



LIFTING BARRIERS. LIFTING LIVES.

PATRIOTIC PROGRESS:

*NATIONAL PRIDE AND
OPTIMISM ABOUT THE FUTURE*

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INTRODUCTION

Optimism plays a central role in human progress. Therefore, it is concerning that many Americans are pessimistic about the future of the United States and its role in the world. For example, according to a Pew Research Center [survey](#), 65% percent of Americans believe the United States is only going to become more politically divided in the coming decades, 60% believe the United States will become less important to the world, 73% believe the gap between rich and poor will grow, and only 20% predict the average family's standard of living will improve.

How can we promote an optimistic and ultimately progress-oriented mindset among Americans? The current analysis explores national pride as a potential variable to target in efforts to inspire American optimism. Are proud Americans more optimistic about the future of their nation, the world, and human progress than Americans who are not proud of their national identity?

WHY OPTIMISM MATTERS

Optimism supports the cognitions and behaviors that drive progress. Optimists envision a positive future, and they are driven to take the actions necessary to make that vision a reality.¹ They are more likely to be goal-focused and achieve those goals than those who are not optimistic about their futures.² Optimists are also more innovative.³ When people have an optimistic outlook, they report higher levels of social trust and civic engagement.⁴ And groups comprised of optimistic individuals are more creative, cooperative, and successful at completing assigned tasks.⁵

Most of the research on optimism and related positive attitudes focuses on how people think about their personal futures. This individual-focused optimism has important implications for individual-focused goal pursuit and success. Just as individual-focused optimism supports individual-focused goals and projects, an outward-focused optimism about the broader society and world should support the types of goals and projects that help organizations, communities, and nations flourish. People who view the future of their society and the world optimistically should be more motivated to work toward making that positive vision of the future a reality, whereas those with a more pessimistic view will be less inclined to think dedicating themselves to building a better world is a good use of their time and energy.

Given the important role that optimism likely plays in advancing human progress, and the possibility that Americans are becoming less optimistic and more pessimistic about the future of their nation, it is critical to identify ways to encourage an outward-focused optimistic mindset.

NATIONAL PRIDE AND OPTIMISM

Humans are group-oriented organisms. This tribal nature is often described as a negative aspect of humanity because under certain circumstances it can contribute to bigotry, hate, and destructive social conflict. However, it is important to remember that our tribal nature also facilitates the type of shared goals, social trust, group coordination, and personal sacrifice that advance society. Group identities are thus a central and often positive feature of human social and cultural life. When people have a positive attitude about a group they belong to (positive group identity), they are more psychologically healthy,⁶ which makes them more likely to have an optimistic mindset.⁷ National pride is an indicator of a positive group identity and thus may encourage progress-oriented optimism.

The current analysis examines the relationship between American national pride and optimism about the future of the nation, the world, and human progress on the specific issues of climate change, poverty, racism and other forms of bigotry, and political polarization.

STUDY 1 | 2020 WHO IS PROUD TO BE AMERICAN SURVEY

In October 2020, the Archbridge Institute and the Challey Institute for Global Innovation and Growth asked a national representative sample of just over 500 US citizens whether or not they are proud to be American. A report on the results from this survey can be found [here](#). Our key takeaway finding was that the vast majority of US adults (87%) are proud to be American. For this report, I am using the data from that survey to examine the link between American pride and attitudes about the future that support progress. Are proud Americans more optimistic about the future of the United States than Americans who are not proud of their national identity?

Survey Questions

National pride was measured with the following question: (yes or no)

Are you proud to be an American?

Attitudes about the future were measured by having participants rate their level of agreement (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree) with each of the following statements.

I am optimistic about the future of the United States.

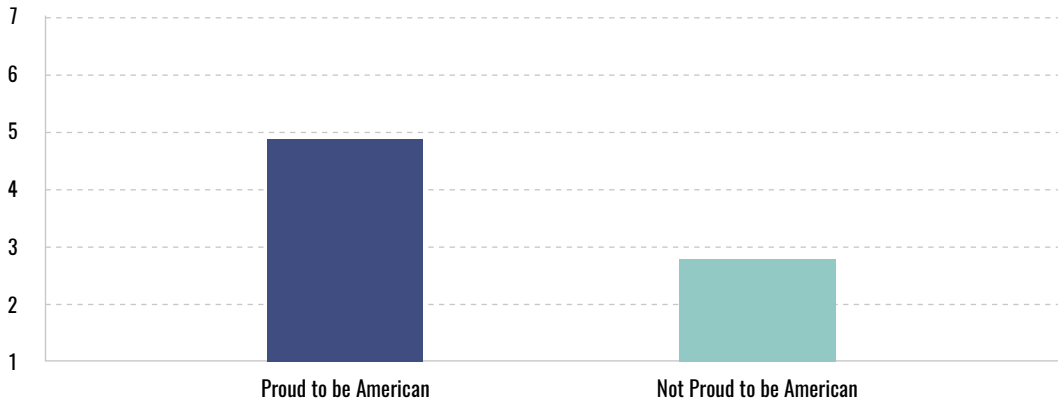
In the future, the United States will be less important to the world.

In the future, the United States will lead the world in scientific, medical, and technological innovations.

Overview of Results

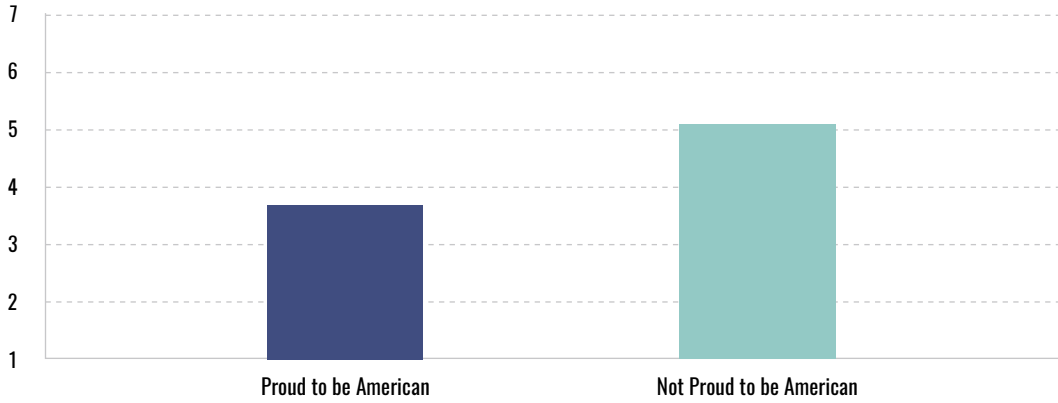
For each of these statements, I found that proud Americans are more optimistic about the future of their nation than Americans who are not proud of their national identity (see Figures 1–3). These differences are statistically significant and remain statistically significant when controlling for other variables included in the survey (age, political ideology, satisfaction with life, meaning in life, loneliness, and optimism about one's own future).⁸ National pride is a unique predictor of optimistic beliefs about the future of the United States.

Figure 1 | THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATIONAL PRIDE AND OPTIMISM ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE UNITED STATES



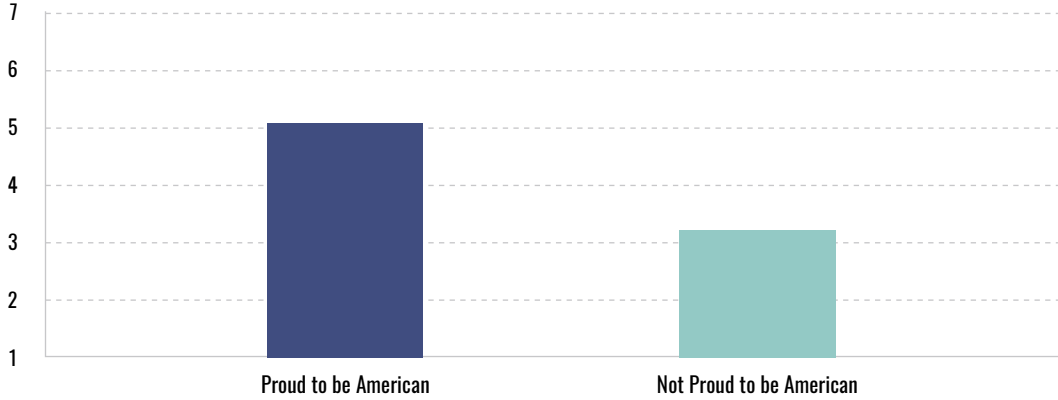
Note: Higher scores on the y-axis reflect stronger agreement with the statement: “I am optimistic about the future of the United States.”

Figure 2 | THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATIONAL PRIDE AND THE BELIEF THAT THE UNITED STATES WILL BE LESS IMPORTANT TO THE WORLD IN THE FUTURE



Note: Higher scores on the y-axis reflect stronger agreement with the statement: “In the future, the United States will be less important to the world.”

Figure 3 | THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATIONAL PRIDE AND THE BELIEF THAT THE UNITED STATES WILL LEAD THE WORLD IN SCIENTIFIC, MEDICAL, AND TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS



Note: Higher scores on the y-axis reflect stronger agreement with the statement: “In the future, the United States will lead the world in scientific, medical, and technological innovations.”

STUDY 2 | 2022 COLLEGE SENIOR ATTITUDES ABOUT THE FUTURE SURVEY

In February 2022, The Psychology of Progress, in collaboration with College Pulse, surveyed a nationally representative sample of 500 US college seniors regarding their views about the future. This survey focused on college seniors because they are about to complete a major educational goal and most of them will shortly be joining the professional workforce, pursuing advanced professional training, or launching their own businesses. These young adults have an important role to play in building the future of our society and advancing the cause of human progress. A report on the general findings of this survey can be found [here](#). College students are more divided than the general US public when it comes to national pride; 56% indicated that they agree or strongly agree and 44% indicated that they disagree or strongly disagree with the statement “I am proud to be American.”

For this report, I am using the data from that survey to examine the link between American pride and attitudes about the future that support progress. Are proud American college students more optimistic about the future of the United States and the world than American college students who are not proud of their national identity? How does national pride relate to beliefs about progress on specific societal challenges?

Survey Questions

National pride was measured by asking participants to rate their level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = somewhat disagree, 3 = somewhat agree, 4 = strongly agree) with the following statement:

“I am proud to be American”

Attitudes about progress were measured in two ways. First, participants rated their level of optimism or pessimism (1 = very pessimistic, 2 = somewhat pessimistic, 3 = somewhat optimistic, 4 = very optimistic) for each of the following questions:

Are you generally optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the United States?

Are you generally optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the world?

Second, participants were asked if they think humans will make significant progress (yes or no) in their lifetime on four specific issues:

Climate change, poverty, racism and other forms of bigotry, and political polarization

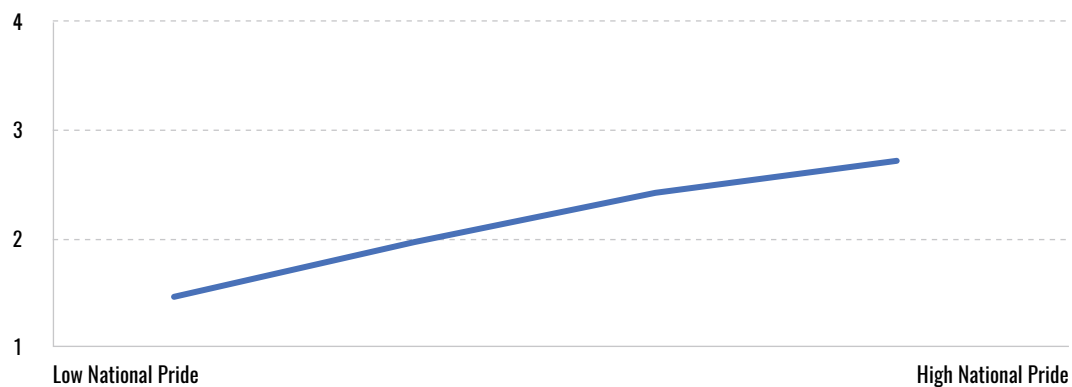
Overview of Results

The more college students are proud to be American, the more they are optimistic about the future of the United States and the future of the world (see Figures 4 and 5). They are also more optimistic that humans will make progress on climate change, poverty, racism and other forms of bigotry, and political polarization within their lifetime.

Specifically, for climate change, 30% of respondents who report low levels of national pride (strongly disagree with the statement “I am proud to be American”) believe that humans will make significant progress in their lifetime (Figure 6). However, among respondents who report high levels of national pride (strongly agree with the statement “I am proud to be American”), 64% believe that humans will make significant progress on climate change in their lifetime. On poverty, 25% of respondents with low levels of national pride and 53% of respondents with high levels of national pride believe humans will make significant progress on this issue in their lifetime. On racism and other forms of bigotry, 52% of respondents with low levels of national pride and 69% of respondents with high levels of national pride believe humans will make significant progress on this issue in their lifetime. Finally, on political polarization, 18% of respondents with low levels of national pride and 36% of respondents with high levels of national pride believe that humans will make significant progress on this issue in their lifetime.

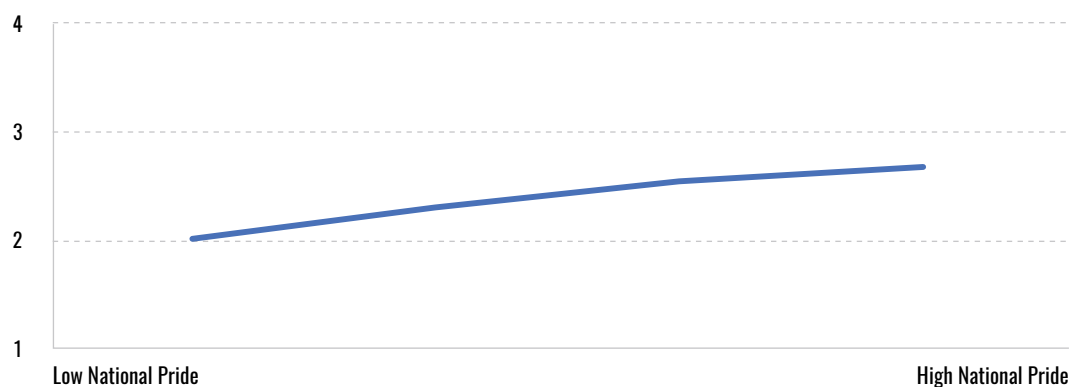
These differences are statistically significant and remain statistically significant when controlling for other variables included in the survey (political ideology, socioeconomic status, and optimism about one’s own future).⁹ National pride is a unique predictor of optimistic beliefs about the future of the United States and the world, as well as optimistic beliefs about making progress on specific societal and global challenges.

Figure 4 | THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATIONAL PRIDE AND OPTIMISM ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE UNITED STATES



Note: Higher scores on the y-axis reflect higher levels of optimism about the future of the United States.

Figure 5 | RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATIONAL PRIDE AND OPTIMISM ABOUT THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD



Note: Higher scores on the y-axis reflect higher levels of optimism about the future of the world.

Figure 6 | RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATIONAL PRIDE AND THE PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS WHO THINK HUMANS WILL MAKE SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS ON CLIMATE CHANGE IN THEIR LIFETIME

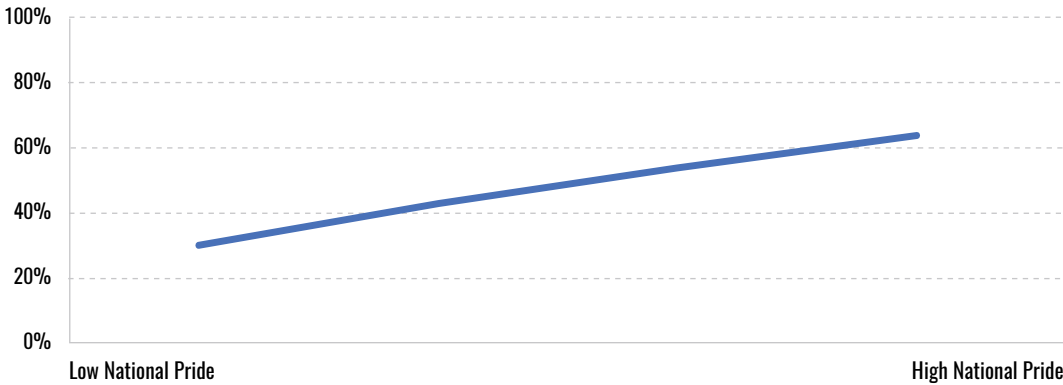


Figure 7 | RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATIONAL PRIDE AND THE PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS WHO THINK HUMANS WILL MAKE SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS ON POVERTY IN THEIR LIFETIME

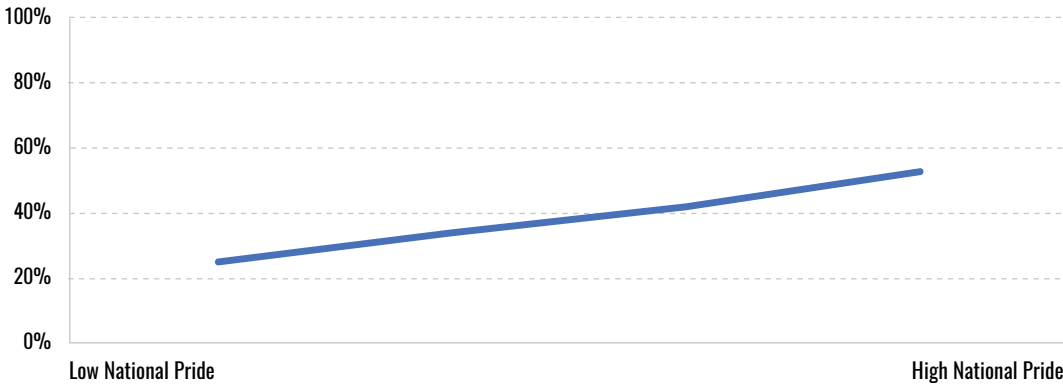


Figure 8 | RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATIONAL PRIDE AND THE PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS WHO THINK HUMANS WILL MAKE SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS ON RACISM AND OTHER FORMS OF BIGOTRY IN THEIR LIFETIME

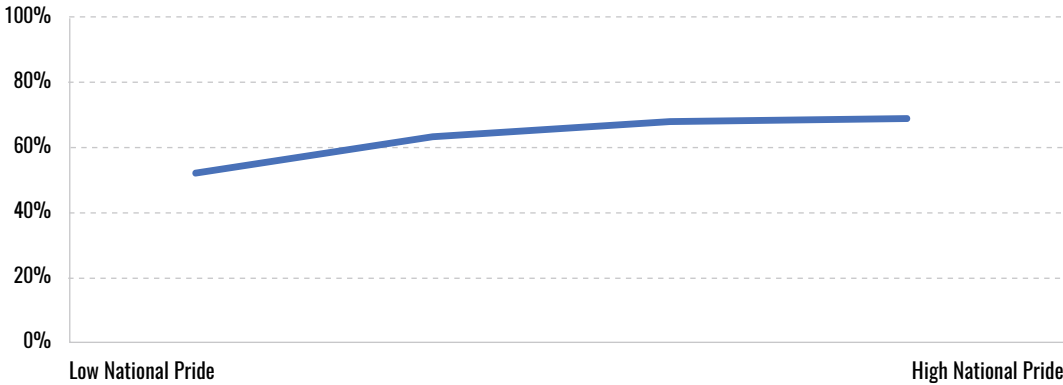
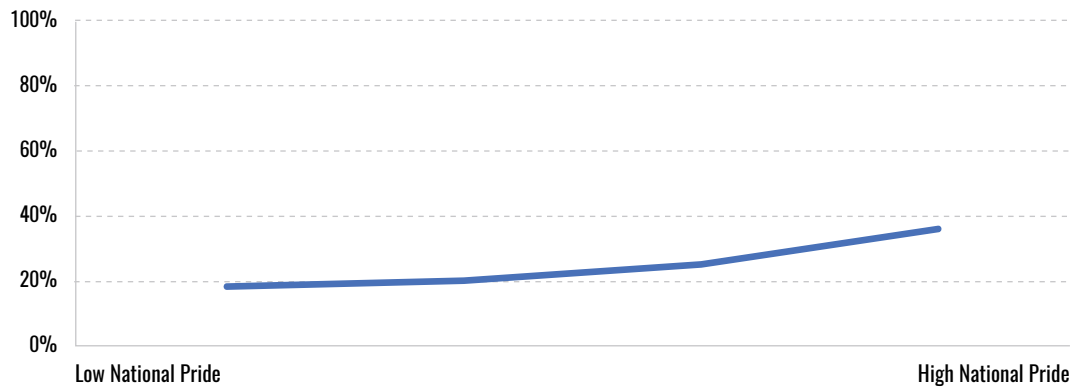


Figure 9 | RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATIONAL PRIDE AND THE THE PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS WHO THINK HUMANS WILL MAKE SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS ON POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN THEIR LIFETIME



CONCLUSION

Across two surveys, a clear pattern emerged indicating that national pride among Americans is associated with a more optimistic mindset about the future of the nation, the world, and human progress.

National pride isn't exclusively related to optimism about the future of the nation. Proud Americans also have a more optimistic outlook about the broader world and about progress on challenges that are not nation-specific such as climate change. This suggests that the benefits of national pride extend beyond national interests. By helping people feel connected to something larger and more enduring than the individual self, a positive national identity may help cultivate the type of optimistic and progress-oriented mindset needed to address global challenges.

It is worth noting that Americans are not especially optimistic about the future. For instance, though young people are often thought of as possessing a youthful optimism, the majority of college seniors indicated that they do not think that humans will make significant progress on climate change, poverty, or political polarization in their lifetime. This is consistent with other surveys indicating that Americans have a pessimism problem. Critically, despite this general pessimistic attitude about the future, on every question, the more Americans felt proud to be American, the more optimistic they felt about the future. This suggests that cultivating national pride may help counter a pessimistic outlook but also that other strategies will be needed to inspire a more optimistic outlook among Americans.

College seniors are very pessimistic about making progress on reducing political polarization. Among those who report low levels of national pride, only 18% believe that there will be progress on this issue in their lifetime. That number rose to 36% among those reporting high levels of national pride. This is encouraging, but these low percentages indicate that political polarization is a major challenge for our nation and a potential major barrier to progress.

College seniors are, however, generally optimistic about making progress on reducing racism and other forms of bigotry. The majority of those with both low levels of national pride (52%) and high levels of national pride (69%) believe there will be progress on this issue in their lifetime. Notably, it is those who are most proud to be American who are most inclined to be optimistic about progress on this issue.

The current analysis provides some clues as to how to begin to address the American pessimism problem but much more work is needed. Future research should examine why many American college students do not have a positive national identity. Future research should also test whether Americans who are not proud of their national identity can be motivated to adopt a more patriotic attitude, and whether this makes them more optimistic about the future of their nation, the world, and human progress.



ENDNOTES

- ¹ Carver, C. S., Sheirer, M. F., & Segerstrom, S. C. (2010). Optimism. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 30, 879 – 889.
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- ⁴ Uslaner, E.M. (1998). Social capital, television, and the “mean world”: Trust, optimism, and civic participation. *Political Psychology*, 19, 441-467.
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- ⁶ Haslam, S. A., Jetten, J., Postmes, T., & Haslam, C. (2009). Social identity, health, and wellbeing: An emerging agenda for applied psychology. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 58, 1 – 23.
- ⁷ Routledge, C. & FioRito, T. A. (2021). Why meaning in life matters for societal flourishing. *Frontiers in Psychology-Personality and Social Psychology*. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.601899/full>
- ⁸ For all three items, the effect of national pride, even when controlling for other variables, remained highly statistically significant at $p < .001$.
- ⁹ For all three items, the effect of national pride, even when controlling for other variables, remained highly statistically significant at $p < .001$.

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Dr. Routledge is a leading expert in existential psychology. His research examines how the human need for meaning in life influences and is influenced by different cognitive processes, self-regulation, momentous life experiences, personal and professional goals, creativity, social connections, cultural worldviews, spirituality and religiosity, entrepreneurship, and prosocial behavior. He has published over 100 scholarly papers, co-edited three books on existential psychology, and authored the books *Nostalgia: A Psychological Resource* and *Supernatural: Death, Meaning, and the Power of the Invisible World*.

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