

Hofstede's legacy and separate national responses to the Covid-19 crisis



Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede's [theory of cultural dimensions](#), captured and revised in three volumes ([here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), has informed research in cross-cultural management and international business for decades. It has also been under [criticism by management scholars](#) for its [excessive determinism](#), perpetuation of [cultural uniformity](#), and cultural categorisation into binaries. Others have iterated the risk of [ecological fallacy](#) to emphasise that the theory applies to national cultures but does not translate to individual behaviours and decisions.

However, nowhere was this applicability to individual responses more evident than early reactions to the Covid-19 crisis. Hofstede correctly anticipated how cultural interpretations are generalised into binaries by real people in real time. Yet, it does not take long for cultural binaries to translate into cultural stereotypes. Indeed, these binary interpretations erupting all across the world with the rise of the current pandemic quickly gave way to racist stereotypes. Western characterisation of East Asians as carriers of the virus began and continues in [schools](#), [workplaces](#), and [public spaces](#). Not just individual interactions, but entire nations subscribed to such a binary, albeit inaccurate generalisation. It is a '[Chinese virus](#)', Donald Trump reminds us.

Even as Italy, Spain, and the US have become epicentres, the burden of international accountability rests disproportionately with China. Detractors were quick to ascribe any positive curtailment of new cases in China and other Asian countries to authoritarian regimes able to implement stringent lockdowns. Yet, Britain, Italy, and the US, along with other countries, now seem to have transcended that cultural-political binary of low-power western democracy and their high-power eastern counterparts to similarly implement a lockdown mandating social distancing. Perhaps similar public quarantine facilities, mass rapid testing as in [South Korea](#) and [Singapore](#), mass production of masks as in [Japan](#), and early screening as in [Taiwan](#) could have been of aid to our NHS too.

Therefore, even as this contradiction between Hofstedian perceptions and non-Hofstedian reality prevails, how are nations coping? Britain's response has been atypical even amongst western countries. As it did at the time of the Spanish flu during World War I, Britain began by underestimating the gravity of the crisis to keep public morale in check. Several people died uninformed and confused then, as did a few this time around. Thankfully, we have now transitioned to a much needed strict enforcement with suspension of all non-essential work. However, dominance of economic preferences over people's lives mean that non-essential work conducted by vulnerable groups such as construction workers [remains permissible](#). In a similar vein of 'saving the economy', Donald Trump had been threatening to ease restrictions on movement sooner than recommended. No mention of economic threats to those in precarious work, however. Turns out, liberal capitalism is still capitalism after all.

Spain and Italy have had to come down stringently on enforcing lockdowns. Much like their responses during the flu of 1918, it is likely their numbers of diagnosis and death are not too inaccurate. Due to the famous Spanish neutrality during the first world war, the press was free to report these figures at the time, leading to the naming of the pandemic after Spain. [Germany](#), like some East Asian countries, was quick to develop large-scale testing capacity helping them achieve a low mortality rate. Restricted testing does increase risks of underreported diagnoses and deaths as suspected in the UK and the US. [Cuban action](#), transparency, and [historical generosity](#) through several humanitarian crises should command respect. Of course, this was before Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, like Johnson, first underplayed the threat of the pandemic then, under pressure, gave tentative signs of coming to terms with reality. In the midst of it all, countries in [Africa](#) are still waiting for WHO guidance on how to approach the crisis in their very different situations.

In predicting future responses to global pandemics, historical responses will play some part. In spirit, Britain did not respond much differently nearly 100 years later than it did in the 1900s. The only historical deviation was perhaps the response to the Swine flu pandemic in 2009, when a Labour government responded to a virus arguably known somewhat more than Covid-19. Even so, a key differentiator in national responses to future pandemics might be governmental politics allowing differing degrees of transparency and social support. Would a Corbynesque response, for instance, have been widely different? At his last prime minister's question time, he earned words of praise, as Boris Johnson's recent policies, such as [statutory sick pay](#), seem to have been taken from a page from Corbyn's book. Perhaps we can seek inspiration from the [Dutch](#) in securing bipartisan unity in times of crisis. Or closer home where community-mobilised volunteer groups in every borough abandon cultural stereotypes to go beyond just claiming to put an arm around every person, but actually show up for them.

Author's note: *This article is accurate at the time of writing as on 25 March, 2020.*



Notes:

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