BEHAVIORAL ETHICS, COVID-19, AND THE WICKED PROBLEM OF LOCKDOWN FATIGUE FOR ALL OF US

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13:00-14:30
POSSIBLE SUB-TITLE TO THE WEBINAR

- A Very Novel Behavioural Approach
- To a “Very Novel and Wicked” Coronavirus Problem and Crisis
- Which Makes the Pandemic Even More Challenging and Threatening for Everybody Including for
  - Elites and the So-called Experts
For over 30 years, focused on bad opportunistic people doing bad things
- Under competition, corporate, securities, consumer protection, privacy, other laws, regulations, social norms

But was puzzled that the number of bad things taking place in the world
- Seemed to be much greater than the number of bad people
As stated during the financial crisis

- Very few corporate executives get up in the morning and ask themselves
  - How am I going to “screw” my customers today
- And yet bad things happened and
- Customer and broader “catastrophic” economic harm took place too often
  - During the crisis and at other times
Research of Feldman and colleagues on good people acting badly helps to address this puzzle in a manner that may help us to better understand human behaviour as we move from crisis to perceived and actual recovery.

At different times over the past year of the “epic” COVID-19 pandemic.
Purpose of August 2020 article was to apply insights from the behavioral ethics literature of Feldman et al (see bibliography) on
- Bounded ethicality and ethical blind spots, fading, erosion, corrosion, numbing, and fatigue
- And good people acting badly and doing unethical (and often quite stupid) things

To the behaviour of the general population during the 2020/21 pandemic

Current presentation will update and extend these findings, insights and guesses to behaviour of other actors before and since August 2020
MAJOR ARGUMENT OF BEHAVIORAL ETHICS SCHOLARS

- Promoting compliance with laws, regulations and social norms should not focus solely on
  - Relatively few opportunists, villains, bad apples
- Instead should pay greater attention to the more frequent and often more consequential
  - Situational/contextual and thoughtless wrongdoing
  - Of normally good, ethical, socially responsible, law abiding, and cooperative people who are
  - Thoughtlessly & “blindly” pursuing their self-interest and personal objectives in various ways
MAJOR ARGUMENT OF THE BEHAVIORAL LITERATURES CONT.

- Nobody is perfect and even good people can do bad things as a consequence of:
  - Social context and situation and interactions with like-minded people – doing bad things as part of a group is easier to rationalize
  - Ethical errors and lapses resulting from intuition, more unconscious and automatic thinking
  - And fast and frugal but flawed heuristics and other non-deliberative processes in system 1 of the human brain
Which they then can easily justify to themselves and others because

- “Everybody else is doing it” as well as the
- Mixed, confusing, muddled, conflicting and self-interested messages from virtually all “elites”
- Including governments and their healthcare and other professionals, politicians, business leaders, and the media (discussed later)

Justifications are made even easier

- When supposedly good and “superior” elites are reportedly doing bad & hypocritical things
SOME OF THE KEY INSIGHTS FROM THESE LITERATURES

That appear especially relevant to the COVID-19 “crisis to recovery” challenge

- The ethical blind spot and “double standard”
  - We focus on and better recall the good things we do and the misdeeds of others
  - Compared with our own wrongdoing which is more easily justified and then forgotten

- Bounded ethicality and ethical fading, corrosion, numbing and fatigue after acting responsibly over an extended period
  - Being ethical and socially responsible are hard work
Many if not most people have aversions to lying but in some group and other contexts

- Employ half-truths and incomplete lying and cheating
- Disguised and contingent/contextual lying and
- Unethical acts of omission/doing nothing (trolley dilemma) and moral wiggle-room

In order to protect their reputations and self-identities as good, ethical and law abiding people
Heterogeneous nature of real human beings

- Salience, vividness & meaning of COVID-19 information, messages, rules and experiences
- Can vary greatly between different individuals and groups leading to COVID-19 being seen as an irritant and abstraction by many people e.g. white, younger, male, middle-income plus, working at home etc.

- Also the intention versus action divide, the moral intensity and meaning of a situation and
  - Feelings of personal and social accountability
- Vary greatly depending on the individual, group and context
KEY INSIGHTS CONT (4)

In short, treating all individuals

- As the perfectly rational and informed “representative agent” of conventional economics
  - Called “economan” by some behavioral scholars -- note the intentional gender bias
- Can be especially problematic when policy makers are dealing with global pandemics &
- Related wicked problems such as climate change, expanding inequality, crisis of democracy etc.
More automatic system 1 pathways leading to questionable behaviour because

Self-control/willpower are scarce resources that

Similar to muscles can become tired and “fatigued” from over-use

Especially during extended periods of doing the right thing

Such as long lockdown periods during a global pandemic when

Many people feel that they have earned some fellowship and fun with family and friends
Depending on the person, crisis periods like COVID-19 also associated with a wider range of less positive emotional, behavioral and cognitive responses e.g.

- Increases in negativity, skepticism, cynicism, rational apathy and ignorance, and learned helplessness
- Reduced aversions to losses, risks, uncertainty, and ambiguity, leading to greater risk seeking and opportunism
- Reduced feelings of independence, autonomy, self-efficacy, self-determination, agency, empowerment, and control
KEY INSIGHTS CONCLUDED (7)

- Extended periods of crisis can also result in less confidence and trust in and expanding public concerns and criticism regarding the
  - Competence, credibility and legitimacy of governments, experts, other elites
  - And their formal institutions/laws and regulations and informal institutions/rules, norms and values
- Leading to higher risk, more reckless & socially irresponsible behaviour, by many but not all people
  - “What have we got to lose after many months of lockdown – let’s go party”
MY OTTAWA EUREKA MOMENT

- Fully realized the realism/relevance of the Feldman concept of good people acting badly when Ottawa
  - A higher income well-educated smaller urban region with relatively low population density considered to be
  - Relatively cautious, law abiding, unexciting, boring, “the town that fun forgot” -- with most public servants and high tech employees working at home during the pandemic
- Went from an early COVID-19 success story, except for the nursing homes/long-term care disaster, to an
- Ontario/Canada hot spot when the rules were relaxed in the early autumn of 2020 after the first lockdown
POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTIONS FROM RESEARCH & ARTICLE (1)

Where a behavioral ethics lens can provide guidance on a wide range of COVID-19 issues

- Continuing debates, controversies, and conflicts (some of them unresolved) on e.g.
  - Physical distancing, face masks, testing, contact tracing, COVID therapies, herd immunity, restricting foreign travel
  - Information, misinformation and conspiracy theories on COVID data e.g. whether confirmed cases & deaths are exaggerated or covered up
  - And now: immunity passports, COVID variants, and vaccine efficacy and availability: who, what, when, how many, and why
And the implications for and negative impacts on:

- Vaccine hesitancy and the rapid spread of negative information on a vaccine
- And the extrinsic and intrinsic incentives of good people to comply with Covid-19 rules, social norms and protocols
- When receiving mixed, conflicting & muddled messages (see below) and
  - Experiencing information overload and related cognitive burdens
POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTIONS CONT (3)

- Need for governments and their healthcare and other authorities and experts to better understand/address
  - The temporal, dynamic, situational, and other challenges posed by
  - Ethical fading, erosion, numbing and fatigue, and good people acting badly
- When designing, framing and implementing their future pandemic policies, rules, strategies and messages
POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTIONS CONT(4)

- Negative effects on COVID-19 rule compliance, incentives to comply, and feelings of personal and social accountability of
  - Naming, shaming and stigmatizing certain demographic and other groups (young people) & economic sectors e.g. restaurants, bars, gyms
  - As well as other nation states with different governance regimes – the stupid “Kung Flu” joke
- Which makes it even easier for good people to act badly and then justify their bad behaviour
  - “I am still behaving much better than those guys”
POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTIONS CONT (5)

- Salience and meaning of COVID-19 to different individuals, groups and locations
  - And how these differences in salience, the vividness of COVID-19 information, and lived experiences should be addressed
  - When preparing for the crisis to recovery period, conducting natural experiments in future research
  - And getting ready for the pre-crisis period before the next pandemic

- Treating COVID-19 as a wicked rather than tame problem at every stage including the
  - Very beginning in the pre-crisis period when the next pandemic is lurking on the horizon
POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTIONS CONCLUDED (6)

- Need a broader and richer array of voices at the next pandemic’s policy table that
  - Goes far beyond government officials and healthcare/pandemic experts and related elites
  - Who unfortunately share the same priorities and biases such as loss and risk aversion, the status quo bias, extreme caution – undue emphasis on the precautionary principle

- Make sure the “wisdom of the crowd” is at the next table
EXTENDING THESE INSIGHTS TO OTHER ACTORS AND CONTEXTS

Behavioral ethics and related concepts and presumptions that support a form of lockdown fatigue

- For governments and their healthcare ministries, officials and other experts and elites such as:
  - Cognitive misers with limited attention span, cognitive resources, bounded rationality & ethicality
  - Finite pool of worry concept in behavioral economics
    - Whereby other challenging and more interesting (less boring) policy issues and worries are emerging during the extended lockdown period
EXTENDING THESE INSIGHTS TO OTHER ACTORS AND CONTEXTS

- Tired of sending out and repeating (ad nauseam) the same messages on the same rules which are
  - Too often ignored after a long lockdown period because they are adding to the
  - Lockdown fatigue, skepticism, & cynicism of the general public
- Ensuring consistent messaging on all of the rules all of the time across all agencies and levels of government -- which is hard work in a democracy & especially a federation
Pandemics no joyride for sitting governments

Forces them to misallocate scarce time and resources from their real job

- Policy making, passing laws, strengthening the party base, and raising funds from party members, businesses and other elites
- In order to ensure re-election -- the laws and raising funds are of course linked
EXTENDING THESE INSIGHTS TO OTHER ACTORS AND CONTEXTS

Growing evidence over the past seven months

- Various elites, who can be categorized (perhaps charitably) as reasonably good people acting less than good at times are
- Also afflicted by lockdown fatigue such as
- Large number of politicians, high profile healthcare professionals etc. who decided “we need a break this week/month”
- And travelled south this winter & ignored international travel guidance and prohibitions
MORE EVIDENCE OF ELITE LOCKDOWN FATIGUE (1)

- Conflicts between governments and between different professional groups that
  - Appear to be more driven by self-interest than the public interest
- Governments bringing in controversial policies and programs under the cover of COVID
  - That are more political and ideological than COVID driven such as to name only a few the
    - Infamous We Charity scandal of Trudeau, and Ford’s elimination of high value conservation areas
As illustrated by the early mask fiasco, messaging from governments, healthcare and other elites to the general public has been

- Confusing, inept, lazy, flaccid, “going though the motions” and at times not credible and too often transparently self-serving

If anything got even worse as the pandemic continued -- consistent with my elite lockdown fatigue hypothesis which for elites can be

- Exhibited by expanding frustration, boredom and ennui with COVID issues and press conferences
Ontario doctor who lied about being visited by a medical friend from the UK after the more dangerous UK variant had already been identified

Restaurants, bars, other businesses that open up during full lockdown for “private parties”

Elites who are jumping the vaccination cue

Opposition critics who put forward positions that are
  - More political/ideological looking towards the next election
  - Rather than helpful to mitigating the pandemic crisis today
Suspicions that governments were failing or at least delaying the collection and reporting of unfavorable information on for example

- Negative COVID impacts on ethnic minority, immigrant and other more vulnerable populations
- Why the vaccine rollout in Canada has been a total and complete failure for three months
- Canadian COVID disaster in long term care and nursing homes

Where arguably half-truths and incomplete lying appear to dominate government statements
MORE EVIDENCE CONT (5)

- Elites repeating the same stale messages, platitudes, & half-truths despite mounting evidence to the contrary such as the federal government

- Repeating for weeks the same message that
  - All willing Canadians will be vaccinated by Sept.
  - When virtually no vaccines were entering Canada
  - And EIU and others were predicting that early 2022 would be more realistic and likely for Canada

- My response is that at age 78 I am placing bets
  - On whether I am vaccinated before turning 80; or after 80
  - When I become eligible based on current rules, “stasis” and Murphy’s Law – right now the odds are 50/50
The more important issue is that, during times of crisis, governments and other elites
Including business, academic and scientific communities and the conventional media should
Provide honesty, clarity, modesty and humility
  - Be honest about what you don’t know
  - Be transparent and clear using layperson’s language about what you do know
  - And don’t try to cover up and fake it for the many areas in-between
After all this is a “novel and wicked” coronavirus, which like all wicked problems is now mutating
MAJOR CONSEQUENCES OF ELITE LOCKDOWN FATIGUE

- May be even greater in the longer-term than lockdown fatigue among the general population
- Individuals significantly less likely to comply with the rules and guidance of governments and other elites
  - That lack credibility and legitimacy and are seen as self-serving and hypocritical
- Makes it even easier for us “good people” to justify why we are ignoring the COVID rules and protocols
  - Which could be especially problematic if the COVID variants result in a substantial third wave
MAJOR CONSEQUENCES OF ELITE LOCKDOWN FATIGUE

- Elite boredom, frustration, lockdown fatigue, poor messaging and hypocrisy
  - Are undermining public confidence and trust in liberal democracy and its institutions
- Major driver is our responses to hypocrisy which are
  - Emotionally charged, generate moral indignation, outrage and desire for revenge
  - And have major influences on the quality of our preferences, judgment, choices, and decisions
  - Including arguably compliance with COVID rules and protocols in the future
Because of ethical fading, erosion, numbing and lockdown fatigue among the general population

Governments and their healthcare and other authorities should fully expect and plan for

Considerable opposition, frustration, anger, pushback, & non-compliance from

New rules and restrictions introduced later in a crisis after long periods of lockdown & other restrictions
CONCLUDING COMMENTS

- And from the reintroduction of rules and restrictions once the recovery period has begun
  - And the jurisdiction is being forced to partially or totally shut down again
  - Because of a major surge and/or the third wave in COVID-19 cases and deaths
- This in my view is now a major risk and threat given COVID variants, potential for premature openings, and universal lockdown fatigue
CONCLUDING COMMENTS

- Negative responses to rules and restrictions
- Will be even greater when elite lockdown fatigue and hypocrisy as described above
  - Have further undermined public confidence and trust in current governments and elites and liberal democracy and its institutions more generally
  - And have provided the rest of us with even more and better excuses to ignore the hypocritical elites and their COVID and other rules and protocols
CONCLUDING COMMENTS

- Therefore, when scientists, healthcare and other experts and professions, and
- Government, political, business, civil society leaders and elites with status and power
  - Are obviously and blatantly ignoring and breaking the COVID-19 rules and other laws, regulations and social norms
  - And clearly exploiting the COVID pandemic in blind pursuit of their self-interest in order to achieve their own selfish goals
CONCLUDING COMMENTS

- They need to fully recognize that they are promoting, encouraging, and justifying non-compliance with COVID-19 rules & social norms
  - By the rest of us “normally good people” through
  - Situational wrongdoing -- context and group pressures (going along with the crowd)
  - Thoughtless wrongdoing – doing bad things on auto-pilot with little thought and reflection
  - And/or a complex and toxic mix of the two

Leading to a very vicious (non-virtuous) behavior driven wicked problem type circle
CONCLUDING COMMENTS

- “Why should I use my scarce and tired self-control and willpower
- When elites with power, status and money who should know better
- Are not using theirs, are ignoring COVID-19 and other rules and norms
- And are blatantly exploiting the pandemic in pursuit of their own selfish interests?”
Applying a behavioral ethics lens suggests that

- General population has behaved more ethically and performed much better than
- Governments and other elites with power, control and status in Canada – for example
  - Upwards of 80% of COVID deaths in Canada are in long term care and nursing homes owned and operated and/or “regulated” by gov’t (mainly through non-benign neglect)
  - Inability of government to protect other more vulnerable citizens & communities and prevent rise in inequality
  - Incredible profits enjoyed by big tech etc. over past year
  - Evidence that media coverage is more harmful than helpful
And COVID has shone a very bright light on the strengths and weaknesses of Canadian governments which in general appear to be much better at

- Spending the money of taxpayers & bondholders, and money cranked out by the Central Bank (i.e. too often the money of future generations) compared with
  - Protecting the vulnerable
  - Procurement of vaccines, protective equipment etc.
  - Providing credible and helpful information and operating vaccine booking and other websites (gov’t IT gap)
  - And designing and enforcing COVID regulations, rules and protocols that are deemed to be fair, and influence individual and social behaviour in the right direction


Robyn Urback (2021) “Canadians are left on their own to figure out ever-evolving COVID-19 vaccine policies” The Globe and Mail March 6 at https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-canadians-are-left-on-their-own-to-figure-out-ever-evolving-covid-19/?cmpid=rss -- on how muddled messaging is imperilling vaccine rollout

Now I Would Like to Hear Your Additional Comments

- On these ideas and “work in progress”
- On behavioral ethics, COVID-19, and the wicked problem of lockdown fatigue
- And I will be happy to send further material to you on request djirel@sympatico.ca