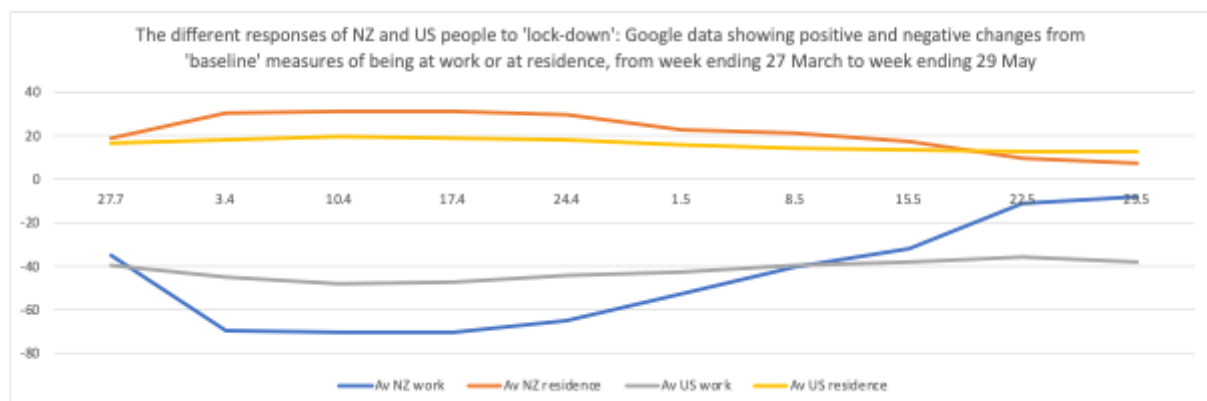


One personality dimension makes a big difference in how a country responds to crisis

New Zealand and the United States are led by very different people. Jacinda Ardern, the world's youngest woman country leader contrasts with the older male Donald Trump. There are many other differences, but we want to zoom in on the personality dimension of agreeableness. One of these leaders is notable for it, the other is perceived as uniquely low on it. The psychological research suggests that this personality difference is a significant factor in the very different response of each nation to the threat of Covid-19.

We are two naturally biased New Zealand organizational psychologists fascinated about what makes for effective leadership. We will attempt to provide data that guides our assertions – so that you can see our logic.

Social distancing is what you do when an incurable new infectious disease arrives. How effective were these leaders in encouraging their people to do the safe thing? Incredibly, Google data (reported on their Community Mobility Reports^[1]) can tell us if people stayed home when urged to do so. The response of New Zealanders and Americans was quite different.



Over the 10 weeks from the end of March to the end of May New Zealanders went hard into staying home from work (achieving a 70% reduction from baseline over the 4 weeks to mid-April). From mid-May, they got back to work faster. Fewer Americans stayed at home in April, and then in May, there was no reduction in those staying away from work.

Not surprising then that as of early June New Zealand had only four Covid-19 deaths for every million of its people. America, as of the same time was reporting 333 deaths per million (reported in ourworldindata.org^[2]).

What was the leadership difference? Ardern blended clarity about expectations (“we must go hard, we must go early”, “stay home, save lives, be kind”) with empathy for the issues posed by the lockdown such as disrupted family and work lives. She was available for almost daily press Q&A, did Facebook Live sessions (for example on her sofa in a sweatshirt after putting her baby to bed early on in the lock-down, in a session that attracted millions).

Trump certainly fronted Q&A sessions and included his infectious disease specialist Dr Anthony Fauci, but he distracted from the public health message with hopeful predictions about the course of the disease and random proposals for medical or pseudo-medical remedies (now most people know about Trump's enthusiasm for hydroxychloroquine).

Personality researchers Oliver P. John and Sanjay Srivastava^[3] describe the agreeableness trait in terms of cooperation, compassion and empathy.

Being low in agreeableness predisposes people to be competitive and antagonistic.

We have good evidence for our assertion that Ardern is highly agreeable, and by contrast, Trump is competitive and hardheaded. International political researchers Alessandro Nai and Emre Toros^[4] have a pool of over 1,800 experts who have rated the personality of 157 political leaders in all contested elections from June 2016 to July 2019 – and they have rated Trump very low for agreeableness and Ardern high.

A more nuanced view is provided by some examples of agreeableness.

How much does Trump trust? In a June 2016 article in The Atlantic, renowned personality psychologist Dan P. McAdams^[5] quotes from Trump in a 1981 People interview: “Man is the most vicious of all animals, and life is a series of battles, ending in victory or defeat.” The risk of being attacked by enemies reduces any inclination towards trust.

Modesty differentiates these leaders. Which of these two described himself on Twitter in 2018 as “a very stable genius”? Ardern is open about her vulnerabilities, quoted in a 2017 magazine article when she was deputy leader of the opposition: “I’m constantly anxious about making some mistake, everything in politics is so fragile....I do live in constant fear of what might be.”

Tender-mindedness goes to Ardern. This is the woman who put on the Islamic hijab headscarf and hugged survivors of the 2019 terrorist shooting in Christchurch. When President Trump called to offer condolences and asked if he could do anything to help, she replied “Sympathy and love for all Muslim communities”.

Our first point is that Ardern is agreeable, Trump is not. Our second point is that agreeableness helps in the process of getting value from other people’s opinions.

The research indicates that agreeable people give a damn about what others think.

That inclines Ardern to listen to the experts. Trump’s lower level of agreeableness helps get his base mobilized – they get the message that here is someone who is against the immigrants and the elite and other scary out-groups that are responsible for their social and economic losses. However, Trump’s inclination to beat his competitors means he is more inclined to assert his own opinion than listen.

Our third point is that agreeableness powers connection and positive influence.

New Zealanders rated Ardern strongly during the time she was telling them to stay home and be kind. That positive regard extended beyond her social-democrat base to 87% support.

In contrast, Trump tends to exclusive rather than inclusive. No wonder that his base doesn’t see the need to follow public health guidelines – the problem is someone else’s.

In a future where we will confront ever more serious problems, including running up against environmental failure, leaders who listen to a range of views, including science-based views, and are humble and inclusive are likely to best serve their people. Whether such leaders succeed in winning over unhappy and alienated voters is an open question.

Stewart Forsyth and Dr Iain McCormick are both organizational psychologists and executive coaches.

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