Identification with one's nation predicts both greater engagement with public health behaviors, such as masking and social distancing, and support for public health policies, finds an analysis of attitudes across 67 countries. The research, which appears in the journal *Nature Communications*, suggests that national identities play a significant and positive role in battling a global pandemic.

"History has undoubtedly shown that nationalism can be a destructive force," observes Jay Van Bavel, a professor of psychology at New York University and one of the paper's authors. "But research has also revealed that there is a pro-social side to group identity. This study points to a new and promising possibility—that national identity can be useful in effectively addressing the current pandemic and may serve as a public health resource in the future."

"We see the positive effects, especially for those who feel genuinely proud and close to their nation, rather than those who are mostly concerned about how others see their country," adds Aleksandra Cichocka, director of the Political Psychology Lab at the University of Kent and one of the paper's authors.

"National Identity as measured reflects what it means to be part of a nation for each person," says Paulo Sérgio Boggio, director of the Social and Cognitive Neuroscience Laboratory at Brazil's Mackenzie Presbyterian University and one of the paper's authors. "Valuing this can foster the collective feeling of the population in the fight against COVID. In real life, this can be seen in countries like New Zealand, whose Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardem, has emphasized each one's role as a member of a larger group that is the country itself."

The study's international team of more than 200 researchers, who also come from Australia's University of Sydney, Germany's Ludwig Maximilian University, and the United Kingdom's University of St. Andrews, among other institutions, recognized the productive role national identity might play in responding to a widespread crisis—in this case, the coronavirus pandemic.

While COVID-19's impact has been global, policies and calls for practices to address it have largely been implemented by individual nations, raising the question of the role national identity plays in responding to country-based public health measures.

To weigh this, the researchers aimed to separate national identity, which gauges how strongly people identify with their country, from national narcissism, which is a form of social identity that involves the belief that one's group—or, in this case, nation—is exceptional but also underappreciated by others. Past studies have found that national identification...
tends to correlate with national narcissism because they both involve a positive evaluation of one's nation. However, the researchers note, they are linked to very different outcomes. For example, prejudice against outgroups (those seen as different) is negatively associated with national identification, but positively with national narcissism.

In their study, the researchers conducted a survey, which included nearly 50,000 respondents across 67 countries, asking the extent to which participants reported adopting public health behaviors (e.g., spatial distancing and stricter hygiene) and endorsed public policy measures (e.g., closing bars and restaurants) during the early stage of the pandemic (April-May 2020). They also asked about respondents' political ideology (e.g., left-wing or right-wing) and included questions aimed at capturing national identification and national narcissism.

Overall and across the studied countries, respondents who reported identifying more strongly with their nation consistently reported greater engagement in public health behaviors and support for public health policies.

Interestingly, unlike left-wing ideology, right-wing political ideology had a positive, moderate correlation with both national identification and national narcissism, but very weak correlations with support for public health measures. This suggests that political ideology may be relatively unimportant for predicting public health behavior outside the United States, the researchers say. There was one exception: Right-wing political beliefs, across several countries, were associated with less support for COVID-19 public health government policies compared to left-wing political beliefs.

"It is important to note that the relationship between national identity and public health support was distinct from national narcissism," the study's authors write. "In past research, national narcissism has predominantly been linked to problematic attitudes towards both out-group and in-group members. However, we found that national narcissism was positively associated with self-reported physical hygiene and support for COVID-19 preventative policies. Still, these effects were much smaller than those for national identity."

To better understand if self-reporting was reflected in the actual actions individuals took, the team conducted a second international study. Here, they used two publicly available datasets—the World Values Survey, which measures values and beliefs over time and across countries, and the COVID-19 Google Community Mobility Reports, which indicate how people's physical movement has changed in response to COVID-19.

The researchers created an index of national identification using two items from the World Value Survey (i.e., national pride and closeness to their nation) and an index of physical mobility by averaging community movement across all available places (i.e., retail and recreation, groceries and pharmacies, parks, transit stations, workplaces, and residential).

They then examined whether countries with higher average national identification prior to the pandemic predicted a stronger reduction in mobility after the COVID-19 pandemic spread around the world during April and May 2020.

Consistent with the results from the initial survey, national identification was associated with reduced spatial mobility, suggesting that those with a strong national identity were following public health guidelines by reducing their movements, thereby reducing physical interactions with others.

Study data may be found on the Open Science Framework page.


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