

RESEARCH SUMMARY  
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**Learning to live with risk and responsibility: understanding popular responses to Covid-19**

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*Aims and objectives*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people living in the UK have been asked to act responsibly in novel ways because of the risks their behaviour poses to themselves and others, and their role in complex chains of causation. This research project investigates how people have engaged with these demands, with the objective of contributing to conceptual and empirical understandings of popular responses to emergency situations including future pandemics. Making use of contemporaneous qualitative data available through the Mass Observation Project, the project seeks to develop a better understanding of how people interpreted sometimes conflicting demands to act responsibly in relation to COVID-19 and translated them into practices of everyday life.

*Research context*

Responses to the range of guidelines, recommendations, and rules associated with the COVID-19 pandemic involve a complex assemblage of *organisations* (e.g. police, supermarkets, public transport agencies, news organisations), *technologies* (e.g. screens, masks, home delivery services), and the emergence of various unscripted *practices* (e.g. community support networks, Zoom parties). Policy responses to the pandemic have problematized everyday routines of action.<sup>1</sup> They do so, for example, by restricting mobility through confinement to home and neighbourhood (e.g. by closing schools, businesses, and workplaces); through the circulation of spatial figures of responsible action (e.g. Stay Home, two metre rules, exercise only close to home, mask wearing); the presentation of a series of outcomes to which action would contribute (e.g. Protect the NHS, protect vulnerable people, support key workers); and the mobilisation of a range of ethical registers aimed at motivating responsible action (including guilt, self-reproach, care, shame, and solidarity).

Appeals to the authority and legitimacy of scientific knowledge, and controversies about science and expertise, have been central to government policy and public debate around the risks and responsibilities associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. For a variety of institutional and political reasons, public health responses have been heavily dependent on social and behavioural change strategies.<sup>2</sup> This project conceptualises the process through which biomedical and epidemiological modelling of contagious disease as well as behavioural health research has been used to frame policies and in turn to shape dramatic adjustments to social and economic life as a series of *translations*:<sup>3</sup>

- Epidemiological practices of modelling focus on quantitative measurements such as R value, patterns of morbidity, and predicted thresholds of organisational capacity. These are translated into general policy objectives, such as ‘flattening the curve’, and broad policy directives aimed at changing behaviours, ranging from recommendations (e.g.

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<sup>1</sup> Barnett, C. 2015. On the milieu of security: situating the emergence of new spaces of public action. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 5:3, 1-34.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick, S.L. and Cormier, H.C. 2020. *Are our lives the experiment? COVID-19 lessons during a chaotic natural experiment – A commentary.* *Health Behaviour Policy Review* 7:2, 165-169; Eaton, L. A. and Kalichman, S.C. 2020. Social and behavioral health responses to COVID-19: lessons from four decades of an HIV pandemic. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* <<https://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10865-020-00157-y>>

<sup>3</sup> Callon, M. 1986. Some elements of a sociology of translation: domestication of the scallops and the fishermen of St Brieuc Bay. In J. Law (ed.), *Power, action and belief: a new sociology of knowledge?* London, Routledge, pp.196-223; Callon, M. 1980. Struggles and negotiations to define what is problematic and what is not: the sociology of translation. In Knorr-Cetina, K. D., Krohn, R., and Whitley, R. D. (eds.), *The Social Process of Scientific Investigation: Sociology of the Sciences Yearbook*, Reidel, Dordrecht, pp. 197-219.

handwashing) and authoritative guidelines (social distancing) to legally enforceable rules (restrictions on non-essential movement outside the home).

- In addition to embodied practices of hygiene, these strategies target spatially defined practices of mobility, interaction, and habitation – they problematize the spaces of home and work, commuting and travel, neighbourliness and family.<sup>4</sup> It is these practices that constitute the spaces of encounter through which people engage with wider public discourses.<sup>5</sup>
- Specific disciplinary paradigms, rooted in concepts of abstract space, behaviour, and environment, inform the development of public health strategies.<sup>6</sup> The translation of these top-down initiatives into transformed patterns of everyday action involves intersubjective negotiations and practical adjustments to routines and habits that qualitative research is well suited to investigate.<sup>7</sup>

Conceptually, this project focuses on how relationships between risk and responsibility are enacted in people's everyday lives. Both epidemiological modelling and the non-pharmaceutical interventions associated with health behaviour strategies are informed primarily by aggregated concepts of individual *risk*. These strategies aim to develop new mental models, modify perceptions of social norms, develop emotional responses to them, in order to help replace 'risk behaviours' with more acceptable behaviours that can be easily adopted.<sup>8</sup> Cultural theories of risk and concepts of egalitarian risk provide more differentiated accounts of popular responses to public health strategies.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, risk-based approaches remain focussed on concepts of self-regarding virtues associated with paradigmatic public health issues, extended to issues such as climate change and financial decision-making. Uncertainties are translated into calculable and narratable risks.<sup>10</sup>

We proceed from the assumption that understanding popular responses to the COVID-19 pandemic is conceptualised here not only in terms of *risk*, a common theme across epidemiology, health behaviour research, and social science, but also practices of *responsibility*.<sup>11</sup> The relationship between risk-centred discourses and responsibility-centred

<sup>4</sup> Devine-Wright, P. et al. 2020. "Re-placed" – Reconsidering relationships with place and lessons from a pandemic. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 72.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2020.101514>

<sup>5</sup> Clarke N, Jennings W, Moss J, and Stoker G. 2017. Changing spaces of political encounter and the rise of anti-politics: Evidence from Mass Observation's general election diaries. *Political Geography* 56:13-23

<sup>6</sup> Hinchliffe, S. 2020. Model evidence: the COVID-19 case. *Somatosphere: Science, Medicine, Anthropology*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020. <<http://somatosphere.net/forumpost/model-evidence-covid-19/>>; Montgomery, C. and Engelmann, L. 2020. Epidemiological publics: On the domestication of modelling in the era of COVID-19. *Somatosphere: Science, Medicine, Anthropology*, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2020. <http://somatosphere.net/2020/epidemiological-publics-on-the-domestication-of-modelling-in-the-era-of-covid-19.html/>>

<sup>7</sup> Barnett, C. (2010). The politics of behaviour change. *Environment and Planning A*, 42, 1881-1886; MacGregor, H., Leach, M., Wilkinson, A., and Parker, M. 2020. Covid-19 – a social phenomenon requiring diverse expertise. <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/covid-19-a-social-phenomenon-requiring-diverse-expertise/>

<sup>8</sup> Michie, S., West, R., Amlot, R., Rubin, J. Slowing down the covid-19 outbreak: changing behaviour by understanding it. *BMJ Opinion* March 11<sup>th</sup> 2020. London. BMJ Publishing <<https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/03/11/slowing-down-the-covid-19-outbreak-changing-behaviour-by-understanding-it/>> London. BMJ Publishing; Harper, C.A., Satchell, L.P., Fido, D., and Latzman, R.D. 2020. Functional fear predicts public health compliance in the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1007%2Fs11469-020-00281-5>

<sup>9</sup> Brown, P. 2020. Studying COVID-19 in light of critical approaches to risk and uncertainty: research pathways, conceptual tools, and some magic from Mary Douglas. *Health, Risk and Society* 22:1, 1-14.

<sup>10</sup> See Stirling, A. and Scoones, I. 2020. COVID-19 and the futility of control in the modern world. *Issues in Science and Technology* 36:4, pp. 25-27.

<sup>11</sup> Baier, K. 1991. Types of responsibility. In P. A. French (ed.), *The Spectrum of Responsibility*. New York: St.

discourses has, indeed, become central to political disputes around COVID-19. Communicating the risks associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has departed significantly from the self-regarding messages of normal public health strategies, which emphasise what is good for an individual (e.g. ‘Quit smoking, live longer’) and identify relatively simple causal chains (e.g. ‘Smoking increases individual exposure to risks of heart disease and stroke’). Messaging strategies such as ‘Stay Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives’, or recommendations to wear face coverings in certain contexts, appeal to other-regarding virtues, animated by a concern to protect other people. These strategies rest on a variable combination of exhortation, prescription, enforcement, incitement, and incentive. They also invoke complex images of the causal relationships between individual actions and systematic outcomes. And they position people as subjects of responsible actions by virtue of serving as passive vectors of disease. The analytical focus of this project on understanding popular engagements with contentious discourses of risk and responsibility therefore will allow for the development of a contextually sensitive sense of the motivations and social relations that shape differential responses to pandemic public health strategies. More fundamentally, the analytical shift towards understanding enactments of responsibility opens up the importance of understanding the *practices* through which responses to COVID-19 develop – it shifts attention from narrow understandings of ‘compliance’ in terms of motivations, towards thicker accounts of how responses are shaped by the practical capabilities available to people.<sup>12</sup>

### *Research methodology*

This research project focuses on understanding how people respond to novel demands to act responsibly by interpreting them and translating them into practices. Extensive research methodologies such as survey research and public opinion polling are of limited use in addressing these issues. Intensive qualitative research is appropriate to this task.<sup>13</sup> However, undertaking qualitative research – e.g. face-to-face interviews, focus groups, and participant observation – is severely constrained by the practical and institutional restrictions put in place due to COVID-19. The project has been developed in close consultation with Mass Observation (MO), and will make use of MO data on the pandemic to demonstrate the potential for broadening the evidence base for understanding the social dynamics of public health responses. Mass Observation is currently collecting diaries and ‘directive responses’ that will provide invaluable data for addressing our research objectives.

MO has a long history of collecting data at times of national crisis. Its collections during and after the Second World War are central to many studies of Britain during that period.<sup>14</sup> MO’s time has come again as the UK responds to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has a proven method for collecting data without face-to-face contact: its panel of volunteer writers currently has over

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Martins Press; pp. 117–122; Barnett, C., Cloke, P., Clarke, N., and Malpass, A. 2011. *Globalizing Responsibility: The Political Rationalities of Ethical Consumption*. Wiley-Blackwell.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Reicher, S. 2020. ‘Blaming Covid rule-breakers is a distraction. support is needed, not fines.’ *Guardian* Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> November.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/nov/04/blaming-covid-rule-breakers-support-fines-lockdown>

<sup>13</sup> Sayer, A. 1992. *Method in Social Science*. Routledge.

<sup>14</sup> Hubble N (2019) ‘What can diaries tell us about how people adapt to social change?’, The British Academy Blog, [www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog](http://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog); Moss J, Clarke N, Jennings W, and Stoker G. 2016. Golden age, apathy, or stealth? Democratic engagement in Britain, 1945-1950. *Contemporary British History* 30(4): 441-462

600 members covering different age groups, genders, and regions of the UK. The collection of diaries and written responses to ‘directives’ sent to panellists every few months provides data directly relevant to our concern with understanding how people are responding to novel demands to act responsibly. The diaries provide insights into how people respond in routine practical ways. Evidence of how they respond to being positioned as responsible subjects is generated by the directive replies. MO’s method is also consistent with robust research ethics protocols regarding primary data collection involving human beings that are required by the COVID-19 emergency. The relationship between MO and its panel members is based on clear consent agreements and is in practice close, reciprocal, sustained, and caring. Panellists tend not to see requests from MO as additional obligations or stressful disturbances.<sup>15</sup>

MO responded to the COVID-19 pandemic quickly, sending out its initial request to panellists for writing before the lockdown was announced on 23 March 2020. Because the panel is permanent and MO sends out directives every three or four months, MO has the infrastructure to sustain its collection of data on life under the pandemic for as long as necessary. The data MO is collecting for the period of March to December 2020 of relevance to the proposed project is summarised below.

Mass Observation’s COVID-19 collections:

- Special COVID-19 letter. Sent March 2020 to over 600 panellists. Asked about behaviour, habits, the government’s response, media coverage. Approximately 300 responses expected by July 2020.
- COVID-19 diaries. Requested March 2020. Approximately 100 responses expected by December 2020.
- Spring directive. Sent April 2020 to over 600 panellists. Asked about political decisions, media coverage, media use, shopping experiences, cooking and eating habits. Approximately 300 responses expected by July 2020.
- 12 May ‘day diaries’. Requested May 2020. Approximately 500 responses expected by June 2020.
- Summer directive. Sent August 2020 to over 600 panellists. Wording to be confirmed. Approximately 300 responses expected by December 2020.

Our analytical approach will involve close reading by both applicants of MO materials, with a focus on evidence of how people engage with requirements to act responsibly, manage risk, and adjust routines by evaluating and anticipating what is justifiable, practical, and sustainable.<sup>16</sup> Developing existing analytical methodologies for engaging with MO materials, our analysis will focus on the ways in which people draw on existing cultural resources and also innovate new interpretative repertoires to justify to themselves and others adjustments to family relationships, domestic routines, and work and career obligations.

## Plan of Research

MO data present methodological challenges. There is the sheer volume of material. There is the unstructured character of sources like diaries, letters, and other forms of voluntary writing. There are also questions about the representativeness of the panel, which is currently balanced

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<sup>15</sup> Sheridan D. 1994. Using the mass-observation archive as a source for women’s studies. *Women’s History Review* 3(1): 101-113.

<sup>16</sup> Barnett, C., Cloke, P., Clarke, N., and Malpass, A. 2011. *Globalizing Responsibility: The Political Rationalities of Ethical Consumption*. Wiley-Blackwell.

by age but skewed towards women and South East England, and is always skewed towards particularly engaged citizens (who volunteer for a social history project).

Building on previous research by members of the research team, these methodological challenges will be addressed by sampling collections, with quotas filled for age, gender, region, and occupational category.<sup>17</sup> 60 responses per collection allow for quotas to be filled and also descriptive saturation – the most important consideration when sampling qualitative data. Materials can be coded for the cultural resources panellists draw on to shape their responses to demands, how panellists draw on these resources (actively, reflexively, critically), and the extent to which these resources are shared with other panellists and, by plausible inference, with family members, friends, work colleagues, and others beyond the panel. Finally, codes can be tested using the content analysis functions in Nvivo. The research will build on and develop this existing protocol.

Phase 1 (September 2020 to May 2021). The applicants will sample roughly 60 responses for each of the five COVID-19 collections. All 300 sampled responses will then be uploaded into Nvivo, in preparation for coding. At this point, both applicants will perform a first read-through of the responses. The aim of this first reading will be to establish the public controversies people wrote about most during the pandemic – the issues and situations that generated a sense of ‘trouble’ for respondents and through which their own habits and routines were made into explicit objects of reflection, justification, and adjustment.

Phase 2 (June 2021 to August 2021). In this phase, the project team will use Internet search tools (e.g. Nexis) to collect government communications, grey literature, and news coverage relevant to the public controversies identified in Phase 1. These texts will be analysed using discourse analysis techniques to establish how public health communications and associated coverage problematized people’s daily routines during pandemics.

Phase 3 (September 2021 to February 2022). In this phase, a second analytical reading of the MO material will be undertaken by the project team to establish how people responded to the problematizations identified in Phase 2. MO sources will be analysed to identify the interpretative repertoires through which publicly circulated imperatives to act responsibly and adjust routines are processed as problems of justification. The aim is to draw inferences about the ways in which people translate the challenges of living responsibly with risk into practical routines in everyday life, negotiating challenges such as the maintenance of personal and family relationships, supporting household provisioning, and sustaining and adjusting work routines and household financial imperatives.

Phase 4 (summer 2021 to August 2022). This phase will involve refining the analytical focus on interpretative repertoires to develop robust inferences about issues of material resourcing, practical capacity, and emotional resilience, through which people negotiated the challenges of living with COVID-19. This will inform the development of dissemination activities, including a research workshop bringing together researchers working on aspects of COVID-19 and using the Mass Observation materials.

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<sup>17</sup> Clarke N, Jennings W, Moss J, and Stoker G. 2018. *The Good Politician: Folk Theories, Political Interaction, and the Rise of Anti-Politics*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.