Communicating COVID-19: Accountability and 'British Common Sense'

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Abstract

In this paper, we conduct a discursive psychological analysis of coronavirus briefings where the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, mentions 'common sense' as means to instruct British people how to behave during the pandemic. We look at five instances where the Prime Minister constructs the idea of using 'common sense' as guidance for fighting COVID-19 and examine how the function and use of 'common sense' varied at different stages of the pandemic. The findings show that 'common sense' began as something that was 'normal' to utilise, and eventually was constructed as a weapon, alongside emphasising the 'common sense' of British people and drawing upon nationalist tropes which excludes non-British residents of the UK. The findings are discussed in light of how 'common sense' is used to hold British people accountable for lowering infection rates whilst at the same time, presenting politicians as acting in solidarity with the public.

Key words: discursive psychology, political communication, common sense, COVID-19, political rhetoric, accountability

1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic is the biggest global crisis since World War II (Jetten et al. 2020), spreading rapidly across the globe whilst the world awaited the development of the vaccine. This was granted approval for use in the UK in December 2020. At the time of writing on 28th March 2022, there were 481,012,947 positive cases worldwide and 20,848,913 positive cases in the UK (John Hopkins University and Medicine, 2021). So far, globally 6,124,113 people have died from the disease, with 165,046 deaths in the United Kingdom (ibid). Initially in the UK, measures such as encouraging washing hands were brought in before 'lockdown' was implemented, whereby people had to stay at home other than for essential travel. The British Prime Minister delivered daily briefings updating the public on the reproduction rate, known as the 'R-rate', as well as television broadcasts whenever a lockdown was introduced or eased. Understanding the virus requires understanding how people behave and how their behaviour is represented in the public as much as about understanding

the virus itself, which is how social psychology can contribute to the research on the pandemic. This paper will use discursive psychological analysis to examine the discourse of the coronavirus briefings, and how 'common sense' was mobilised as means of shifting accountability for reducing the 'R-rate' onto the general public.

Earlier in the pandemic, the UK government attempted to maintain social order by contributing to lost wages and income though the development of the furlough scheme (Duffy & Allington, 2020). Nonetheless, the pandemic has revealed disparities between rich and poor as people with higher incomes are more likely to be able to shield and work from home (Nossem, 2020). As well as people of a lower income, people from black and ethnic minority groups are at a higher risk of developing COVID-19 (Pidd et al., 2020). Discussions on social media focused on people termed 'covidiots'; those who broke regulations by having social gatherings or panic bought items known to have a shortage such as toilet paper (Mardon et al., 2020). However, research reported that people did not follow the governmental guidelines due to having a lack of trust in the politicians enforcing the rules or being confused over the government messages, some of which lacked consistency (Young & Goldstein, 2021). Research on previous pandemics has shown that adhering to guidelines is strongly linked with trust in the government (Gilles et al., 2011), something that has been lacking in the UK government due to politicians not always following the rules that they have set (Williams et al., 2021). Some scientists argued that the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, reacted too slowly in taking action and implementing the first lockdown, with events like the Cheltenham horse race happening in mid-March of 2020 (Mason, 2020). The UK chief medical advisor, Professor Chris Whitty, argued that this was due to preventing behavioural fatigue.

Social psychologists promote the argument that fighting COVID-19 should be a form of collective action (Jetten et al., 2020), and that, whilst awaiting the vaccine, behavioural responses were key (Drury et al., 2021). Additionally, during a crisis, leaders need to create a sense of 'us', as an authoritarian approach or threatening the public only worsens fear (Bonell et al., 2020; Haslam et al., 2021). The construction of the virus as coming from 'the other', for example, Trump labelling it as the 'China virus' only creates nationalism and division (Nossem, 2020). Messages from leaders should reach out to the shared human values of openness and self enhancement (Wolf et al., 2020). One way to do this would be by talking to the public openly about future plans, as that includes them in solving the problem together (see Haslam, 2020).

Throughout the pandemic, one of the main ways for Boris Johnson to mobilise particular behaviours in the wider British public was to speak of the "British 'common sense'" as a guide for how to behave. This was frequently used in various public occasions, such as parliamentary sessions. Because of the prominence of this invocation, our aim is to analyse some of these occasions in detail to what end the mentions of 'common sense' were used, especially as means to explain and direct how the wider public in Britain should behave in relation to COVID-19 measures.

1.1 Discursive Psychology and 'Common Sense'

From a discursive psychological (henceforth DP) perspective attitudes are a social construct manifest in interaction, which involve criticism and justification of positions and often draw upon the use of commonplace ideas that are shared within the community (Billig, 1997a). Just as psychological phenomena as, say, attitudes are highly variable depending on context (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), so also 'common sense' is not a fixed entity and, rather, is something that is grounded in our cultural and historical context (Andreouli and Brice 2021).

The notion of 'common sense' is a complex construct and contains contradictory themes and tensions (Billig, 1996). Billig (ibid.) describes 'common sense' as a type of communal wisdom, a group of readily accessible argumentative aphorisms (such as "too many cooks spoil the broth"), a consensus between both speaker and audience that certain positions are more sensible than others. Yet 'common sense' is also contradictory, in that the number of available arguments is not all compatible with each other (contrast previous example with "many hands make light work"). 'Common sense' tropes can be, and often are, contradictory, flexible and vague – it is precisely this that gives them argumentative and practical value. 'Common sense' can also be used to close off arguments and remove the dilemma of interpretation (Berger, 1966). Because 'common sense' is expressed through discourse, spoken or written, it is readily analysable from a DP perspective to see how it attends to social action – such as shifting accountability from one person or agent to another. In the case of our data, from the British government to the British people when it comes to dealing with the pandemic in a responsible and socially appropriate manner.

While other social psychological approaches such as the social identity approach (e.g., Reicher & Stott, 2020) have been applied to understand the conflict between the public and authorities when it comes to fighting COVID-19, our research takes a discursive approach to examine the language used by the British Prime Minister and other British politician on how they used the term 'common sense' to place the accountability for dealing with the pandemic onto the public. Indeed, DP's broader goal of respecifying psychological phenomena as discursive action – dubbed by Potter (1998) as discursive social psychology (see also Huma et al., 2020) – renders our analytic approach relevant for social psychology, and one that contributes to our understanding of social psychological phenomena, in our case 'common sense' as a practical matter.

There is a lack of research on talk about COVID-19, with the exception of Andreouli and Brice (2021) who examined the construction of 'the good citizen' in COVID-19 political broadcasts. In line with DP, we are treating 'common sense' as a social construct which unfolds in interaction as an action-oriented notion to explore what types of social actions are used when the term 'common sense' is invoked, rather than focusing on what common sense 'really means' (see Potter and Wetherell, 1987).

2. Data and Method

The extracts presented are taken from a corpus of data consisting of press conferences and briefings by the UK government between 9th March 2020, and 14th May 2021. From this corpus, we focused on instances where common sense was explicitly mentioned. Here we present five instances where 'common sense' was brought up by Boris Johnson. These are not the only instances where Boris Johnson talks about 'common sense', but we focus on these five for the sake of analytic focus and detail – they provide particularly striking examples of the ambiguous way 'common sense' is deployed in these briefings.

The first broadcast was the coronavirus press conference on 9th March 2020 (Note 1) (before the first UK lockdown), delivered by Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Chief Medical Officer Sir Patrick Vallance and the Chief Scientific Advisor Professor Chris Whitty. The second broadcast was taken from the Prime Minister's statement at the British House of Commons on 11th May 2020 (Note 2), outlining the measures that the government was doing to ease the first lockdown restrictions. Third, the Prime Minister's televised broadcast delivered on 22nd Sept 2020 (Note 3), where he responded to the action that the government was taking on the rising cases of coronavirus (this was not during a lockdown). The fourth instance was broadcast as part of the Prime Minister's daily COVID-19 update, aired 11th May 2020 (Note 4). The final instance is from the daily update, aired on 14th May 2021 (Note 5). The broadcasts were transcribed verbatim using simplified Jeffersonian convention (2004). The use material from these sources, and the quotes we produced, fall under the fair dealing use of publicly available material as set by the UK Intellectual Property Office Online (2014). We opted to focus on these cases due to the prominence of the daily pandemic updates, the emphasis placed on these updates as providing guidance to the general population, and the subsequent media attention given to the perceived vagueness of them[1]. With these criteria for choosing the data, we then let the discursive dynamic and context of where 'common sense' was mentioned to guide our analytic focus – what we focused on was informed and guided by the data. That is, our analytic approach for looking at 'common sense' prioritises the *way* in which it was expressed (discursive dynamic) and *when* (contextual dynamic). This in mind, we are not aiming to provide a comprehensive overview of Johnson's discursive style. Although we focus on a particular type of data, daily pandemic briefings where Boris Johnson invokes 'common sense', we see no reason to treat our findings are bound specifically to our dataset alone. To follow suit from Billig and Marinho: "the particular can reveal new aspects of the general" (2017, 7).

We applied a combined approach of critical discursive psychology (Wetherell & Edley, 1999) and discursive social psychology (Potter, 1998) to analyse Johnson's talk on 'common sense' and how it is used in this specific context, as well as how the term is socially and discursively constructed more in the political climate at the time of the coronavirus pandemic. The distinction between a critical discursive psychological approach and other discursive methods such as discourse analysis is the focus on broader patterns in discourse (Wetherell & Edley, 1999). The analysis was conducted using the analytic principles of discursive psychology (see below). This involved reading the data repeatedly and searching for the 'action orientation' of the talk, in this case what actions are being performed when Johnson talks about 'common sense', before beginning to generate results based on the discursive and rhetorical actions

identified to answer the research question, selecting extracts that best illustrate the action in order to be able to discuss in detail.

Broadly speaking, the analytic focus of DP tends to orient to what Edwards and Potter (1992) term the 'discursive action model'. This is the analytic framework that guides DP analysis. This framework treats discourse as, first, action oriented – language is treated as performative rather than reflect one's mental structures – second, accountable – people treat themselves as responsible, or not, for what they say – and, third, orienting to the matter of fact and interest – how 'true' is what one says and whether one is viewed as being invested (see also Potter, 1996) in what was said. Furthermore, DP works with the notion that one can apply the discursive study of everyday language to psychological language (discussions of who forgot, who thinks what, etc.) to understand discourses of any type (Edwards & Potter, 1992: Edwards, 2005). What this means for our analytic approach is that we view 'common sense' as neither an abstract concept, nor something reflective of Johnson's mind. As we say above, it instead becomes a contextually bound, rhetorical, *action*. We look to unpack how 'common sense' is deployed and what action it performs in its context of interaction.

What the analysis, then, looks like in practice (note 7) involves the identification of relevant instances for analysis (see above). The collection of relevant instances is then accompanied by further repeated reading of them. Particular attention is paid to what is said before and after mentions of 'common sense' as well as the overall wording of the instances where 'common sense' is talked about. From our analytic perspective, particular choice of words is analytically relevant – our approach does not treat words as having inherent meanings; hence their function and meaning is drawn from the context in which they are expressed. Put simply, meanings of words are built up or resisted in various ways that are not dependent on the 'nature' of the words or any single individual. The implication for our analysis is that it is not possible to determine the function or meaning of 'common sense' prior to the analysis, given that our approach is data-driven rather than theoretically driven. The various ways in which we make sense of 'common sense' is detailed in the analysis, below.

The analytic focus on social issues as a form of communication shifts concentration from these being a matter of cognition to being a social problem in interaction, thus something that speakers are accountable for. For example, people use discursive strategies to present hostile or prejudicial views towards 'outgroups' as reasonable: blaming ethnic minorities for the prejudice against them because they are 'being different' (Tileagă, 2005) or accounting for extreme views by rationalising them (Burke & Demasi, 2021). Because DP works with the principle that one can explore matters like prejudice using everyday discursive moves, the principle can be reversed. We can look at strategies of othering and shifting accountability to explore how British politicians, specifically Boris Johnson in our case, shift accountability of responsible public behaviour in managing COVID-19 to the wider public.

3. Analysis

In the analysis, we show how Boris Johnson begins his account by setting up the current climate with regards to COVID-19, before going on to introduce the measures that need to be taken to reduce the infection rate. It is at these points

that the notion of 'common sense' is introduced. Firstly, we look at the early press conference in March 2020.

3.1 Using Common Sense 'as Normal' and 'as Usual'

In the first section, we look at how 'common sense' is treated as a shorthand for normative and normal behaviour, without necessarily specifying what that is. In the first extract, Boris Johnson is taking a question from an audience member identified as 'Peter'.

Extract one: *Boris Johnson coronavirus press conference, 9th March 2020:*

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1    PE: if the devolved governments are having different
2        strategies to that of yours↑ will there now be control
3        points at the borders for tho:se entering those nations
4        from England↓

5    BJ: ah well thanks eh Peter the answer to that is is n:o the
6        common travel area will <eh> Remain↑ eh obviously >be<tween
7        ah the UK and and ↑Ireland there'll be no ah ah checks ah
8        ah n-nothing is intended between Ireland and ↑Northern ↑
9        Ireland and similarly, you wouldn't expect anything between
10       err GB and and Northern Ireland ↑I think possibly the most
11       useful↑ wha-what we really want people to do in this country
12       is to look at our social distancing measures across the er
13       that what we're proposing all f- all four nations totally
14       ah understand what their social distancing measures are and
15       ↑apply them with common sense so the two-meter rule err h-
16       how you uhm addr- how you how you interact with people these
17       are these are ways in which we can push down↓ <this virus
18       ↓> and I think it's the ↑common ↑sense of the British people
19       ↓ that has been so (.) crucial the whole of the UK in getting
20       the R down everybody understood ah roughly what to do eh
21       <in the> eh first phase and it's by applying common sense
22       that I think we'll be successful in this second phase as
23       well↓
```

In response to Peter's question, Boris Johnson responds with a thrice repeated negation regarding closure of borders. This three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) emphasises, rhetorically, the strength of the 'no' and the insistence of open borders within the four nations of the UK. The solution to dealing with the pandemic is by this moved away from a high-level political decision – the closure of borders – to a more normative solution. It is the common sense of the British people that is the solution (15, 18, 21), and by implication, then, the responsibility does not lie with the government.

Note that the actual behaviours that would encompass common sense are not spelled out, with the exception of mentioning the two-meter rule (15) – this allows Johnson to not be detailed with the rules and for the public to perceive

how to abide by them, for example, "how you interact with people" (16). For the rest, Johnson states that people understand the rules and use common sense, although he does emphasise that this is a case of "roughly" understanding. This absence of elaboration leaves the interpretation of common sense open, and thus casts a wide rhetorical net to encompass as many potential behaviours as possible without committing to a potentially exclusive list. Furthermore, by claiming that people understand the rules Johnson is constructing a sense of agency in the wider population. This builds a moral imperative that holds the public accountable for responsible behaviour in dealing with the pandemic.

The next extract presents Boris Johnson's closing statement.

Extract two: Boris Johnson coronavirus press conference, 9th March 2020

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1    BJ: okay well look I thank you all very much I I think we've
2        covered all the essential points that I I think we we feel
3        ah that we we need to to make to you and to make to everybody
4        I hope that that's given at least some clarity and (y'know)
5        people understand the logic of the advice that we're getting
6        the government is getting and transmitting to you about
7        the=the range of options that we have in particular about
8        th-the   slightly   counterintuitive   advice   about   large
9        gatherings  sporting  events  schools  I  hope  that's  that's
10       coming across↓ we will be setting out more in the course of
11       this week about what measures ah people and families ah can
12       be taking as we move into ah the delay phase and when we
13       move into the delay phase as you have heard (.) what we're
14       asking people to do (.) now is ensure that ↑if they have
15       serious flu like symptoms as err happens every year then they
16       should do what they do every year and stay at at home and
17       not risk infection of their colleagues and that's that's
18       normal and commonsensical
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Here Johnson is closing the daily briefing following questions from audience members, the final one being about whether people, particularly elderly people, should be avoiding social gatherings. Johnson positions the measures against COVID-19 as being "options" (7), presenting fighting COVID-19 as a choice rather than a necessity and, thus, assigning moral agency to the hearer. He also emphasises that there is a "range" of options, constructing this as something that is not an emergency or a last resort. He describes the advice given during the briefing as "counterintuitive" (8) which may appear contradictory to 'common sense', although this is hedged through using the word "slightly" as a defensive move (Billig, 1991; Potter, 1996) to stave off the hearability of the contradiction. Johnson further orients to the advice not being clear by twice stating that he "hopes" (9) people understand the advice. There is an indication that the advice could be problematic or received in a number of ways. Ultimately, the responsibility of understanding is left to lie with the listener, as Johnson explicitly states his intention, hope (9), as a stake confession (Potter, 1996) to suggest that his intentions, despite any apparent lack of clarity, are honourable.

Johnson then prescribes the current action to isolate and parallels this with action taken when falling ill with flu. This creates a sense of 'normal' and 'business as usual'. Framing this as an 'ask' places the responsibility of reducing

rates onto the public (McVittie, 2021). He is, by his own account, not asking the British public to do anything that they would not usually do if they were unwell, something that "happens every year" (15, 16). This downplays the seriousness of COVID-19 as something that is non-life threatening and routine. However, this is contradictory with the term "serious flu like symptoms" (15). He presents the assumption that every year people have a serious illness that they stay at home for. Johnson does not expand upon what counts as serious symptoms, leaving the audience to form this definition themselves. Note that he only includes "colleagues" in the group of people you should want to avoid infecting, implying that this is only a work issue and does not address earlier queries such as avoiding large social gatherings and pubs (Note 6). There is a dilemma between presenting this as ordinary yet serious. There is a switch from following government advice (that seems "slightly" counterintuitive), to not even needing to think about it as it is normal and 'common sense'. Isolating is something that people would not usually do to such an extreme extent, yet Johnson is presenting staying at home to save infection as something that is normal and that the public do regularly.

Overall, Johnson manages a tension between stating the seriousness of the problem and placing the agency of responsible action onto the listener. This is done by the mixture of marking the event as unusual, thus enhancing its seriousness, but with it being resolved by the simple, every day, things that the average citizen *ought* to know and do as an average citizen – what Andreouli and Brice (2021) term 'the confined citizen'. The appeal to 'common sense', then, by way of its open interpretation – yet this interpretation will be demarcated within the bounds of 'reason', whatever it may be – and accessibility to the average citizen pushes the responsibility of dealing with COVID-19 in a morally approvable manner from the government onto the listener.

The next extract is taken from Boris Johnson's opening statement, setting out his plans for easing lockdown. Johnson continues using the trope 'common sense' as something that the British people should show 'as always'.

Extract three: Prime Minister's opening statement, 11th May 2020

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1    BJ: and so the Government is today submitting to >the House<
2        a plan which is conditional and dependent as always on the
3        'common sense' and observance of the British people and on
4        continual re-assessment of the data (.) that picture varies
5        across the regions and Home Nations of the United ↑Kingdom
6        requiring a flexible response different parts of the UK may
7        need to stay in full lockdown longer but any divergence
8        should only be short-term because as Prime Minister of the
9        UK I am in no doubt that we must defeat this threat and face
10       the challenge of recovery together↓ our progress will depend
11       on meeting five essential tests protecting the NHS reducing
12       both the daily death toll and the infection rate in a
13       sustained way ↑ensuring that testing and PPE can meet future
14       demand (>which is<) a global problem but one that we must
15       fix and avoiding a second peak that would overwhelm the NHS↓
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By stating that adhering to the guidelines depends on the 'common sense' of the British public "as always" (2), the plan is proposed by Johnson, but the responsibility to ensure that it goes smoothly lies firmly with the public. The

invocation of "as always" is a rhetorical construction of continuity, which gives Johnson the means of holding the public accountable for their behaviour (Demasi, 2022). The invocation of 'common sense' and public agency is framed as a matter of the public being now required 'to do their part'.

The word "conditional" (2) indicates that this plan can change, and whether it does change or not depends on the behaviour of the public. In a similar way to extract one, he presents this as something ordinary that the British public would do without thinking anyway – at least insofar as the British public adhere to 'common sense'. Johnson also positions fighting COVID-19 as a "global problem" (14), so it is not just on him or the UK government to resolve this. The regions of the UK are presented as differing as to whether in lockdown or not, but Johnson softens this division by referring to it as "short term" (8). Johnson also presents avoiding a second peak as an aim, implying that the UK is over the first peak.

When looking back at the previous three extracts, while Johnson places the agency and a level of moral responsibility on the public – by the clear expectation of 'common sense' – this agency only goes so far. Johnson clearly constructs a high degree of agency on the British people (absent from Johnson's discourse are non-British citizens of the UK, making this a 'nationalism' issue). One potential avenue of failure to return to normal is dependent on the behaviour of the British people. Another is on "continual re-assessment of data" (4). That is, while 'common sense' is constructed as a potential determinant of government rules, as stated above, they only go so far. It is not made clear who exactly is responsible for the assessment of data, but it is not the British people. Later in the extract, Johnson speaks of the "we" (9, 14) who must defeat COVID-19 – positive self-representation being a common trope of political discourse (Augoustinos & Every, 2007). While Johnson places agency on the British people, he also sets the limits of this agency. Not only are the British people made accountable for the outcome but, also, Boris Johnson and the British government are treated, implicitly, as the ultimate agents of deontic authority (Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012) in this matter. British people have a responsibility to behave in a certain manner, and failure to do so (to adhere to 'common sense') implies a failure to deal with COVID-19, but it is the government that has the control over whether this behaviour will be adequate.

This section has examined examples whereby fighting coronavirus should be taken with a 'business as usual' approach by the British people, without necessarily specifying what this entails, as means of shifting moral accountability on the (British) public.

3.2 Working Together to use 'Common Sense'

We now turn to look at how Boris Johnson constructs 'common sense' as a 'weapon' to be used by the British people. Next in Johnson's September broadcast, 'common sense' is constructed as the best means of fighting infection rates:

Extract four: Prime Minister's broadcast, 22nd September 2020

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1    BJ: w-we know, alas, that this virus is no less fatal than it
2        was in the spring >and that< the vast majority of our people
3        are no less susceptible and the iron laws of geometrical
4        progression are shouting at us from the graphs that we risk
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 5      many more deaths↓ many more families losing loved ones
 6      before their time↓ and I know that faced with that risk the
 7      British people will want their government to continue to
 8      fight to protect them, you and that's what we're doing night
 9      and day and yet the single greatest weapon we bring to this
10      fight↑ is the 'common sense' of the people themselves↑ the
11      joint resolve of this country to work together to suppress
12      covid now
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In this extract, Johnson displays his reluctance that the virus has worsened using the word 'alas' (1); this notion of a truth reluctantly arrived at (Edwards, 2003) is designed to rhetorically reify his claim of a pandemic that remains fatal. Johnson repeats the phrase used in extract two "before their time" (6) to emphasise how many people have died unnaturally at the hands of COVID-19. The war imagery is invoked through militant language (Pettersson, 2019). He positions the government as the active ones who are 'fighting' this virus for the passive public, something which the British public 'want'. Johnson uses "yet" (9) to indicate a change in stance – the government will fight the virus on behalf of the public, but the public are the ones who are responsible for keeping the virus at bay.

At this point the pronouns change from 'I' and 'you' to 'we' when he presents fighting the virus as something national, that we can do using 'common sense' (Billig, 1995). Johnson's use of 'common sense' has been upgraded as a weapon and paired with nationalism, as using 'common sense' means caring about your own country. This implication is somewhat sanitised by removing the reference to British people (7) to people only (10), although the joint resolve is for people of 'this country' (11). The unequivocal message remains; the problem of COVID-19 requires a British solution. Absent are the non-British peoples of the UK – they are given neither agency nor recognition. On the surface, such absence of non-British people may well appear expected: Boris Johnson is a British politician speaking to his voters. However, given Britain's sensitive political context of Brexit the role of non-British residents of the UK is a delicate one. This focus on British people is a form of rhetorical silence, and one that is unlikely to go unheard by the audience (Billig & Marinho, 2019).

As with other examples, the matter of responsibility and agency is placed onto the British populace rather than the government. Johnson and the government are bound to act due to the "iron laws of geometrical progression" (3; note the use of mathematical language for rhetorical bolstering). Yet it is the British people and their greatest weapon – the British 'common sense' – that are rhetorically imbued with moral and behavioural agency to act against COVID-19. That is, Johnson and the government are bound by circumstance, but the British people are bound by agency. Thus, the moral accountability is heightened for the British people.

Finally, we look at a more recent coronavirus briefing where the prime minister addresses the issue of the COVID-19 variants, and the government are still planning to proceed with lifting of all social distancing measures by 21st June 2021.

Extract five: Boris Johnson coronavirus press conference, 14 May 2021

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1      BJ: and to ↑everybody else across the whole country >wherever
2          you live< (.) please get tested twice a week for free and
3          get a jab if you are >eligible remember< hands face space
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4      (.) and fresh ↑air observe social distancing from those you
5      don't ↑know (.) and if ↑you're seeing loved ones think really
6      CArefully about the risk to them especially if they haven't
7      had that second dose or if it hasn't yet had the time to
8      take <full effect> I want us to trust people to be
9      responsible and to do the right thing↓ that's the way to
10     live with this virus while protecting the NHS and restoring
11     our freedoms >and< it's very clear now we are going to have
12     to live with this new ↑variant of the vi-of the virus as
13     well for some time↓ so let's work together and let's exercise
14     caution and common sense thank you very much
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Here, as above, 'common sense' is presented as a tool to be used to combat COVID-19. In the first instance, by Johnson alluding to his desire to trust the public (8) and then stating more explicitly the need to exercise common sense (13). However, before making these statements, Johnson specifies some behaviours that could potentially be within his use of 'common sense'. These behaviours include regular tests, jabs, observing government regulations (see paragraph below) and social distancing. Note that the directive to observe social distancing is less directive than regular tests or jabs. It is a conditional 'if' (5), leaving the choice to the public. They are instructed to "think really carefully"(5-6) before meeting others. Stopping short of telling the public how to behave, in this instance, is a form of giving permission. However, by virtue of the instruction, the public are treated as accountable for any outcome of such meetings. The implication is clear; if people do not distance and someone gets ill then it is their fault rather than the governments since Johnson has told people to take care. His warning is further emphasised by mentioning potentially vulnerable people (6-8).

To begin with, these behaviours are applied to everyone across the country (1-2). This is a wider category of people to previous extracts, which focused on British people more exclusively, but still retains its national focus by advising people in Britain only. The national theme is further reinforced by emphasising a well-known government slogan (hands, face, space) in allusion to supporting the National Health Service (NHS). As a loved institution in the UK, this constructs the support of it as part of the nationalist pride repertoire (Andreouli & Brice, 2021). So, the mobilisation discourse may have a more inclusive target audience in this instance, but it has still retained its nationalistic tone.

After specifying who the information on appropriate behaviour is targeted at, and what some of it might look like Johnson then begins to provide an upshot of what is required. He first does this by stating his desire to trust the people to do the right thing. By claiming the disposition of trust, he places the agency of responsibility to the wider public; this use of an everyday psychological concept, trust, is a public way for Johnson to manage his accountability (Tileagă, 2012) as someone not responsible for the public's behaviour. Framing these behaviours on moral grounds – responsible people doing the right thing (8-9) – implies that non-adherence constitutes a moral transgression, and those doing it are, then, accountable for any failures.

Only after having invoked the public's accountability does Johnson state that COVID-19 is a permanent part of the daily life in Britain, thus normalising its presence, and then to say that it dealt with by exercising 'caution and common sense' (14). By stating that the pandemic is going to be a feature of everyday life (11-13) makes salient the use of common sense. One might readily argue that

common sense is a feature of mundane everyday life, opening up a potential critique of its relevance in extreme times. However, by treating the pandemic as everyday Johnson forestall such critique. It also suggests that an everyday problem can be solved with everyday means – that is, using common sense. In contrast to other examples discussed here, this is the rarer instance where 'common sense' is specified somewhat (see above). Here, then, common sense is invoked to provide an upshot of previously stated behaviour. Whereas in previous examples where it featured as a means for shifting accountability onto the public, which is the same here, but in addition here common sense is functions as a normalising label to the types of behaviours stated above. Not only is 'common sense' a means to an end, a weapon to combat COVID-19, but it is also treated as an everyday, mundane, means to an end. As such, it is treated as readily accessible to the populace at large.

In this section, we have shown how 'common sense' is presented as a 'weapon', a means to an end, something that British people can, and should, use to fight the pandemic. This is an example of mobilizing discourse, used to encourage the people in Britain to behave in a certain manner.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

We have presented a discursive psychological analysis of how 'common sense' was used by the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, as a way to mobilise the British public and direct how they should behave during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis demonstrates how 'common sense' was something that people showed 'anyway', downplaying the seriousness of COVID-19, and constructing fighting it as something that people would do in the same way they would if they had the flu. 'Common sense' was also displayed as means and guide to fight COVID-19, shifting the responsibility of fighting the virus onto the public. The public was constructed as morally accountable to engage in 'common sense' behaviour, by treating this behaviour as 'usual' in order to cope living with the virus. The onus was placed on the public to behave in an appropriate manner to combat COVID-19. This is a form of public mobilisation discourse (e.g., Sneijder et al., 2021); an attempt to get the public to behave in a specific way. The particular aspect of 'common sense' in our data, however, is that it is simultaneously presented as a clear directive to behave in a certain way and, at the same time, lacking in specific instructions. The only exception to this was extract five, where in addition to the points above it also functioned as an upshot of previously stated behaviours. Overall, mentions of 'common sense' served to constitute a moral boundary for which the members of the public – or, in most cases, specifically the British people – were responsible for not crossing.

We also noted how the discussion of 'common sense' was, in all instances except extract five, framed as a primarily British matter. The British focus is a form of rhetorical silence (Billig, 1997b), rendering non-British residents of the UK invisible: "it is a resource to establish and maintain individual, collective and national memory, identity, agendas and ideology" (Murray, 2021, 287), and it is a silence that is unlikely to have gone unheard (Billig & Marinho, 2019).

As social psychologists advocate, leaders should be creating a sense of 'us' and holding the general public accountable for fighting COVID-19 does not do this (Jetten et al., 2020). A breakdown in this sense of 'us' has been further

emphasised by the recent controversies of a number of prominent British politicians, Johnson included, who were found to break the lockdown rules (BBC News, 2022). However, Johnson's frequent switch between 'us' and 'them', and his implicit positioning of the British government as having the authority to determine when 'common sense' is or is not enough (in spite of the British citizens' duty to act in line with it), in discursive terms was frequently a move away from a common identity with the wider public. This shifting is readily explainable from a DP perspective, that treats an 'us and them' discourse as a rhetorical strategy (see Lynn & Lea, 2003). In the case of our data, Johnson's strategy was to maintain a balance between invoking governmental authority and the use of public mobilisation discourse.

Social psychological research found that in fighting coronavirus infection rates, behaviour responses from the public were vital whilst we awaited the development of the vaccine (Drury et al., 2021), however the publicly perceived vagueness and confusion over government messages around "using 'common sense'" made it difficult for the public to follow the rules. Our discursive psychological approach shows how 'common sense' is a construct that is flexible and contradictory, grounded in our cultural and historical context (Andreouli & Brice, 2021) – part and parcel of public political communication on how to deal with the pandemic. Just as Andreouli (2021) argues that it is necessary to understand lay perspectives of Brexit, we echo this and argue that it is important to see how the public makes sense of 'common sense' and responsible behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is doubly important given that in these briefings Johnson treats the public as accountable for behaving in a particular way. Thus, the British public will respond to using 'common sense' in different ways. This could be a potential avenue for further research, as would the expressions of 'common sense' by politicians in other contexts (e.g., broadcast interviews). We can look at public mobilisation discourse (Sneijder et al., 2021), but this does not guarantee a particular outcome – equally important is to look at responses to this. What this would look like in practice would be a discursive study of people either responding to public guidelines of behaviour (of the type we have analysed here) or to look at how laypeople talk about 'common sense' as part of dealing with a serious societal issue (such as COVID-19). More specifically, one could look at how members of the public talk about the state of COVID-19 in the post-lockdown era.

This research has presented a discursive psychological analysis on how the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, constructs 'common sense' in coronavirus briefings when communicating with the British public. 'Common sense' is used as a construct to shift responsibility onto the general, British, public for lowering COVID-19 rates. Boris Johnson has presented an extreme event as being resolved by something ordinary and 'British'; those not fitting both categories are excluded as able to deal with the pandemic, thus having their agency stripped.

Notes

1. https://www.ft.com/content/df14c89b-6cab-464b-ad15-fe9c45fb0f42

2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpZz9rCz3C0

3. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvTZhe9ZXWM&t=3s

4.https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhhgU3i8T3w

5.https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4XPeAE1M-w

6.https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Xy3bY3gDgQ

7.This is an example of the ideological dilemma of what counts as healthy, whereby the concept of 'being healthy' is bound with one's ability to work (see Billig et al., 1988).

8. Of the eight steps on conducting psychological discourse analysis which Goodman (2017) provides, this paragraph covers steps five and six: preliminary reading of the data (searching for action orientation) and generating results (discursive devices and rhetorical strategies). The steps cover a discursive project from start to end, thus earlier and later steps are not directly related to explicating the analytic approach.

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