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Exceptionalism at the Time of COVID-19: Where Nationalism Meets Irrationality

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Abstract

Exceptionalism is the view that one group is better than other groups and, by virtue of its alleged superiority, is not subject to the same constraints. Here we identify national exceptionalism in the responses made by political leaders in the United States and the United Kingdom to the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. First, we observe that responses appealed to national values and national character and were marked by a denial of the severity of the situation. Second, we suggest an analogy between national exceptionalism and unrealistic optimism, i.e., people's tendency to make rosier predictions about their future than is warranted by the evidence due to illusions of superiority and control. Finally, we argue that, at the national level, exceptionalism gave rise to an assumption of invulnerability that made for slow responses to the pandemic, and at the individual level, it served as a justification of people's failures to adopt safety behaviors.

Keywords

COVID-19 – unrealistic optimism – national values – exceptionalism – national character – freedom – positive illusions – confabulation

1 Exceptionalism and the Pandemic

Broadly, exceptionalism is the idea that one group is superior to others. More specifically, it is the view that, due to its alleged superiority, a certain group is not subject to the same constraints as other groups and deserves special treatment.¹ Exceptionalism has been advocated in various contexts, such as the relationship between human and nonhuman animals, where the human species is the one regarded as superior. Here we focus on *national exceptionalism* and argue that there are some interesting connections between this phenomenon and the responses of some political leaders to the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020.

In particular, we argue that the combination of exceptionalism and nationalism can give rise to an assumption of invulnerability that makes for slow and ineffective responses to threats and justifies failures to comply with safety behavior at the individual level. There is no better example of the role of nationalist rhetoric in political decision-making than the initial responses of countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States to the COVID-19 global pandemic.² In this paper, we focus on these two examples because the prominence of those nations within the international community means that the behavior of their political leaders was more influential and more closely scrutinized, even though other countries, such as Brazil, Sweden, and Denmark, were charged with exceptionalism at the time. In the case of the UK and the US, more evidence is available of the explicit justifications provided for the policies adopted by their leaders and of the reactions to such justifications, nationally and internationally.

In sections 2 and 3, we review how political leaders in the UK and the US openly advocated the superiority of the British and American national character and appealed to national values in their initial responses to COVID-19 in early 2020, based on transcripts of their speeches, newspaper articles, and

1 On exceptionalism at the national level, see John A. Agnew, "An Excess of 'National Exceptionalism': Towards a New Political Geography of American Foreign Policy," *Political Geography Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1983): 151–166.

2 Other countries have been described as exhibiting exceptionalism—for instance Sweden, Denmark, and Brazil—but we will not consider them here. For more information about claims of exceptionalism as they apply to Sweden, see Staffan Andersson and Nicholas Aylott, "Sweden and Coronavirus: Unexceptional Exceptionalism," *Social Sciences* 9, no. 12 (2020): 232. For a discussion of Western exceptionalism in the Danish context, see Mette Hjort, "The Epiphanic Moments of COVID-19: The Revelation of Painful National Truths," *Cultural Studies* 35, nos. 2–3 (2021): 505–513. For a discussion of exceptionalism in a number of countries, including Brazil, see Martha Lincoln, "Study the Role of Hubris in Nations' COVID-19 Response," *Nature* 585 (2020): 325.

opinion pieces by experts. Similar appeals were subsequently made in the leaders' approach to the development of COVID-19 vaccines and the implementation of vaccination programs. As we shall see, there has been an almost constant reference to a *leadership role* performed by the two nations and to the *love of freedom* in appeals to the British and American national character. 'Love of freedom' should be construed both as the freedom of individual citizens to choose for themselves and the importance of supporting the free market.

In order to better understand exceptionalism as manifested in beliefs about the superiority of one's nation and its capacity to control and manage significant threats, we turn to the literature on *unrealistic optimism* in section 4. People tend to be excessively optimistic about their own skills, talents, and virtues, and about their capacity to exercise control over their lives and avoid adverse events. Exceptionalism and unrealistic optimism support a positive self-image and foster feelings of belonging, helping people to manage negative emotions and sustaining their sense of agency. However, both exceptionalism and optimism give rise to epistemically irrational beliefs and may be conducive to taking excessive risks. In particular, it has been argued that they have cost lives in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.³

Experts have argued that the idea that one's nation is better in some respect than other nations (e.g., better equipped to face a pandemic) has led to the delegitimization of medical advice and a refusal or reluctance to engage in international cooperation. This has prevented the UK and the US from learning from crisis management elsewhere and from responding in a timely and effective way to the challenges posed by the pandemic. As Cynthia Miller-Idriss said:

In the case of COVID-19, populist nationalist leaders are thus more likely than other national leaders to reject scientists' advice, attack global organizations like WHO, promote scientifically unproven and potentially harmful treatments for COVID-19 and reject scientifically proven practices like wearing masks in public. Populist nationalist anti-elite and anti-science sentiments have undoubtedly led to higher COVID-19 infection and mortality rates as a result.⁴

3 See, for instance, Danny Haiphong, "The Great Unmasking: American Exceptionalism in the Age of COVID-19," *International Critical Thought* 10, no. 2 (2020): 200–213. For the effects of so-called national narcissism on the uptake of COVID-19 vaccines, see also Aleksandra Cislak et al., "National Narcissism and Support for Voluntary Vaccination Policy: The Mediating Role of Vaccination Conspiracy Beliefs," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 24, no. 5 (2021): 701–719.

4 In Eric Taylor Woods et al., "COVID-19, Nationalism, and the Politics of Crisis: A Scholarly Exchange," *Nations and Nationalism* (2020): 1–19.

In section 5, we look at how exceptionalism has been used to justify poor responses to the pandemic by exploring the phenomenon of *confabulation*. Confabulations are explanations that are ill-grounded but offered sincerely, often to fill a knowledge gap. We suggest that confabulation was common when people were prompted to defend behavior that did not conform to the health and safety guidelines put in place to reduce the risk of infection. We notice how these confabulatory explanations appealed to the nationalistic themes of superiority and control and also to the ideals of personal autonomy and economic freedom. Similar to unrealistically optimistic beliefs, these confabulations may have had a significant psychological benefit by contributing to people's positive self-image; the very fact that people offered reasons for their behavior had some epistemic value, because it enabled their explanations to be discussed, reflected upon, and challenged. However, confabulatory explanations ultimately misrepresented potentially dangerous rule-breaking as an expression of love for freedom, contributing to people dismissing the effects of their behavior on their own safety and that of others, as well as on the containment of the virus.

To conclude, in section 6, we summarize the main points raised in the course of the discussion. Exceptionalism by itself is not a manifestation of irrationality: there may be good grounds to believe that one group (a nation in this case) is better equipped than other groups (nations) to respond to a threat. However, when claims of exceptionalism are grounded in nationalistic values and generalizations about national character, there are risks involved. These are the same risks individuals face when they unjustifiably inflate their conception of their own worth and expect not to suffer as much as others from setbacks. In the end, we focus on what the pandemic has taught us, considering what can be done differently in the future to avoid the risks of combining exceptionalism with nationalism.

2 British Exceptionalism

In February 2020, Boris Johnson, prime minister of the UK, argued that it was important that some governments in the world stood by freedom of exchange, contrasting this attitude with the “irrational” panic caused by the new coronavirus. In his speech, he indicated that the UK was such a country and compared it to a superhero ready to lead and save: “Humanity needs some government somewhere that is willing at least to make the case powerfully for freedom of exchange, some country ready to take off its Clark Kent spectacles and leap into the phone booth and emerge with its cloak flowing as the supercharged

champion, of the right of the populations of the earth to buy and sell freely among each other.”⁵

Prior to the announcement of a lockdown in March 2020, the UK refused to follow the examples of China, Taiwan, and Korea, which had been imposing restrictions on their citizens to contain the spread of the virus. A writer for the *Guardian* newspaper observed that “rather than learning from other countries and following the WHO advice, which comes from experts with decades of experience in tackling outbreaks across the world, the UK has decided to follow its own path. This seems to accept that the virus is unstoppable and will probably become an annual, seasonal infection.”⁶

On a number of occasions, Johnson explicitly suggested that British people loved freedom too much to tolerate restrictions on their movement, and so the lockdown measures adopted by other countries to contain the coronavirus could not be implemented. Commentators identified *love of freedom* as a thread in the distinct form of exceptionalism embodied by Johnson: “The myth of a unique and defining love of personal freedom as a badge of nationhood underpinned a profound reluctance to impose lifesaving restrictions on movement and social gatherings. Other people might put up with that sort of thing, but not the English. On the altar of this exceptionalism, lives have been sacrificed.”⁷ Interestingly, the UK did go into lockdown again after the first lockdown in March 2020, but the references to the country being special, unique, and second-to-none did not stop. In June 2020, Johnson invited people to enjoy the freedoms they had given up due to the COVID-19 restrictions and were now “rightly reacquiring,” including going to shops and restaurants. Tory MP Gareth Johnson described people heading to the pub as “doing their patriotic best for Britain,” asserting that going to the pub was a “great British institution” and was vital to getting the economy back on track.⁸ The day when most COVID-19 restrictions were lifted in the UK, July 19, 2021, was named Freedom Day.

5 Boris Johnson, “PM speech in Greenwich: 3 February 2020,” GOV.UK, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-in-greenwich-3-february-2020> (accessed February 1, 2021).

6 Devi Sridhar, “Britain Goes It Alone Over Coronavirus. We Can Only Hope the Gamble Pays Off,” *The Guardian*, March 15, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/15/britain-goes-it-alone-over-coronavirus-we-can-only-hope-the-gamble-pays-off>.

7 Fintan O’Toole, “Coronavirus Has Exposed the Myth of British Exceptionalism,” *The Guardian*, April 11, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/11/coronavirus-exposed-myth-british-exceptionalism>.

8 Neil Shaw, “Boris Johnson Says People Should Do ‘Patriotic Best’ and Go to Pub,” *Wales Online*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/uk-news/boris-johnson-says-people-should-18472969>.

Examples of exceptionalism could also be observed in politicians' messages concerning the new vaccines against COVID-19, mixed with the need to persuade citizens that there were some advantages to Brexit at the end of the transition period, just before the UK exited the European Union. Health secretary Matthew Hancock claimed that the UK could approve the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine for use without waiting for the European Medicines Agency. He said, "Because of Brexit, we've been able to make a decision to do this based on the UK regulator, a world-class regulator, and not go at the pace of the Europeans, who are moving a little bit more slowly."⁹ Exultant statements about the UK being the first country in the world in which a COVID-19 vaccine was authorized and made available were accompanied by additional references to the potential beneficial effects on people's freedom and the national economy; the benefit was consistently cashed out in terms of "reclaiming our lives" and "getting our lives and livelihoods back."

3 American Exceptionalism

Similar themes of exceptionalism can be found in the handling of the virus in the US. Even before the virus hit, a belief in the superiority of the nation's capacity to tackle health threats could be seen in the decisions made to undervalue and cut funding toward projects based on pandemic prediction and preparation.¹⁰ For instance, the Trump administration stopped funding a program aimed at providing alerts regarding potential pandemics a few months before COVID-19 infections started spreading in China.¹¹ The US did not act quickly in preparing to face the coronavirus, despite the fact that its severity was evident from the situation in other countries. Furthermore, in the midst of the pandemic, the decision was made to withdraw from the World Health Organization, undermining international cooperation in tracking the virus, producing vaccines, and protecting citizens. COVID-19 was described

9 Heather Stewart, Sarah Boseley, and Daniel Boffey, "Covid Vaccinations Will Begin Next Week, says Boris Johnson," *The Guardian*, December 2, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/02/covid-vaccinations-will-begin-next-week-says-boris-johnson>.

10 See Daniel Lippman, "DHS Wound Down Pandemic Models before Coronavirus Struck," *Politico*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/03/24/dhs-pandemic-coronavirus-146884>. See also Dan Diamond, "Inside America's 2-Decade Failure to Prepare for Coronavirus," *Politico*, April 11, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/04/11/america-two-decade-failure-prepare-coronavirus-179574>.

11 Oliver Milman, "Trump Administration Cut Pandemic Early Warning Program in September," *The Guardian*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/03/trump-scrapped-pandemic-early-warning-program-system-before-coronavirus>.

by President Donald Trump as being just “like the flu” and as something that one day, as a miracle, would disappear on its own.¹² Thus, Trump and the US appeared to be completely unprepared and incognizant of the seriousness of COVID-19 and the harm it would bring, optimistically assuming it would be easy to tackle.

Moreover, during the pandemic, Trump keenly emphasized the superiority of the US in responding to the virus, with no regard for the reality of how the country was actually faring in comparison to other nations. He claimed that the country was leading the way and even providing support to other countries: “I spoke with Angela Merkel today. I spoke with Prime Minister Abe of Japan. I spoke with many of the leaders over the last four or five days. And so many of them, almost all of them—I would say all of them; not everybody would want to admit it—but they all view us as the world leader, and they’re following us.”¹³ Talking about ventilators, Trump claimed that the US was in a position to help other countries: “We have a very big stockpile right now. And we’re building it bigger and we’re helping a lot of other countries. Nigeria—we just sent a thousand. We have various—various countries: France, Spain. We have a lot going to Italy. We have a lot going to a different—probably 15, 18 countries. They’re calling us. We had the capacity to do this; nobody else did.”¹⁴

Trump’s boasting reflects the general tendency for the US to present itself as the model for other countries to learn from, rather than being a country that looks to others. For instance, back in 2011, Mitt Romney described the US as having the strongest economy and the strongest military in the world. He said that “God did not create this country to be a nation of followers,”¹⁵ and he too suggested that the US should lead the rest of the world. This idea that the

12 See Dan Mangan, “Trump Dismissed Coronavirus Pandemic Worry in January—Now Claims He Long Warned about It,” *CNBC*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/17/trump-dissed-coronavirus-pandemic-worry-now-claims-he-warned-about-it.html>. See also Tommy Beer, “All The Times Trump Compared Covid-19 to the Flu, Even After He Knew Covid-19 Was Far More Deadly,” *Forbes*, September 10, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tommybeer/2020/09/10/all-the-times-trump-compared-covid-19-to-the-flu-even-after-he-knew-covid-19-was-far-more-deadly/?sh=672450cdf9d2>.

13 “Remarks by President Trump in Meeting with Republican Members of Congress,” May 8, 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-meeting-republican-members-congress/>.

14 “Remarks by President Trump During Tour of Ford Rawsonville Components Plant,” May 21, 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-tour-ford-rawsonville-components-plant/>.

15 Michael McGough, “God Made America, According to Romney,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 7, 2011, <https://opinion.latimes.com/opinionla/2011/10/god-made-america-according-to-romney.html>.

US does not follow but leads, often emphasized by Trump, has led many commentators to view the nation's response to the virus as an act of "hubris."¹⁶ The message is that US political leaders failed to grasp the seriousness of the problem and delayed taking action, and as a result their response was inadequate.

Trump often appealed to national identity and national values when downplaying the effects of the virus and the effectiveness of the required provisions. Rather than referring to expert advice or scientific research to justify his decisions, Trump appealed instead to American citizens' love of freedom. For instance, with regard to closing the country's borders, Trump said: "I don't think the [American] people are going to stand for it. This is a country that's meant to be open, not closed."¹⁷ In promoting minimally invasive legislation for containing and tackling the virus, Trump appealed to the value of economic freedom.¹⁸ The result was that the only area in which the US led the rest of the world was in the infection rates and number of deaths due to COVID-19.¹⁹ Testing was plagued with setbacks and challenges, during which the virus continued to spread quickly,²⁰ and yet Trump claimed that the US tested more citizens than all other countries put together and furthermore utilized the "highest quality" test.²¹ It was patently false that the US tested more than all other countries combined, and the accuracy and quality of the tests administered worldwide were comparable.²² Trump also claimed that his administration had "taken the most aggressive action in modern history to prevent the spread of this illness in the United States."²³ This statement was obviously in tension with his initial dismissal of the pandemic, and again emphasized the superiority of the US in

16 See, for instance, Emily Tamkin, "Donald Trump's Hubris in the Face of COVID-19 Pandemic is Pure Americana," *New Statesman*, October 7, 2020, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2020/10/donald-trump-s-hubris-face-covid-19-pandemic-pure-americana>. See also Uri Friedman, "Why America Resists Learning From Other Countries," *Atlantic*, May 14, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/05/coronavirus-could-end-american-exceptionalism/61605/>.

17 "Remarks by President Trump During Tour of Ford Rawsonville Components Plant."

18 Matthew P. Crayne and Kelsey E. Medeiros, "Making Sense of Crisis: Charismatic, Ideological, and Pragmatic Leadership in Response to COVID-19," *American Psychologist* 76, no. 3 (2020): 462–474. doi.org/10.1037/amp0000715.

19 See Haiphong, "The Great Unmasking."

20 Sara Murray, Nick Valencia, Jeremy Diamond, and Scott Glover, "How Coronavirus Testing Fumbles Squandered Valuable Time," *CNN*, April 20, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/20/politics/coronavirus-testing-trump-administration-response-invs/index.html>.

21 Reality Check Team, "Coronavirus: President Trump's Testing Claims Fact-Checked," *BBC*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-52493073>.

22 Haiphong, "The Great Unmasking."

23 Mangan, "Trump Dismissed Coronavirus Pandemic Worry in January."

the face of mounting evidence that the national response and handling of the pandemic was inadequate and had catastrophic results.

The sense of superiority and the exceptionalism seen in the United States' response can be linked to historical nationalist values of liberty and freedom, just like the response by British political leaders. In both countries, the very same values have long been used to maintain systems that disadvantage many of their citizens, who as a result lack access to basic rights, including safe housing and healthcare. In the context of the threats posed by COVID-19, the emphasis on individual freedom led to an 'economy first' approach that caused immense harm and loss of human lives.²⁴

4 Optimism about Health

Why do world leaders invoke exceptionalism in justifying their decisions, and why do many of their citizens follow them in believing that their country is an exception to the norm or superior to other countries? It is possible that the exceptionalism exhibited by political leaders is a means of propaganda, a show of strength and confidence, but we need a better understanding of the wider popularity and considerable persistence of exceptionalist attitudes and arguments across the rest of the population.²⁵ In this section, we want to draw some analogies between exceptionalism and unrealistic optimism, based on the fact that both tendencies can be used to justify denialist responses to a crisis.

It is common for agents to believe that something undesirable will not happen to them even when the undesirable event (such as a redundancy, serious illness, or divorce) is a frequent occurrence in their population or culture. This tendency is known as the *optimism bias* or *unrealistic optimism*.²⁶ Maybe the most cited example in the literature is that of divorce: in Western countries

24 Crayne and Medeiros write, "[T]he evidence suggests that countries led by more pragmatic leaders may have better long-term health outcomes from their response to COVID-19 than those with charismatic or ideological leaders. [...] In contrast, attempts to understate the pandemic's seriousness and appeals for economic freedom that have been noted in Brazil are reflected also in the approach of leaders from the United States." "Making Sense of Crisis," 9.

25 This point is often raised in the literature on conspiracy theories: the motives of those who propagate the theories may not coincide with the motives of those who endorse the theories. See, e.g., Neil Levy, "Is Conspiracy Theorising Irrational?," *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8, no. 10 (2019): 65–76, <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-4wW>.

26 See Anneli Jefferson, Lisa Bortolotti, and Bojana Kuzmanovic, "What Is Unrealistic Optimism?," *Consciousness & Cognition* 50 (2017): 3–11.

divorce rates are extremely high (close to 50 percent), but when people are asked what they think their chance of getting a divorce is, they estimate it to be 1 or 2 percent.²⁷ They know that divorce is common, they just don't think it will happen to them.²⁸ Even 'experts,' such as divorce lawyers, are optimistic about their own marriages.

Another common tendency for agents is to believe that they are better than their peers in a number of domains including specific skills (such as driving or academic performance), general qualities (such as attractiveness and intelligence), and even moral character (such as generosity and altruism). This is known as the *illusion of superiority* or the *better-than-average effect*. There are several hypotheses about how the illusion emerges and is maintained: people tend to creatively interpret negative feedback and selectively remember successes while forgetting failures, and this can begin to explain why they may think of themselves as a better-than-average driver even after being involved in several car accidents, or why the overwhelming majority of academics regard their own work as better than average.

The optimism bias and illusion of superiority are often accompanied by a third, widespread bias, the *illusion of control*. Agents believe that they can control events that are independent of them and on which they exercise limited or no influence. Examples abound: in a betting situation, people overestimate their chances of winning when they themselves deal the cards or throw the dice; at pedestrian crossings, people assume that the green light is an effect of their pressing the button, whereas in many cases the lights follow a pre-established pattern.²⁹

It is likely that the three biases interact with one another. Take Jei's belief that she is better than her peers in a number of domains and her conviction that she can control external events. Such attitudes will contribute to Jei's prediction that her future will not include adverse events. This is because

27 Tali Sharot, "The Optimism Bias," *Current Biology* 21, no. 23 (2011): R941–R945.

28 Some researchers have argued that this optimism is simply a manifestation of the person's commitment to the success of their relationship and to their romantic partners. What if the unrealistic optimism literature unveils aspirations instead of biased beliefs? See Owen Flanagan, "'Can Do' Attitudes: Some Positive Illusions Are Not Misbeliefs," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 32, no. 6 (2009): 519–520. This is an interesting perspective, and it can be shown to apply to some of the attitudes involved. However, from our point of view, what matters is not whether the attitude is a belief as such, but whether it has an impact on decision-making and drives action. As unrealistically optimistic attitudes do have pervasive effects on people's behaviors, their examination is an important contribution to a more thorough understanding of people's cognition and agency.

29 Stuart Vyse, *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

she believes that she can actively avoid adversities. The health domain is of particular relevance to our discussion: suppose that without any particular evidence to support her conviction, Jei comes to believe that she has a better immune system than average and that, if she adopts some safety behaviors, she can avoid contracting the virus altogether. As a result, in the context of a global pandemic, Jei confidently predicts that she will not catch COVID-19. This type of reasoning has been observed in other health contexts, including among breast cancer patients in remission who overestimate their capacity to control their health in the future and prevent the cancer from returning.³⁰

How should we evaluate Jei's positive illusions? On the one hand, her prediction that she will not contract the virus is excessively optimistic, and her beliefs of superiority and control are epistemically irrational, in the sense that they are not robustly supported by the evidence at her disposal. On the other hand, her rosy prediction and optimistic beliefs have undeniable psychological benefits. Minimally, they can contribute to Jei's ability to successfully manage her own stress and anxiety in relation to the pandemic. More importantly, they can sustain her motivation to engage in those safety behaviors (washing her hands often, wearing a mask, maintaining social distance) that will protect herself and others from the virus.³¹ If Jei has an unrealistically optimistic belief about the extent to which her safety behaviors can protect her from infection, she will comply with government advice enthusiastically and even encourage other people to do so. This will support her coping response more effectively than a fatalistic belief ("Nobody can avoid infection"), which may lead to disengagement.

But optimistically biased beliefs do not always result in coping effectively with threats and increased motivation in pursuing beneficial lifestyle changes; they could result in a denial of the threat. In that case, they may lift one's mood significantly in the short term, because the threat magically disappears, but they are conducive to risk-taking behavior with negative consequences for the individual and the community. If Jei convinces herself that she is immune to the virus, this may lead her to believe that adopting safety behaviors is not required. As a consequence, she might stop following the government's advice

30 Shelley E. Taylor, "Adjustment to Threatening Events: A Theory of Cognitive Adaptation," *American Psychologist* 38 (1983): 1161–1173.

31 Lisa Bortolotti, Magdalena Antrobus, and Ema Sullivan-Bissett, "The Epistemic Innocence of Optimistically Biased Beliefs," in *Reasoning: Essays on Theoretical and Practical Thinking*, ed. Magdalena Balcerak Jackson and Brendan Balcerak Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), ch. 12.

to work from home when possible to reduce the spread of the virus and begin commuting to her office daily, putting herself and others at risk.

Attitudes toward the pandemic have already been explained by reference to unrealistic optimism:³² researchers studying the attitudes of university students from three different countries (Poland, Iran, and Kazakhstan) at the time of the first and second waves of COVID-19 found that unrealistic optimism about the possibility of contracting the virus was a widespread and robust result.³³ Interestingly, the researchers found that medical professionals in Poland who had medical knowledge about COVID-19 and dealt with the consequences of the virus in their daily lives were not unrealistically optimistic. Further studies have confirmed the pervasiveness of unrealistic optimism in several European countries prior to the first wave,³⁴ when the risk of catching the virus was dramatically underestimated:

As early as January 2020, renowned epidemiologists like Gabriel Leung or Marc Lipsitch had highlighted the threat of a global pandemic. [...] They announced that more than 40–70% of the world population could be infected within the end of the year. However, survey data collected in February 2020 during the early phases of the outbreak in France, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland showed that a large majority of citizens estimated their risk of catching the virus to be around 1%.³⁵

The optimism bias may also incur ‘systemic’ costs. In her classic 2011 paper on the optimism bias, Tali Sharot argues convincingly that individual biases may be responsible for group behavior. In particular, she mentions the crisis of the financial market in 2008:

The harmful influences of over-optimism likely extend to the collective behaviour of groups. For instance, the optimism bias has been named by

32 See Sinué Salgado and Dorte Berntsen, “It Won’t Happen to Us: Unrealistic Optimism Affects COVID-19 Risk Assessments and Attitudes Regarding Protective Behaviour,” *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2021.07.006>.

33 Wojciech Kulesza et al., “We Are Infected with the New, Mutated Virus UO-COVID-19,” *Archives of Medical Science* 17, no. 6 (2021): 1–10, doi:10.5114/aoms.2020.99592.

34 Hugo Botteman et al., “Does the Coronavirus Epidemic Take Advantage of Human Optimism Bias?,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020), <https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.02001>.

35 Jocelyn Raude et al., “Are People Excessively Pessimistic about the Risk of Coronavirus Infection?,” *PsyArXiv*, March 8, 2020, doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/364qj.

several economists as one of the core causes of the financial downfall of 2008. Unrealistic expectation of individuals, financial analysts and government officials that the market would continue growing, despite evidence to the contrary, likely contributed to the collapse.³⁶

Sharot considers several factors that can turn adaptive versions of individual optimism into causes of catastrophic events for groups or society at large. First, optimism bias is likely to increase with uncertainty (and both the oscillation of financial markets and the circumstances of a new global pandemic are to some extent difficult to predict, resulting in uncertainty). Second, the globalized nature of how information spreads, due to the internet and social media, means that an individual has the potential to communicate with (and influence) many more people. As Sharot puts it, “[I]ndividuals’ biases that are inconsequential on their own can accumulate together to produce a large bubble.”³⁷

A similar transition from adaptive individual bias to negative systemic effects has been observed with respect to the problem of climate change inaction. When reviewing various factors that impact people’s responses to climate problems, we find that people who score higher in optimism bias are also less concerned about the environment.³⁸ The case of climate change is especially interesting because of the time lag between action/response and outcomes. In some situations (such as the interval between taking an exam and receiving the results), people tend to ‘shelve’ their optimism when the ‘moment of truth’ comes, so they can prepare themselves for the outcome and avoid disappointment.³⁹ In the case of climate change, however, the moment of truth is too far into the future and the reality check does not apply.

This discussion has wide-ranging implications for attitudes toward the pandemic. The delay between action and outcomes is not as great as in the case of climate change inaction, because we can observe or infer the effects of a lockdown or a vaccination program on infection rates before too long. But there is still a significant time lag, and this means that any commitment to an action or response in the hope that it will have the desired effects requires something like a leap of faith. That is why excessive optimism can still lead people to

36 Sharot, “Optimism Bias.”

37 Ibid., 944.

38 Sabine Pahl et al., “Perceptions of Time in Relation to Climate Change,” *WIREs Climate Change* 5, no. 3 (2014): 375–388.

39 Kate Sweeny, Patrick Carroll, and James A. Shepperd, “Is Optimism Always Best? Future Outlooks and Preparedness,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 15 (2006): 302–306.

ignore risks, underestimate the negative effects of inaction, and delay decisions that are beneficial in terms of pandemic outcomes but are economically or psychologically costly.

What are the analogies, then, between a country's exceptionalism and an agent's optimism? Nationalist values play the same role as self-enhancing beliefs in the unrealistic optimism phenomenon. Predictions about the future are unrealistically optimistic when the desired event requires a skill or talent that people mistakenly attribute to themselves (self-enhancement). If Sylvia thinks she is an excellent driver but is in fact deceived about her driving skills, her prediction that she will easily win the World Rally Championship is unrealistically optimistic. What about exceptionalism and the capacity to respond effectively to threats? When we believe that people and institutions from a given country are better equipped than others to deal with threats because of their history and culture, we may be right. There are cases in which a country's previous experience can confer advantages in dealing with threats: the fact that Taiwan's history involved a SARS outbreak, and that many Asian countries were already accustomed to mask-wearing, did put them in a better position when attempting to reduce COVID-19 infection rates.

But suppose that a country does not possess—or possesses to a lower degree than other countries—those virtues needed to respond effectively to a threat, even though such virtues are commonly associated with its national character. In that case, the prediction that, based on those virtues, the country's response to the threat will be effective—or more effective than that of other countries—is unrealistically optimistic. In the context of a pandemic, if a country falsely believes that it has a better health system than other countries, then the prediction that it will cope better with a health threat is unrealistically optimistic.

5 The Role of Exceptionalism in Confabulation

As we have seen, being unrealistically optimistic about one's chances of contracting COVID-19 and suffering significantly from it affects the actions and precautions one subsequently takes. On the national scale, the UK and the US were slow to react to the encroaching pandemic despite the fact that the damage and harm that it was causing in other European countries, such as Italy and Spain, was quite clear. At the individual level, many citizens did not update their beliefs about the likelihood of contracting COVID-19 despite the evidence that the virus was spreading quickly within their own countries, and they continued to underestimate the seriousness of the infection despite evidence

of significant health consequences. Such behavioral tendencies reflect the irrationality of unrealistic optimism; beliefs with desirable content are more resistant to change and less responsive to new contrary evidence than beliefs with undesirable content. Many went on with their daily lives despite the risks, continuing to meet with others, visit shops and gyms, and attend large gatherings without wearing masks or socially distancing. How can we explain reckless behavior despite the mounting evidence of the threats posed by COVID-19?

A leading factor in accounting for these behaviors is the prevalence of confabulation. When people explain their own behavior, they tend to confabulate: they come up with explanations and justifications of their choices and actions despite having a knowledge gap with regard to what actually influenced their behavior.⁴⁰ Crucially, they have no intention to deceive others when they do so and sincerely believe their own reports about what has driven their behavior. But they are motivated to give explanations that present themselves as rational decision-makers and preserve and emphasize their positive self-representations,⁴¹ so they are less likely to consider explanations that may be more truthful but tell a less flattering story about themselves. In short, confabulations are ill-grounded explanations, so they often misrepresent the world and do not accurately capture the actual factors that are efficacious in determining people's behavior.

The influence of unrealistic optimism on people's behavior is a factor that people are unlikely to include in their explanations of why they acted and chose in the ways that they did, because they may not know how biases affect decision-making. Moreover, even if they did, acknowledging the influence of a bias would not cohere with their self-representations as reasonable agents. When people had to explain and justify behavior-flouting rules, they offered explanations such as, "If I get the virus, I get it. Even if I get ill, at least it's over and done with." This kind of thinking manifests unwarranted optimism: it disregards the possibility of suffering serious long-term symptoms of COVID-19, the possibility of death, and the possibility of passing the virus on to more vulnerable people. Other factors, such as being generally self-centered and irresponsible, were

40 On confabulation and consumer choice, see Richard E. Nisbett and Timothy D. Wilson, "Telling More Than We Can Know: Verbal Reports on Mental Processes," *Psychological Review* 84, no. 3 (1977): 231–259. On confabulation in moral reasoning, see Jonathan Haidt, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgement," *Psychological Review* 108, no. 4 (2001): 814–834. On confabulation and justifying choices, see Lars Hall et al., "Magic at the Marketplace: Choice Blindness for the Taste of Jam and the Smell of Tea," *Cognition* 117, no. 1 (2010): 54–61.

41 Ema Sullivan-Bissett, "Implicit Bias, Confabulation, and Epistemic Innocence," *Consciousness and Cognition* 33 (2015): 548–560.

probably efficacious in bringing this behavior about, at least in some instances, but again were not included in people's explanations of their own behavior. As we saw, the illusion of superiority applies to the domain of moral character as well, and people tend to describe themselves as more generous and altruistic than is warranted by the evidence, or more virtuous in general than the average person. This suggests that people may not have been fully aware of their own selfish motivations for action (or inaction). Even if they had become aware of their genuine motivation at some level, confabulation may have intervened, protecting and projecting positive self-images.

Exceptionalism may have been exactly what people needed to provide alternative explanations and justifications for their behavior—explanations and justifications that were ultimately ill-grounded but protective of a positive self-image. As we saw, the core of an exceptionalist belief regarding a nation is the idea that one's nation is an exception to the norm, where the anomaly is cashed out in terms of superiority (e.g., an increased capacity to control and respond effectively to threats). Exceptionalism was a recurrent theme in post-hoc justifications provided by people who were prompted to defend risky behavior or behavior that flouted the rules. Often, the exceptionalist justifications offered were based on the person's political and national identity and on their love for freedom. For example, anti-maskers in Florida defended their stance with references to religion, their "God-given right" to breathe, a rejection of communism, and an endorsement of democratic values, stating their case as "we the people."⁴² Similarly, those who snubbed newly implemented regulations aimed at combatting COVID-19 often justified themselves along these lines: "This is a free country, the government can't mandate this extent of control."

Interestingly, these defenses often paralleled the themes of exceptionalism based on national identity emerging in Johnson's and Trump's speeches. As we saw in sections 2 and 3, both leaders emphasized the values of freedom, liberalism, and the free market as cornerstones of the national image in the UK and the US. The national identities constructed and portrayed by world leaders influence citizens' personal identities, in that the same themes are adopted in characterizing positive self-representations and are then featured in confabulatory explanations and justifications of rule-flouting. National identities and associated values become available as a source of personal identities and values, and thus are more likely to be featured in people's self-interpretations. For example, American citizens may draw on American values of economic freedom and personal liberties as God-given rights to defend their choice to attend

42 "Florida's Anti-Maskers Are Taking a Stand," *Yahoo News*, June 26, 2020, <https://news.yahoo.com/floridas-anti-maskers-taking-stand-231500975.html>.

gatherings despite the pandemic. They may believe that they are an exception *because they are American*, and Americans continue with ‘business as usual’ no matter what and do not learn from other countries but teach them instead.

The explanations and justifications people offer for personal behaviors that appeal to national values are epistemically problematic in several ways: (a) they tend to underestimate the severity of the threat; (b) they do not offer the whole picture of the motivation behind rule-flouting behavior, downplaying selfish interests, lack of responsibility, loss of patience, and recklessness; and (c) they may circumvent the need for people to better understand their own behavior.⁴³

There are clear dangers and costs associated with confabulation that apply also in this context. On some accounts, confabulations consist of *representative reasons* given for agents’ behavior, as opposed to the specific reasons that gave rise to it.⁴⁴ Representative reasons are reasons that are, by the standards of that society and culture, perceived as good and sensible reasons for a given behavior. In Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson’s classic study on confabulation in consumer choice, research participants believed that they were involved in a customer survey. They were asked to choose among pairs of stockings and then they were asked the reason for their choice. According to the experimenters, most people chose the pair of stockings on their right-hand side due to a robust priming effect determined by the position of the items. However, research participants explained their choice of stockings by offering representative reasons for their choices (“I chose these stockings because they are softer/brighter”), that is, reasons that are widely perceived to be sensible ones in the context of consumer choice (such as preferred texture or color). In the experiment, the pairs of stockings to choose from did not differ in texture or color, yet this did not stop research participants from using representative reasons in the explanations of their choices.⁴⁵

Similarly, culture and national identity could play a role in determining the representative reasons for certain behaviors in that culture or nation. In other words, the exceptionalism displayed by political leaders makes nationalistic reasons for actions widely available and salient, enabling their citizens

43 As we shall discuss shortly, the actual reasons why people act and choose the way they do may not always be available to them. However, motivated beliefs may still be relevant here, because among the reasons that are available for explaining and justifying behavior, people tend to select those that depict them in a positive light.

44 Nisbett and Wilson, “Telling More Than We Can Know.”

45 For a discussion of the experiment and its significance in the philosophical literature, see Lisa Bortolotti, “Stranger than Fiction: Costs and Benefits of Everyday Confabulation,” *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 9, no. 2 (2018): 227–249.

to deploy them as representative reasons for their own behavior. In the case of controversial behaviors that people are particularly keen to defend from challenges, these ‘ready-made’ and highly regarded justificatory reasons are likely to be used. Confabulations that make use of reasons that are consistent with one’s national identity and embody national values are less likely to be scrutinized and criticized by peers, with the effect that even dangerous and irresponsible behavior is seemingly condoned and can go unchallenged for longer. In contexts where national ideals are overvalued and may not always receive the scrutiny they deserve, they become a powerful source for narratives used to justify behavior. This prevents the potentially hypocritical mismatch between values and behavior from becoming apparent: the refusal to engage in safety behaviors is seen as a consequence of valuing individual freedom for oneself and one’s fellow citizens, and not as an open disregard for one’s own and one’s fellow citizens’ well-being in the face of an increased risk of infection.

Confabulatory explanations that appeal to national character and national values, or to personal values that are consistent with national character and national values, also justify behavior in a way that fends off potential allegations of unrealistic optimism. It is not excessively optimistic to believe that British and American citizens will not suffer from COVID-19 as much as citizens of other countries because exceptionalism says that the UK and the US are better placed to face the pandemic. Similarly, it is not unreasonable to avoid lockdowns and refuse to wear masks because exceptionalism says that in the UK and the US freedom is paramount and cannot be compromised—“it is in the country’s DNA,” and no threat is serious enough to justify a limitation of that freedom.

When people interpret their behavior in a way that is consistent with a positive self-image but distorts reality, confabulation incurs various epistemic costs. Scientific evidence is dismissed, the world is misrepresented, psychological factors actually driving behavior are ignored, and potential hypocrisy is masked. In section 4 we compared situations in which unrealistic optimism is fruitful and situations in which it is costly. In the case of COVID-19, the seriousness of the threat was minimized in a way that led some countries to remain underprepared and prompted some political leaders to reject expert advice on national policy. At the individual level, effects included a mistrust of scientists and a refusal to comply with health and safety recommendations. In sum, reckless and harmful behavior continued because people justified it to themselves in line with highly valued personal and national ideals, putting lives at risk and weakening attempts to control the spread of the virus.

So, confabulation means that some people found ready-made justifications for their irresponsible behavior in the exceptionalist rhetoric of their leaders.

However, the picture need not be so bleak. We should also consider the positive aspects of confabulating. Just as unrealistic optimism can lead either to effectively coping with a threat or to denying it altogether, confabulation can have positive as well as negative effects. Why do people confabulate? Confabulation is driven by a fundamental need people have to explain their behavior to themselves and to others, and to share the reasons for their actions and choices with their peers in a social interaction.⁴⁶ However, people cannot explain their behavior on the basis of causal mechanisms that are unknown to them, and cannot share information that is not available. Thus, in some circumstances, an accurate, well-grounded story about why people think, act, and choose the way they do is completely or partially unavailable to them. If agents' behavior is due to implicit biases or environmental cues of which they are unaware, those biases and cues cannot appear in the explanations they offer for their behavior. This means that, sometimes, the alternative to confabulating the reasons for one's behavior is not to provide an accurate explanation for it, because, as we have seen, agents may not have access to the factors influencing or determining their behavior.⁴⁷ Rather, the alternative is to provide no explanation at all, or to reply "I don't know" to questions about why one acts or chooses the way one does. This response would cut short the process of seeking understanding and inquiring about reasons or causes with others. Although the widespread nature of confabulation reveals a lack of insight into exactly why people behave the way they do, it also shows that people have a constant motivation to gain that insight. If they had no interest in understanding their behavior, this would be more disturbing than confabulating, especially when behavior can have such critical and far-reaching consequences.

It is epistemically valuable to be motivated to find explanations for one's behavior and to share those explanations in social interactions. If people had no interest in understanding, explaining, and justifying their behavior, then they would feel no pressure to give reasons for rejecting masks, social distancing, lockdown restrictions, and so on, and their reasons could not be available for personal reflection and for external scrutiny. Only when explanations are offered and shared can they be taken apart and assessed, and ultimately endorsed or rejected. When people engage in reason-giving practices, their

46 Sophie Stammers, "Confabulation, Explanation, and the Pursuit of Resonant Meaning," *Topoi* 39, no. 1 (2020): 177–187. For a discussion of the social ends of cognitive functions, see Carolyn Parkinson and Thalia Wheatley, "The Repurposed Social Brain," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 19, no. 3 (2015): 133–141.

47 Lisa Bortolotti, *The Epistemic Innocence of Irrational Beliefs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), ch. 3.

attention can be drawn to the coherence and overall plausibility of the reasons they offer. For example, their attention can be drawn to the fact that behavior endangering their own and other people's lives may not actually embody the values of personal freedom and autonomy.

6 Lessons from the Pandemic

In this paper, we discussed the role of exceptionalism in justifying slow responses by some countries to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and moved on to draw some analogies between exceptionalism as a feature of nations and unrealistic optimism as a widespread bias in human cognition. We remarked how optimism has both costs and benefits for people who make excessively positive self-assessments and predictions about their own future, and how it turns bad when it leads people to deny the seriousness of a threat rather than motivating them to mount an effective response to it.

Exceptionalism has not just served as an alibi used by political leaders to justify ineffective policies for the containment of COVID-19, but has also influenced the way individual citizens justify their rule-flouting behavior when refusing to conform to safety recommendations and guidelines. When asked why they were not using masks or staying at home, people often referred to the same ideals of superiority and freedom that their political leaders had endorsed. It is a good thing that people have a strong need to interrogate themselves about why they behave the way they do and to share their explanations with others. However, some of the factors responsible for human behavior are unavailable, either because people are unaware of their own biases or because they are motivated to ignore such biases. In those instances, people may explain their behavior in ways that are ill-grounded and overly flattering.

Given our discussion of the role of exceptionalism, the costs and benefits of optimism, and the inevitability of confabulation, can anything be done to avoid in the future the mistakes that were made in tackling the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic? The reactions to the health emergency from nations and the public alike have highlighted how national values, unrealistic optimism, and confabulation have pervasive effects on national policy and individual behavior. At the personal level, the likeliness that reason-giving will aid self-understanding in the long run rests on agents' humility about their self-regulatory practices. It is important for agents to recognize that they are fallible and might not always be living up to their own ideals or to the political and national values they are committed to. Having such humility will also bring a healthier and more open attitude toward expert advice and toward the

feedback agents receive from others on their own behavior. Indeed, the need to believe that one has a special claim to knowledge about a certain event and the lack of epistemic humility have been identified by cognitive scientists as factors contributing to the adoption and spread of conspiracy theories and the general mistrust of scientific expertise.⁴⁸

Further, it is possible to turn agents' hardwired optimism into a force for good, if realistic predictions from experts are taken seriously and agents are empowered to think that they can control *something*, even in scenarios of great uncertainty. For instance, they can control their own behavior and make their own contributions to efforts to contain and overcome threats. Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, was praised for doing exactly this.⁴⁹ In her communications with the public, she regularly referred to scientific findings while also allowing for some hope and optimism. For example, she stated that "It is true that the latest numbers . . . as high as they are, very cautiously give a bit of hope. However, it is definitely too soon to recognize a definite trend, and it is way too soon to start loosening any of the strict rules we have imposed on ourselves."⁵⁰ Cautious optimism can bolster preparations prior to facing a threat, rather than turning into a denial of its seriousness.

Merkel was also praised for taking heed of other countries and their successes in tackling the virus.⁵¹ In particular, she recognized the history and prior knowledge of South Korea, given that the country had tackled a different coronavirus five years before. The value of international cooperation has proven critical in addressing the pandemic. At the level of national values and national character, it would be beneficial to have a more constructive set of values to identify with—values that emphasize the importance of cooperation and reserve a role for scientific expertise. This attitude has already been explicitly advocated in discussions about the rollout of the vaccine: "Global cooperation on vaccine allocation would be the most efficient way to disrupt the spread of the virus. It would also spur economies, avoid supply chain disruptions, and prevent unnecessary geopolitical conflict. Yet if all other

48 Roland Imhoff and Pia K. Lamberty, "Too Special to Be Duped: Need for Uniqueness Motivates Conspiracy Beliefs," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 47, no. 6 (2017): 724–734, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2265>.

49 Crayne and Medeiros, "Making Sense of Crisis."

50 "Angela Merkel Sees 'A Bit of Hope,' But Keeps Coronavirus Lockdown in Place," *DW News*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/angela-merkel-sees-bit-of-hope-but-keeps-coronavirus-lockdown-in-place/a-53010223>.

51 David Rising, "Germany Praised for Handling of Covid-19," *Yahoo News*, April 23, 2020, <https://news.yahoo.com/germany-praised-handling-covid-19-044913509.html>.

vaccine-manufacturing countries are being nationalists, no one will have an incentive to buck the trend.”⁵²

Optimism with regard to oneself and exceptionalism with regard to one's nation do not inspire successful responses to a crisis unless the values attributed to oneself and one's nation include epistemic humility and cooperation. Without the uncritical belief that one is superior to others and an exception to the norm, natural optimism can be more conducive to effectively coping with difficulties and embracing safety behaviors, and the inevitable confabulations are less likely to disguise reckless rule-breaking or unscrupulous self-interest as a defense of freedom.

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52 Thomas J. Bollyky and Chad P. Bown, “The Tragedy of Vaccine Nationalism,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-07-27/vaccine-nationalism-pandemic>.