

Study finds nationality is not a good indicator of work-related cultural values

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Researchers and businesses have often operated under the idea that work-related cultural values are defined by country - just think of stereotypes about countries that are known to have hard workers or are team-oriented. A new study finds that nationality is actually a bad proxy for work-related cultural values, and points to other groupings - such as

occupation - as more reliable indicators.

"I study work-related values - how culture informs our beliefs and behaviors related to work," says Bradley Kirkman, co-author of a paper on the work. "This field has long defined and measured culture based on national borders. We wanted to know if nationality is really the best way to delineate cultural values and boundaries. And we learned that it's not a very good marker." Kirkman is the General (Ret.) H. Hugh Shelton Distinguished Professor of Leadership and head of the Department of Management, Innovation and Entrepreneurship at North Carolina State University. The paper was co-authored by researchers at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and the University of Calgary.

To examine the issue, the researchers looked at data from 558 studies on work-related values. The studies covered 32 [countries](#) from around the world, including the United States, Brazil, France, South Africa and China.

Specifically, the researchers evaluated variation, both within each country and between countries, on four work-related [cultural values](#):

- Individualism, which measures the extent to which a society places emphasis on individuals as opposed to groups;
- Power distance, which measures the importance of status and hierarchy in work settings;
- Uncertainty avoidance, which measures the extent to which cultures are willing to accept ambiguity or the unknown; and
- Quantity versus quality of life, which measures emphasis on competition and material wealth versus emphasis on societal welfare and well-being.

The researchers found that approximately 80 percent of variation in these values was within countries. For example, at the low end, only 16.6

percent of the variation on individualism was between countries - 83.4 percent of the variability was within countries. At the high end, 20.8 percent of variation on power distance was between countries - which still left 79.2 percent of the variability within countries.

"This told us that country does not equal culture on work-related values," Kirkman says.

Researchers then evaluated other demographic and economic indicators to see if they could find a better proxy for work-related values - and they did.

For example, occupation and [socioeconomic status](#) both significantly outperformed country as indicators on power distance. For example, only 20.8 percent of variation was between countries. But differences between occupations accounted for 50.1 percent, while differences between socioeconomic status accounted for 32.2 percent.

Occupation and socioeconomic status also significantly outperformed country on individualism, but fared worse than nationality as indicators on [uncertainty avoidance](#) and quantity versus quality of life.

"This work highlights the illusion of national homogeneity and shows that there is a real danger in equating country and culture in a work context," Kirkman says. "Making generalizations based on country can lead people to draw very inaccurate conclusions that may influence both individual and organizational business and management relationships.

"For example, if a U.S. manager is transferred to a foreign office and makes decisions based on national stereotypes about workplace culture, it could blow up in his or her face," Kirkman says.

The paper, "Does Country Equate with Culture? Beyond Geography in

the Search for Cultural Boundaries," is published online in the journal *Management International Review*. Lead author of the paper is Vas Taras of UNC-Greensboro. The paper was co-authored by Piers Steel of the University of Calgary.

More information: Vas Taras et al, Does Country Equate with Culture? Beyond Geography in the Search for Cultural Boundaries, *Management International Review* (2016). [DOI: 10.1007/s11575-016-0283-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11575-016-0283-x)

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