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Communicating Solidarity? Public Responses to UK Government Communication of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This article explores public responses to UK government communication of COVID-19, focusing on public solidarity as a crucial part of an effective pandemic response. Drawing on focus group research with members of the public, we identify three limitations in the way solidarity was communicated by government. What solidarity meant and entailed was not always (1) clear and understandable, (2) adequately justified to all, or (3) demonstrated by the actions of political leaders themselves. In conclusion, we consider the implications of our analysis for how the communication of solidarity could have been improved. Beyond any specific communicative shortcomings, communicating solidarity was always bound to be difficult. What solidarity meant and entailed in the context of the pandemic was never normatively self-evident, especially given the different values and interests at stake. Given this, we suggest that a more deliberative-democratic approach to solidarity would have been both normatively desirable and more likely to be effective in sustaining solidarity. But the need for this approach reveals an underlying systemic weakness in the political-communication environment: the lack of adequate opportunities for those called upon to show solidarity to reflect on, contest, and shape its meaning.

1. Introduction

Solidarity became a public health imperative during the COVID-19 pandemic. The public needed to change their behaviour to prevent the virus spreading, but the costs and perceived benefits of doing so were not shared evenly by all groups. Short of forcing members of the public to follow rules through coercion, compliance depended on public solidarity: the public, that is, needed to feel a strong enough bond with others to act collectively, even if they did not view this as in their narrow self-interest (Forst, 2021; Fuks et al., 2021; Jetten et al., 2020; Prainsack, 2020; West-Oram, 2021).

Governments appealed to public solidarity regularly in their response to the pandemic. While health experts spelt out the risks the virus posed, political leaders sought

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to foster public unity and emphasise how 'we're in this together'. During the first lockdown in March 2020, the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson even explicitly reversed Margaret Thatcher's claim that 'there is no such thing as society', telling the public that: 'We are going to do it, we are going to do it together. One thing I think the coronavirus crisis has already proved is that there really is such a thing as society'. But some researchers have argued that the type of solidarity communicated by governments lacked substance (Orgad & Hegde, 2022). The rhetoric of public togetherness was undermined by social inequalities among groups (Couldry, 2022), and the failure to put in place adequate policies to support and sustain solidary actions by all (Fuks et al., 2021; West-Oram, 2021). These critiques not only raise doubts about the effectiveness of solidarity appeals in supporting compliance and protecting public health. By pointing to a failure of government to acknowledge difference and inequality adequately, they also question the normative justification of solidarity claims.

This article explores how the public, as the addressee of solidarity appeals, responded to government communication of the pandemic. Drawing on sixteen focus groups with members of the UK public, conducted in the first year of the pandemic, we find that appeals to solidarity were widely recognised, but there was a perception that solidarity had weakened over time and individualism and non-compliance had increased. This shift was linked to three limitations in the way solidarity was communicated by the UK government. What public solidarity meant and required was not always: (1) clear and understandable, (2) adequately justified to all those expected to show solidarity, or (3) demonstrated by the actions of political leaders themselves.

In conclusion, we consider the implications of our analysis for how the communication of solidarity could have been improved. We acknowledge that communicating solidarity was always bound to be difficult. While the need for action to respond to COVID-19 was clear and pressing, exactly what solidarity meant and entailed in the context of the pandemic was not self-evident, especially given the different interests and values at stake. Given this, we argue that a more deliberative-democratic approach to solidarity, where different groups were involved in defining what solidarity meant and entailed, would have been both normatively desirable and more likely to be effective in sustaining solidarity. But this need for public deliberation reveals a systemic weakness in the political-communication environment beyond any specific communicative failings: the lack of meaningful opportunities for those called upon to show solidarity to consider, contest, and shape its meaning.

2. Research Context

The importance of solidarity in responding effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic has been widely recognised (Fuks et al., 2021; Jetten et al., 2020; Prainsack, 2020; West-Oram, 2021). Short of using coercion alone, governments had to rely on the public to comply with rules and guidance freely, but the costs and benefits of compliance varied. Differing social and economic circumstances meant the costs of compliance were much higher for some than others, while their vulnerability to the virus and so the perceived benefits of compliance might have been lower (Prainsack, 2020; Prainsack & Buyx, 2011). Solidarity is critical here. Where costs outweigh benefits, individuals need to feel a strong enough bond of solidarity with others that they are willing to act collectively, even if it is against what they perceive to be in their self-interest.

Following Rainer Forst, we define 'solidarity' as a willingness to act collectively in order to further a 'normative bond' shared with others:

> The general concept of solidarity refers to a particular practical attitude of a person toward others. It involves a form of "standing by" each other (from the Latin solidus) based on a particular normative bond with others constituted by a common cause or shared identity […] Solidarity expresses a willingness to act with and for the sake of others based on the motive of affirming the collective bond. (2021, p. 4)

Forst (2021) notes that this general concept of solidarity may be fleshed out in different ways and that specific conceptions vary depending on context. Solidarity may be attached to different types of collective, ranging from close circles of family and friends to national publics or even humanity at large. And, in different contexts, the bond – the 'common cause or shared identity' – that underpins solidarity and what furthering it entails will be understood in various ways. Different forms and practices of justification among members of the collective will also be involved (Forst, 2014a, 2014b).

Mediated communication is bound up with these dynamics of solidarity. Couldry and Hepp (2017, p. 170) distinguish between 'mediatised collectivities', which exist independently of media but may be shaped by them, and 'media-based collectivities', constituted by the 'frames of reference' and 'spaces of communication' media provide. Interpersonal solidarity may fall into the former group: it can grow and exist independently of media, even if – during the pandemic – relations among those unable to meet in person were sustained by them. Forms of solidarity in larger groups such as national or global publics, where, as Miller (2020, p. 182) puts it, 'people have to learn to feel solidarity with those who they will never meet, and about whom they lack specific information', are necessarily more reliant on mediated communication. Here, like Couldry and Hepp's (2017) 'media-based collectivities', mediated communication plays a constitutive role in shaping solidarity. The 'normative bond' of solidarity and what furthering this bond entails in specific contexts are necessarily constructed and negotiated through media.

Not surprisingly, government communication and information campaigns were central to communicating public solidarity during the pandemic. As emphasised by the literature on crisis and risk communication, the public look to governments and political leaders in times of crisis (Wardman, 2020). Governments not only need to communicate clear information that explains the risks, but also foster public solidarity by affirming the common bond the public share and explaining what furthering this entails. Crisis and risk communication researchers write about the importance of 'identity leadership' in such situations: the ability, that is, 'to represent and advance the shared interests of group members and to create and embed a sense of shared social identity among them (a sense of "us-ness")' (Haslam et al., 2021, p. 35; Jetten et al., 2020).

Government leaders clearly recognised the importance of solidarity in their communication during the early stages of the pandemic. They spoke of 'we', 'us', and 'togetherness', and emphasised the responsibilities we have to each other. Nonetheless, researchers have argued that the solidarity communicated by governments was often thin and lacking in substance. Shani Orgad and Radha Sarma Hegde (2022) conducted a textual analysis of government COVID-19 campaigns across 12 countries, including

the UK. They found that government communication tended to emphasise national solidarity, downplaying the manifestly global nature of the pandemic and the need for solidarity across national borders. At the same time, the solidarity communicated was based on a weak sense of the national public as a collective, which put the responsibility on members of the public to address the pandemic individually.

Others have similarly questioned governments for not doing more to support solidarity through appropriate policy measures (Fuks et al., 2021; Prainsack, 2020; West-Oram, 2021). In the UK, West-Oram (2021) argues that the government put responsibility on individuals to respond to the pandemic, but what they needed to do was not always clear or backed up by enough material support. The furlough scheme, which helped those unable to work financially, was an exception. But some groups fell through the safety net provided or were left unsupported in other ways. West-Oram (2021, p. 67) concludes that the UK government 'failed to engage in solidarity with its constituents, and effectively devolved responsibility for action to agents with far less power to deliver an effective response to COVID-19'.

A key question in relation to government responses is the extent to which they acknowledged the different and unequal circumstances individuals faced adequately. Couldry (2022, p. 255) notes that people's ability to 'get by' during the pandemic varied hugely, differences that often reflected and reproduced 'enduring inequalities of class, gender, and race'. The pandemic brought already present inequalities into starker relief, Couldry (2022, p. 255) argues, collapsing 'any pretence that what "we" were experiencing as the pandemic was the same thing, even as the rhetoric of "being in this together" intensified'. Rather than acknowledge differences and inequalities in circumstances, Orgad and Hegde (2022, p. 7) conclude that government communication 'promoted narratives that ignored and masked inequalities and, instead, promulgated national solidarity and solidarity 'lite''.

These critiques of government communication not only offer reasons why solidarity appeals might not have been as effective as they could have been in protecting public health. By pointing to a failure of governments to acknowledge difference and inequality adequately, they also question the normative justification of solidarity appeals. After all, solidarity is not necessarily 'good'. As Forst (2021) notes, 'nationalist movements have historically used the language of solidarity quite effectively for many purposes, including aggressive ones. Hence, in general, solidarity, like courage, is a morally neutral virtue, and it can be used for good or bad purposes' (p. 5). What is critical is how solidarity – both the common bond and what furthering this entails – is justified in particular contexts. What public solidarity means in a democracy, Rehg (2007) argues, 'may not be simply imposed on members in an authoritarian manner, but must somehow involve their input and free affirmation' (p. 7). In other words, appeals for public solidarity must be democratically justified to the publics they address.

In relation to COVID-19, the threat the virus posed and need for actions to address it were clear and pressing. Yet exactly what solidarity meant and entailed in the pandemic was not normatively self-evident, especially given people's different vulnerability to the virus, perceptions of risk, and their diverse and unequal social and economic circumstances. Pearse (2020) argues the pandemic raised questions which could not be answered simply by 'following the science', but 'that every member of a political community has a right, and the capacity, to help answer' (p. 574). He called for more public deliberation to

ensure the views and experiences of different groups were voiced and taken into account (Pearse, 2020; see also Moore & MacKenzie, 2020; Scheinerman & McCoy, 2021; The Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 2020). We adopt a similar deliberative democratic perspective in this article, maintaining that the normative justification of pandemic solidarity is based on the extent to which it is justified to all affected, which depends, in turn, on them having meaningful opportunities to consider, contest, and shape its meaning (Forst, 2014a, 2014b).

But how then did the public respond to solidarity appeals in practice? Were appeals accepted, questioned, or rejected? Reporting on cross-country survey research, Jetten et al. (2020) confirmed the importance of solidarity in promoting compliance with lockdown measures. Regardless of varying perceptions of individual vulnerability and risk, the authors note that solidarity is strongly associated with compliance:

> One's sense of personal risk barely affects adherence to lockdown at all. Rather, according to data we have collected from nearly 6000 respondents across eleven countries, what best predicts adherence is a sense of "we are all in it together and we all need to come out of it together". (Jetten et al., 2020, p. 10)

At the same time, other researchers documented declines in feelings of public solidarity as the COVID-19 pandemic developed (Prainsack, 2020). Fuks et al.'s (2021) study in Netherlands found that solidarity among the public waned over time. They argue that this decline cannot be explained solely by 'pandemic fatigue', but reflected a lack of policy measures from government to support and sustain solidarity (Fuks et al., 2021).

In the UK, survey research reported significant differences in how the public acted in response to government communication about the pandemic (Coleman, Konstantinova & Moss, 2020 1), which were associated with varied perceptions of the risk it posed and views about how it should be addressed (Douglas, 1999; Wildavsky & Dake, 1990). There were seemingly clear differences among groups in terms of solidarity. Some were 'COVID communitarian': they were convinced of the overwhelming health risks posed by COVID-19 and the need to act collectively by following rules and guidance assiduously. Meanwhile, others were more 'COVID individualist': they favoured more scope for individual judgement in responding to the pandemic and were more accepting of some non-compliance.

This article aims to build on the general picture provided by this survey research by exploring these divergent public views about solidarity and in particular how they relate to government communication in more qualitative depth. How did these different groups view and respond to government communication? And how do their accounts help us to understand how government communication – alongside government policy – might support and sustain solidarity better?

3. Methodology

Our analysis in this article is based on sixteen focus groups, conducted as part of a larger research project that examined public experiences and views of government pandemic communication. The focus groups were conducted in late 2020 and early 2021, allowing participants to reflect back on the first year of the pandemic. A total of 72 people took

part in the research: there were 4–8 participants in most groups as planned, although we were only able to secure 2–3 participants for four groups. All sessions were 60–90 min in length and were conducted online because of social distancing requirements.

Our focus group participants were involved in prior survey research completed as part of the larger project. The survey research, conducted with nationally representative samples of the UK population, investigated how the UK public received, understood, and acted on pandemic communication (Coleman, Konstantinova & Moss, 2020 1). A segmentation analysis of the survey data identified six key population groups that differed in key respects (Table 1). The segmentation provided a valuable basis for the sampling of the focus groups, helping us to ensure the sample reflected key variables proven to be significant at a UK population level. The groups differed in the extent to which they engaged in behaviour associated with risk, had experience of COVID, and were vulnerable to the virus. Most relevant for this article, the groups also varied in the degree to which they held views that were 'COVID communitarian' (convinced of the need to act collectively to address the pandemic and follow rules and guidance) or 'COVID individualist' (less convinced of the need to act collectively and more accepting of some non-compliance).[1] We conducted two focus groups with members of each of the six segments and four mixed groups.[2]

Our aim in conducting the focus groups was to explore public experiences and views in more depth than was possible through the survey research. With a focus group, as Kitzinger (1995) puts it, the researcher can 'examine not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way' (p. 299). Through asking open questions about how participants felt the government handled the pandemic, how they followed, understood, and evaluated government communication, and what their expectations were for the future, our aim was to come to a better understanding of why people gave particular responses to the survey. At the same time, we were conscious of the fact that we may not just be 'excavating' attitudes and opinions that exist already. People's views are not always fully developed or fixed, and may be shaped through interactions with others in focus groups just as in other social contexts (Hollander, 2004). We return to this important constructivist insight below.

Table 1. COVID-19 and six segments of the UK population.

Selected characteristics	Segments					
	Segment 1	Segment 2	Segment 3	Segment 4	Segment 5	Segment 6
COVID communitarian	average	significantly below average	above average	below average	significantly above average	significantly above average
COVID individualist	significantly above average	average	below average	significantly above average	significantly below average	below average
Behaviour associated with COVID risks	significantly above average	average	average	average	average	below average
Experience of COVID	above average	average	average	below average	average	above average
Vulnerability to COVID	average	average	average	below average	average	above average

Note: Based on Coleman, Konstantinova & Moss, 2020 1: pp. 13–15.

Our analysis of the focus groups began at the end of each session, where we exchanged immediate impressions and notes with one another. The focus groups were then transcribed and uploaded to NVivo for closer analysis. We conducted a thematic analysis involving three main stages (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Firstly, we read the transcripts closely, immersing ourselves in the data. Secondly, we coded the content, identifying content related to our project research questions (how had people received, understood, evaluated, and acted upon the communication of official information during the pandemic?). Thirdly, we made connections among codes, identifying broader themes. At each stage, we discussed and refined our analysis in an iterative fashion. We published our initial findings in a stakeholder report shortly after the focus groups with a view to informing policy and practice (Moss & Konstantinova, 2021 2).

It was clear from our initial analysis that 'solidarity' was a key theme of the discussions. Contributions to the focus groups were most intense when discussing compliance and non-compliance with rules and guidance, and what this said about people's willingness to make sacrifices for the collective or not. At the same time, it became apparent to us that the opposition, derived from the survey research, between the 'COVID communitarian' and 'COVID individualists' was too simple. At least, those who were more individualist gave various reasons to explain non-compliance, suggesting they were not necessarily committed individualists rejecting public solidarity *per se*, even if they were identifying problems with the way it can be communicated and understood. We therefore returned to our transcripts and initial analysis with a particular focus on the theme of solidarity and the ways its communication could be improved. The results of this second analysis are presented here.

But what is the nature of the 'evidence' we present? A critic might argue that our findings are not only shaped by analytical choices, but also by our method. Did the focus groups, for example, encourage participants to justify their attitudes and actions, perhaps pushing them to give post-hoc rationalisations to explain non-compliance that fail to reflect their original motivations? As already noted, we accept the constructivist possibility that focus groups do not just examine existing attitudes and opinions, and that views may emerge through group interaction (Hollander, 2004). Our research did encourage participants to account for their actions or views in the presence of others, pushing them into a position of public justification (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996, p. 88). Some of these justifications may have reflected post-hoc rationalisations. Nonetheless, this possibility does not invalidate our findings in our view. Even when some reasons do not reflect original motivations fully, justifications can still shape motivations for subsequent action. As Summers (2017, p. 32) argues, 'Deliberation, at least deliberation about why one has acted, is motivational over time given our desire to remain consistent with our past motives. Rationalisation can thus be a crucial part of an ongoing process of shaping our own motivation'. Indeed, we will argue, the possibility that motivations can in principle be shaped through a deliberative process is crucial to how a more deliberative approach may be able to sustain public solidarity better. For this reason, even if they are rationalisations, the views participants expressed in the focus groups provide evidence of how the communication of solidarity could have been improved and solidarity better sustained.

Before presenting our analysis, it is important to note some limitations. First, while we emphasise the role of government communication in our analysis, we acknowledge that

communication is only one factor that may affect public solidarity among others, such as government policy or 'pandemic fatigue' (Fuks et al., 2021; West-Oram, 2021). Given the nature of our method, we were not able to assess the relative importance of government communication against other variables systematically. Our aim was more to explore the relationship between communication and solidarity in qualitative depth. Secondly, while we reflect on some regional differences, the numbers of participants from different locations were too small to explore variations in responses to local and national governments systematically. So even though policy and communication diverged in the four nations of the UK after May 2020 (see Tatlow et al., 2021), and there is some evidence to suggest responses to local government may differ from central government (Abrams et al., 2021), our analysis is limited to communication by the UK government, who were responsible for policy in England and some measures for the whole of the UK.

4. Solidarity in a Pandemic

Our participants described how there was a clear sense of public togetherness during the first lockdown period in March-May 2020. However, by the time of our focus groups in late 2020 / early 2021, there was a perception that solidarity was decreasing and individualism and non-compliance increasing. One participant, for example, told us that the 'community spirit' at the beginning of the pandemic had been 'really inspiring', but they now felt 'everybody is kind of out for their own':

> P2: Initially the community spirit and everything, helping each other out and stuff was really inspiring. I sometimes feel like we've lost that again now and everybody is kind of out for their own and what they can do in their situation and how they can make the best of it for them. Whereas I was kind of thinking that the community feel would last longer than it has done. (Segment 3, Group 1)

Another said that the 'common goal' of the pandemic had not been 'strong enough to bring people together':

> P3: I think it's a bit sad, because the common goal that we should all have is coming to the end of this and doing what we need to do to get through it. It doesn't seem to be strong enough to bring people together. (Segment 3, Group 1)

Reflecting this shift, some participants suggested that others were more self-regarding and less willing to make the sacrifices solidarity entailed. They were more likely to break rules and behave in ways that threatened public health. One participant said people had become 'reckless':

> P6: I feel like during the first lockdown in March, I remember it was quite scary because it was like a ghost town. But everyone was literally at home abiding by the rules. And I feel like at that point the death rate and the number of people affected did go down massively. However, after that I think a lot of people became really reckless. And that's when you know, the rules are being bended, and people were just kind of doing whatever they wanted to do. (Segment 2, Group 2)

Another participant, from a segment that tends to be more vulnerable to the virus and careful to avoid risks, said that younger people did not 'care' or perceive it as their 'problem':

P2: I like to stick to the rules, but I do find – and I don't want to be judgemental and I don't want to come across it, but I do find a lot of the younger people do think to themselves I don't care. It's not my problem type of thing. (Segment 6, Group 1)

There were differences across groups in how they evaluated weakening solidarity. Those who adopted a more COVID communitarian outlook (Segments 3, 5 and 6) tended to be critical of non-compliance, placing blame for rule-breaking on people's individualist outlook. For example, one participant – appearing to suggest others were breaking a 'normative bond' of solidarity – said it was a question of whether people are willing to do 'the right thing':

P1: The government is relying on people to do the right thing. And unfortunately there's a lot of the population that are never going to do the right thing, and are not going to follow any sort of thing, guidance they're given. (Segment 5, Group 2)

But not all participants condemned those who did not comply with rules in such strong terms. While a small number hinted at conspiracy theories, almost all participants appeared to recognise the need to take some collective action to protect public health. Yet those who adopted more COVID individualist views (Segments 1, 2, and 4) seemed more accepting of individual judgments and some non-compliance. As we describe in the following sections, these participants offered reasons in the focus groups to explain this position and connected this to specific weaknesses in the communication of solidarity. In other words, they were not necessarily committed individualists who rejected public solidarity *per se*, although they were questioning the particular ways pandemic solidarity had been communicated. Focusing on these weaknesses of communication helps us to identify how the communication of solidarity might be improved.

5. Informing Solidarity

To communicate solidarity, the government needed to explain what solidarity meant and entailed in the context of the pandemic. Clear and understandable information is vital. However, participants from across our groups – from both more COVID communitarian and COVID individualist segments – described how messages about what they needed to do to act collectively and further solidarity became more complex, changeable, and harder to understand over time. Our research therefore supports West-Oram's (2021) claim that a failure to provide clear enough information may have weakened solidarity.

Participants described how government communication during the first lockdown period in March–May 2020 was clear and comprehensible. Basic health messages about washing hands and social distancing were well understood, while the request to 'stay at home, protect the NHS, save lives' was clear and left little room for ambiguity. This message was also reflected in the tangible effects of policy, as the world outside people's home became less available through closures so even those less engaged with official communication received the message (Reicher, 2021). During this period, people had a reasonable idea of what acting in a solidary way entailed, or at least they knew what political leaders and health experts thought it entailed.

If communication during the first lockdown period was easy to follow, participants described how it became more difficult to understand later. At this time, the public were still required to follow rules and guidance around social distancing, isolation

periods, and so on, but exceptions were introduced. Information become less clear, leaving members of the public more confused and uncertain:

> P1: Yeah, I think, at the start, it was very clear, it was stay at home. And then as the restrictions gradually eased, there were as P5 was saying, there were a lot of exceptions, oh you can do this, but only this or you might be able to do this. And that's where things started to get quite confusing. (Segment 1, Group 2)

> P4: So when we were going into lockdown in March, I felt that was a really clear message and we all knew what we were doing. And then, by the time it got to July and we were starting to come out of it, I think that's when all the mixed messages started and that's when the confusion began. (Segment 4, Group 1)

Some participants suggested Boris Johnson and other senior politicians did not always understand the rules and guidance they were asking others to follow. Not only were Johnson and others then unable to clarify things when they communicated; they also reinforced a perception that information was too complex to understand:

> P3: I think when Boris [Johnson] talks you get the feeling that he doesn't really know what he's talking about. That he's briefed, but he doesn't really get it. […] if Boris gets a question, you know he'll get facts wrong, he'll say the wrong thing. He doesn't know. He'll say things like oh well, I don't want to go into detail now and it's just you know, it just feels like he doesn't really get the rules, or he doesn't really understand what's going on. (Segment 5, Group 1)

> P2: I think that they haven't had a full grasp of what's been needed. So in terms of when they've been giving interviews or doing the meetings, they haven't necessarily understood what they're saying themselves about what's going to happen. And that then led to a lot of confusion from the general public … . (Segment 5, Group 2)

The speed of policy changes made information hard to follow. Having told people to 'stay at home', the Government eased restrictions during the summer and encouraged people to 'eat out to help out' instead. Restrictions were then reapplied in the autumn, culminating in another lockdown and the introduction of a new 'tougher' tier system. There was a temporary relaxation of rules over Christmas before another lockdown was introduced in January 2021 (see Tatlow et al., 2021, for a detailed account of policy changes across the UK during the pandemic). Whether these changes were well advised or not, the fast-changing, labile nature of policy gave the public less time to familiarise themselves with rules and guidance and 'keep up':

> P4: They'll say one thing on Monday, by Wednesday they've changed their mind and by Friday they'll be back onto Monday's idea. It's just impossible to keep up. (Mixed, Group 1)

> P3: I think they're being communicated but it's just too many things are being communicated so often that it's hard to keep up with them … . (Mixed, Group 2)

Importantly, as a result of conflicting solidarity appeals such as 'stay at home' and 'eat out to help out', government communication did not provide a clear sense of what the public needed to do to show solidarity. Many participants seemed to recognise how the government was trying to balance different and competing priorities: physical health, the economy, well-being, and so on. Yet this left the meaning of what solidarity entailed in the context of the pandemic unclear, as one participant said:

P2: It's been a bit of haphazard kind of effort [by the UK government] at trying to find that balance. And so you are having like, you're getting one impression initially and saying go out, eat out to help out. And then you immediately, oh it's spiking again. And you're seeing early September, mid-September and later September it's gone up and up and up. And suddenly it's like oh actually, let's go back into considerable lockdown. […] It didn't feel like a consistent message of saying, what are you trying to balance here? Are you trying to balance wellbeing alongside the economy, alongside health? Or what are you trying to balance here? And it's never been clear. (Segment 2, Group 2)

Solidarity cannot be communicated clearly if its meaning is unclear. Therefore, the fact that what solidarity meant and entailed in the context of the pandemic was ambiguous was one limitation of government communication. This lack of clarity may be linked to rising levels of non-compliance and individualism among the public discussed in the previous section. Consider quotes from two participants from Segment 1 groups, which tend to be more COVID individualist and engaged in behaviour associated with higher risk, who say that information that is difficult to understand means 'you probably just do your own thing' and make your 'own assumptions with what is right and wrong':

P1: I think they [rules and guidance] just changed so often that, yeah, you could never really keep up to date with it as well. And so you probably just do your own thing irrelevant of what the update was. (Segment 1, Group 1)

P4: And that's when I kind of feel, oh I'm just kind of like I'm having to make my own assumptions with what is right and wrong with the communication because it seems to be very changeable and kind of like very contradictory. (Segment 1, Group 2)

Of course, an individual left to do their 'own thing' or make their 'own assumptions' may not follow their own self-interest; they may decide to act in ways they think show solidarity with others.[3] Still, the important point is that it is difficult for the public to act in a solidary way without a shared sense of what this means and requires, and this clarity was not always evident in government communication.

6. Justifying Solidarity

As well as knowing what solidarity means and entails, the public must think appeals to solidarity are justified. While a small number of participants expressed some scepticism about the scientific evidence, most accepted the need for public action to protect public health. However, a significant number did question government appeals to solidarity in terms of how well they acknowledged the different circumstances of groups or where they appeared to treat groups differently in an unjustified way.

Those who tended towards more COVID communitarian views appeared to be convinced of the need to act to protect public health from the virus. For them, the meaning of solidarity in the context of the pandemic was clear and government solidarity appeals on this basis were well justified. They expected government communication to reflect this and some wanted it to be firmer, believing it left too much room for individual discretion rather than telling people what to do:

P5: I don't want to get too involved in the political aspects of this, but I think the government's general overall philosophy is very much one of, you know, not interfering, not- And I think that's really not helped to be honest with you. We could do with more of a maybe the wartime government's attitude perhaps. You know, the attitude that well yes people need to

be a little bit more, you need to be clear, people need: if necessary, tell people what to do but in a good way and a nice way. (Segment 5, Group 1)

At the same time, others stressed the need to consider the different circumstances of groups before being too firm and uncompromising. Some participants expressed concerns about the mental health impacts of the pandemic, as well as sympathy towards people who stretched rules to combat isolation. One participant, from a segment less vulnerable to COVID, told us that:

P2: I think it's hard to obey rules sometimes. You have to go like make your own decision as well. If you see friends you have to say OK fine. Can we keep your distance in order or OK? It's very, very hard. To make a choice basically, you make yourself, you wanna be safety first so you have to decide yourself, if you want to be safe or not going to be safe. (Segment 4, Group 1)

Other participants said that we need to be careful when judging people since their situations are different and unequal. The following quotes are from participants from the relatively COVID-individualist and risk-prone Segment 1:

P1: But I think we need to remember that everyone deals with this differently. And I heard a really good analogy of this in that we, yes, we are all in the same storm, but we are not in the same boat. Some people are in sturdier vessels than others. And I think that is something that we need to take into consideration. Our circumstances are not equal. (Segment 1, Group 2)

P2: I just think everybody deals with it in their own way. And their circumstances are all different, like [Participant 1] said, and yeah, I wouldn't judge people on what they do. Like, it's not an easy time. And I think, yeah, we're just trying our best. We're all just trying to get through it. (Segment 1, Group 2)

These comments echo Couldry's (2022) point about the difficulties and inequalities people faced when trying to 'get by' during the pandemic. Given the diverse social and economic circumstances of groups, costs associated with compliance are more significant for some than others, especially without adequate government policy to enable and support solidary actions by all (Fuks et al., 2021; West-Oram, 2021).

There were other ways participants questioned the justification of solidarity appeals. Some participants, for example, said policy was designed and applied in a way that reflected a north–south divide, privileging London and the South over the rest of the country. Consider the following exchange, where participants from Segment 4 – which is more COVID individualist – say 'not being heard' makes people 'not want to follow the rules' (i.e., not act in a solidary way):

P1: I've heard a lot of people saying that this week that the government doesn't care about the North. You know and the same amount of funding isn't going in. They don't care about the economy, people's well-being as much as they do for the South and the capital. [Other's nodding]

P3: If you feel like you're not being heard, you're much more likely to rebel and not want to follow the rules.

P1: I think that's what's happening isn't it. (Segment 4, Group 1)

The divergent responses to the communication of solidarity discussed in this section are revealing. For the COVID communitarian, the threat the virus poses and the need to

act to protect public health appears to be overwhelming. They expect others to appreciate this, and the government to communicate it unequivocally. This communitarian view depends on the assumption that what solidarity means and entails is normatively unambiguous. Such certainty can justify government being firmer in how it communicates and perhaps even imposing rules in a more authoritarian way (Rehg, 2007). For other participants, appeals to solidarity are more questionable where they (1) fail to acknowledge the different and unequal circumstances of groups adequately and/or (2) treat groups differently without adequate justification. As noted earlier, these participants are not necessarily individualists who reject public solidarity *per se*, although they are contesting the particular way it has been communicated. But when presented in a take-it-or-leave-it way, without opportunities to consider, contest, and negotiate its meaning, solidarity is something you must either accept dutifully or find ways to work around.

7. Demonstrating Solidarity

A final important factor related to the communication of solidarity is the extent to which those communicating solidarity demonstrate it themselves. We noted the importance of 'identity leadership' earlier: the ability of leaders 'to represent and advance the shared interests of group members and to create and embed a sense of shared social identity among them' (Haslam et al., 2021, p. 35; Jetten et al., 2020). In a representative democracy, elected politicians have a central role in representing their constituents and connecting them with decision-making. Yet our participants said that political leaders did not always demonstrate solidarity through their own actions, pointing to a third way solidarity was not communicated as well as it could have been.

Participants did not believe political representatives always followed the rules and guidance they endorsed publicly. We noted earlier how some participants said politicians did not understand the rules they were asking others to follow. Some participants were concerned they were breaking the rules or applying different rules to themselves and those close to them – both of which question their commitment to public solidarity. Our research was conducted before subsequent revelations about social gatherings or 'parties' in the UK Government, but concerns about rule-breaking and double standards were still evident at the time across our groups:

> P1: I mean I just wanted to mention double standards here because there's been quite a few cases of government ministers not doing what they should have done. And what that communication is, you know, that's totally against what they've said isn't it. (Segment 5, Group 2)

> P5: Yes I'd agree with P1. I was about to say the same thing of they're not leading by example necessarily. So to people within kind of the government that haven't followed the rules, also haven't done, faced the same outcomes that the general public would if they didn't follow the rules. (Segment 5, Group 2)

> P3: I just think what happened with his [Boris Johnson's] dad. He wasn't wearing a mask[4] and you're just like, if his family is going to be like that and he's not like enforcing that, then why would why would we follow him and his family aren't even following him like, yeah. (Segment 1, Group 1)

While people's political preferences may influence how they evaluate government, even those who openly expressed support for the governing Conservative Party were critical of rule-breaking:

> P1: I'm pro Tory – I don't have a problem with admitting that. The only time I thought it was a little bit disingenuous was with the incident with Dominic Cummings.[5] I think he should have gone straightaway. (Segment 3, Group 2)

Another participant connected rule breaking among the political elite, and their subsequent failure to address this, to non-compliance among the public:

> P7: It really sets an example. People do follow. Monkey see, monkey do, and I just think that was really the worst thing they could have done by just sweeping it under the carpet (Segment 5, Group 1)

In addition to breaking rules or applying them differently, there was another sense in which political representatives failed to demonstrate solidarity. Reflecting the need for solidarity in a time of crisis, some participants expressed a hope that communication between government and opposition politicians, and in the media more generally, could have suspended some of the point-scoring and adversarial nature of politics as usual and been more constructive and collaborative. Some participants even advocated a government of national unity, with politicians from different parties pulling together to address a crisis for the collective benefit:

> P1: So, I think that there's also an element, to me personally, where a national government would make a difference or should make a difference in the sense that you would expect it to be able to weigh all the different counter arguments more objectively than either a Labour government or Conservative government. (Segment 3, Group 1)

> P2: Yeah at this time they should come together to stick to one thing instead of going by all the other stuff like that party, you know, we don't like that party, you know what I mean? It just had too much politics involved. Just all get together. (Segment 4, Group 1)

If they were to 'come together' and consider different arguments, as these participants describe, politicians could help to demonstrate the solidarity at a political level expected of the public at a societal level. Yet, many of our participants suggested that political leaders did not themselves demonstrate solidarity as well as they could have done, identifying another weakness in the communication of solidarity during the pandemic.

8. Concluding Remarks

Drawing on focus group research, this article has explored public responses to UK government communication of COVID-19 and focused on public solidarity as a crucial part of an effective pandemic response (Jetten et al., 2020; Prainsack, 2020). While there was a clear sense of public togetherness during the first lockdown period in March-May 2020, there was a perception by the time of our focus groups – in late 2020 / early 2021 – that solidarity had decreased and individualism and non-compliance were increasing. Of course, different factors may explain why solidarity waned, including 'pandemic fatigue' and government policy (Fuks et al., 2021; West-Oram, 2021). Our analysis has suggested the decline was linked, at least in part, to weaknesses in the way solidarity was communicated. We identified three specific limitations of government

communication: what solidarity meant and entailed was not always (1) clear and understandable, (2) justified adequately to all groups, or (3) demonstrated by the actions of political leaders themselves.

At the same time, beyond specific communicating failings, we have acknowledged that communicating solidarity was always bound to be difficult. As the literature on 'identity leadership' shows, times of crisis require political leaders who can represent and further the shared cause and identities of groups effectively (Haslam et al., 2021, p. 35; Jetten et al., 2020). But this depends on the meaning of these collective bonds of solidarity and what furthering them entails being clear and agreed upon. Beyond weak appeals to public togetherness and national identity by governments (Orgad & Hegde, 2022), exactly what solidarity meant and entailed in the context of the pandemic was not normatively self-evident, but more ambiguous and contested. While some of our research participants appeared to view the common threat the pandemic posed to health and the actions required to address it as an indisputable basis for solidarity, others – who tended to be more accepting of non-compliance and the need for some individual judgement – raised additional considerations and pointed to the different and unequal circumstances of groups. The unclear, uncertain, and often changeable nature of some UK government communication may have represented some of this complexity. But then, after an initial period of public togetherness, public solidarity was difficult to maintain.

How then could the communication of solidarity have been improved? One answer, we think, was to involve the public more in considering and defining what solidarity meant and entailed in the context of the pandemic. By viewing solidarity as a recursive outcome of public deliberation, a deliberative approach offers an alternative to a communitarian position, which assumes the meaning of solidarity is clear, settled, and agreed upon, and an individualist one, which rejects solidarity altogether (Delanty, 2000; Habermas, 1997). While not all our focus group participants may accept this deliberative conclusion, we believe it speaks to key concerns they raised. As well as helping to clarify the meaning of solidarity to enable clearer communication, public deliberation could improve its justification by ensuring the concerns of different groups are considered more effectively. In addition to political representatives leading by example and adhering to collectively agreed rules, more constructive deliberation among political representatives – as opposed to the typically adversarial and centralised nature of UK politics (Gaskell et al., 2020) – could have modelled solidarity at political levels. Of course, given the different and sometimes conflicting values and interests at stake, it is unrealistic to expect deliberation to have resulted in consensus. But, when different views are listened to, fair compromises can be reached (Habermas, 1997, p. 166). Those who disagree are also more likely to accept decisions as legitimate where they have a better understanding of the reasons they have gained public support, even if they continue to think differently (Forst, 2021, p. 365).

A more deliberative approach would not only be more normatively desirable, therefore, but could have helped to maintain solidarity better. As we have stressed, our research participants who were seemingly more individualist did not necessarily reject solidarity *per se*, even if they did raise questions about the way it was communicated. Viewed through a deliberative lens, their critical questioning could be a crucial part of a discursive process that defines what solidarity means and entails in a way that accounts for their concerns. Of course, the most committed individualists will remain

unconvinced of the need for collective action. However, the willingness of others to act collectively might have been strengthened if their concerns were better addressed. Since rationalisations can motivate subsequent actions (Summers, 2017), collective action might be strengthened even when publicly-expressed concerns do not capture a person's original motivations fully. The possibility that motivations are amenable to change through a deliberative process is crucial to understanding how deliberation might have maintained solidarity better.

However, the need to approach solidarity more deliberatively draws attention to an underlying systemic weakness in our political-communication environment: the lack of adequate opportunities for those called upon to show solidarity to reflect on, contest, and shape its meaning. Rectifying this would require more collaborative dialogue among political and community representatives (in government, parliaments, and through media at local and national levels), demonstrating the type of solidarity at a political level that can allow differences to be considered and worked through constructively. It would also require more meaningful opportunities for the public to participate themselves, from being able to ask questions to political representatives and experts (Kim & Kreps, 2020) to being brought together in mini publics – if only remotely – to reflect on common issues and inform decision-making (Pearse, 2020; Scheinerman & McCoy, 2021; Smith & Setälä, 2018). At the same time, governments and public-interest media need to be sensitive to inputs emerging spontaneously in the public sphere, engaging with what would otherwise be marginalised views and experiences (Habermas, 1997; Scheinerman & McCoy, 2021). Deliberative democracy may be an ideal that can never be fully realised (Mansbridge et al., 2010), but we can surely reform our political communication environment to support 'a more deliberative democracy' (Coleman & Blumler, 2009, p. 26). In our view, such democratic reform would help to produce stronger – and better justified – public solidarity.

By highlighting public critiques of UK government communication in this article, we have aimed to identify ways communication could be improved. Our intention has not been to detract from the fact that most of the UK public did respond to solidarity appeals by trying to adhere to pandemic rules and guidance as best they could (Coleman, Konstantinova & Moss, 2020 1). This includes those who will have made significant sacrifices or faced especially adverse personal circumstances in doing so. Habermas (2013) notes that solidarity involves a 'credit of trust', based on expectations of reciprocity in future: those who show solidarity may act against their immediate self-interest not only for the collective good, therefore, but also because they believe they will receive benefits themselves in the longer term. Let us hope our post-pandemic democracies repay this trust.

Notes

1. Our analysis in this article focuses on this distinction between the COVID Communitarian and Communitarian Individualist. It is not possible to examine the potential influence of other variables, such as how party political preferences may influence the evaluation of government communication, since this was not captured by the segmentation analysis and we did not ask participants specifically about this.
2. Participants knew their survey responses had been used to select them for the study and to form groups, but they did not know the composition of specific groups in advance in order

to avoid influencing their contributions. The findings of the study were shared with participants subsequently, describing the segments and how the groups had been formed, and they were given another opportunity to ask questions, raise concerns, and withdraw from the research without explanation or penalty.

3. We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for making this point.
4. The participant seems to be referring to at least one of several incidents when Stanley Johnson, the then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson's father, was spotted not wearing a face mask in situations where face masks were mandatory at the time (see Duncan & da Silva, 2020).
5. Dominic Cummings, the then-chief advisor of UK's Prime Minister Boris Johnson, was accused of breaking the lockdown rules set by his government on at least two occasions: by travelling 264 miles from his London home to Durham after the start of a national lockdown in March 2020, while having COVID-19 symptoms; and later in April by going to Barnard Castle with his family during lockdown (see Dodd, 2020).

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