

Employees from high-status countries are more likely to be considered “leadership material”

We like and empathize with coworkers who share our nationality, but our belief in who is most competent reflects first-world prejudices.



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Many of us work in international teams, where people from different countries, and even

different continents, rub shoulders in pursuit of a common goal.

But when it comes to being promoted, some of those people will be considered more competent than others, and it isn't necessarily down to experience.

Imagine a team with members from Germany, Greece, India, the United States and Vietnam. Who do you think, all else being equal, will be promoted?

If you answered the American or the German, you already instinctively know some of the findings of a new study by IESE's [Yih-Teen Lee](#), with IESEG School of Management's Gouri Mohan and Copenhagen Business School's Minna Paunova, which looks at the [effects of nationality](#) on perceptions of others' warmth and competence.

You are where you come from

Nationality, like gender and race, shapes who we view as leaders in sometimes subtle ways. As many in diverse workplaces will know, birds of a feather flock together — it's easy to fall into groups along nationality lines, where we share cultural norms and signifiers. Though many global workers have left their country of origin behind, it continues to have an effect on our identities.

But how does this work when it comes to evaluating people from other nationalities and our perception of who should be trusted?

The research looked at nationality as a source of heterogeneity (meaning differences between people that don't connote hierarchies) and as a source of inequality (differences that do suggest hierarchies or unequal status). It then considered two mechanisms through which nationality affects who is considered leadership material: warmth and competence.

The pull of shared nationality

The results were, in part, surprising. Although people with shared nationality tend to perceive more warmth in their compatriots, they don't necessarily consider them better leaders.

To understand the impact of country of origin on team dynamics, it's useful to examine people who share a nationality. There's a human tendency to experience a natural affinity toward others in the same broad categories as ourselves, seeing them as part of the group. Research shows people also tend to value the opinions of group members more, and are

more likely to give them the benefit of the doubt.

But do we see them as better leaders? Initially, Lee and his co-authors hypothesized that people would view peers from the same cultural background as embodying a positive prototype, and therefore would favor them as leadership material over other nationalities.

But, surprisingly, there was no correlation between being from the same country and feeling that someone was more competent. Quite the opposite: people were more likely to feel competition with their compatriots for top roles, rather than solidarity.

This result was in spite of the finding that we perceive our compatriots as warmer — a concept that encompasses ideas like morality, trustworthiness, sincerity and friendliness. When we see others as warm, we trust their motives, generally like them and feel empathetic toward them.

But while employees might care for their fellow Indian or Greek, when it comes to backing someone for leadership, they're likely to consider the American or German more competent.

Country status affects who we believe should be leaders

This perception seems to be influenced by the status of the country of origin, which was assessed using the United Nations' [Human Development Index](#) (HDI). Individuals from higher-status countries (as ranked by the HDI) were more likely to be viewed as potential leaders, even when the nation's level of development had no relevance to the job at hand.

These results suggest that we are all pigeonholed, to some extent, by our nationality, which has a profound impact not only on our identities and how we see the world, but also on how we interact as teams, from organizational performance to fairness in career advancement and distribution of power in the organization.

Since nationality has a significant impact during the initial stages of team formation, when members are just beginning to get acquainted, managers should be especially careful to ensure that preconceived notions do not shape the course of relationships. Every team member, irrespective of their country of origin, should be seen as potential leadership material. If not, initial judgments can become entrenched and hard to change.

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