United Nations Children's Fund (2021) 'Conducting community engagement for Covid-19 vaccines: interim guidance', WHO website. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/339451>
- 44 Halvorsrud K, Shand J, Weil L G, Hutchings A, Zuriaga A, Satterthwaite D, Yip J L Y, Eshareturi E, Billett J, Hepworth A, Dodhia R, Schwartz E C, Penniston R, Mordaunt E, Bulmer S, Barratt H, Illingworth J, Inskip J, Bury F, Jenkins D, Mounier-Jack S and Raine R (2022) 'Tackling barriers to Covid-19 vaccine uptake in London: a mixed-methods evaluation', *Journal of Public Health*. fdac038. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35373295/>

ministers focussed on the individual deficiencies – ‘idiocy’ and ‘selfishness’ – of those who were not vaccinated.<sup>45,46</sup> Correspondingly, the debate around how to increase take-up focussed almost exclusively on whether and how to make life difficult for those who could not provide evidence of having been jabbed.<sup>47</sup> As the latest statistical bulletin from the Office for National Statistics (18 November 2022) shows,<sup>48</sup> vaccination rates remain much lower for Black Britons to this day.

**“The roots of these differences clearly lie in mistrust, which comes from historical abuses and failures of engagement”**

Developing inclusive and agile forms of engagement would have transformed the pandemic response. And they would make us better prepared for a future pandemic. Such developments would also have general societal benefits in terms of cohesion, trust and democratic resilience. But they haven’t happened and there is little sign of them happening in the future. How could they, as long as the government views the population as a psychologically deficient and incompetent interlocutor? Democratic engagement remains impossible if one subscribes to a psychology that deems the public a partner not worth engaging with.

## AFTER COVID?

Some four years ago, I wrote about the relationship between groups and democracy, about how the nature of group psychology has been consistently misunderstood and misrepresented and about how a sense of shared group membership is critical to democratic engagement.

When I developed my argument, I could not have imagined how the ensuing period would provide a harsh lesson in just how important it is to get the psychology right and how great the costs of getting it wrong.

45 BBC (2021) ‘Covid: turning down Covid vaccine is selfish, says Michael Gove’, BBC News website, 27 July 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-57987016>

46 Riley-Smith, B. & Donnelly, L. (2021) People who refuse Covid vaccine are selfish says Lord Lloyd Webber. The Telegraph. 17<sup>th</sup> May. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2021/05/17/people-refuse-covid-vaccine-selfish-says-andrew-lloyd-webber/>

47 Vaughan A (2021) ‘UK vaccine passport row’, *New Scientist*, 250(3329): 7

48 Office for National Statistics (2022) ‘Coronavirus (Covid-19) latest insights: vaccines’, ONS website, 18 November 2022. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/articles/coronaviruscovid19latestinsights/vaccines#:~:text=Those%20identifying%20as%20White%20British,areas%2C%20or%20social%20rented%20housing>

These costs took forms I had not envisaged in 2019. As I have argued here, by failing to appreciate the constructive power of the group, the UK government made a series of disastrous policy calls that caused massive harm to health, to wellbeing and to the economy. Its distrust and disregard for the public led it to manage people through threats and punishments rather than engagement and discussion. In that way it alienated people, made partnership impossible and squandered goodwill. Rather than understanding that a communalised public was its greatest asset, it treated us as a problem and thereby turned us into a problem.

**“the UK government made a series of disastrous policy calls that caused massive harm to health, to wellbeing and to the economy”**

Until recently, we talked about ‘building back better’ after Covid and of creating something positive out of all we have endured and all those we have lost. In the rush to believe that the pandemic is behind us, that seems to have been forgotten. But if there is one lesson I hope that we do retain, it is the way that adversity can create community and solidarity. If this is properly understood and properly supported, then it can point the way to creating a more inclusive, cohesive and democratic future.

**Stephen Reicher is Wardlaw Professor of Psychology at the University of St. Andrews, Fellow of the British Academy, Fellow and Vice-President of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He advised both the UK and Scottish Governments on behavioural science during the Covid-19 pandemic. He is also a member of Independent SAGE and convenes its Behavioural Science sub-group.**