

Young children may see nationality as biological, new study suggests

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Young children see national identity, in part, as biological in nature, a perception that diminishes as they get older, finds a new study by psychology researchers. But despite changes in views of nationality as

we age, the work suggests the intriguing possibility that the roots of nationalist sentiments are established early in life.

"As children grow up, they continue to think an individual's nationality is a stable aspect of their identity—not linked to biology, but nonetheless something that is informative about who they are as a person and reaching beyond the formalities of citizenship," explains Andrei Cimpian, an associate professor in New York University's Department of Psychology and the senior author of the study, which appears in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*. "To speculate, it is possible that the nationalist sentiments seen among adults may be partly facilitated by psychological processes that are at work within the first decade of life."

The study's first author was Larisa Hussak, a doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign at the time of research and now a consultant at EAB, a higher education analytical firm.

The researchers note that despite a trend of increasing globalization in many aspects of modern life, nationality is a powerful source of meaning in people's lives. They cite an American National Election Studies survey that shows 72 percent of Americans report being an American is either "very important" or "extremely important" to their identity. Moreover, the recent rise of nationalist ideologies in the United States and beyond reveals the central role of national groups in the psychological landscape of the 21st century. In addition, previous studies have found that national groups shape people's attitudes toward others. For example, stronger national identification predicts more negative attitudes toward immigrants and views of ethnic minorities as outsiders rather than as full-fledged citizens.

Given the influence of national group concepts over how people view themselves and others, Cimpian and Hussak sought to understand how

these concepts are not only represented in people's minds, but also what shape they take early in life and whether or not they evolve over time.

To do so, they conducted a series of experiments that included samples of American children aged 5 to 8. To compare children's views with those of American adults, Cimpian and Hussak recruited adults, who were in their mid-30s on average, using Amazon's "Mechanical Turk"—a tool in which individuals are compensated for completing small tasks and is frequently used in running behavioral science studies.

In these experiments, the subjects were given a series of prompts aimed at probing their views on the factors behind national identity. For instance, they were shown pictures of [young children](#) who were identified as Americans or other nationalities (e.g., Canadian) and asked whether national group membership is manifested in a person's biology (e.g., could it be detected "in their insides"?). They were also asked if they believed this membership was informative about other aspects of a person (e.g., what games they liked to play at recess). In addition, they were asked what might explain differences in national traditions—for example, if they believed that Americans eat a lot of apple pie because of some inherent features of Americans or because of their history or circumstances.

The authors also sought to measure how American children think about the advantages they have by virtue of belonging to their national group. Specifically, they gauged whether children believed that inequalities favoring their group (i.e., Americans) are legitimate and fair. The two items in this measure portrayed Americans as having an economic advantage over two different, unfamiliar non-American groups (e.g., "Americans tend to have a lot more money than Daxians" [a fictional nation]). To facilitate children's understanding, the researchers showed them pictures of an American flag and a non-American flag while presenting the inequality information. Children were asked three

questions about each inequality, in random order: (1) whether they thought it was fair that Americans had an advantage, (2) whether they thought the inequality was OK, and (3) whether Americans deserved their advantage.

Overall, the results revealed the following about how both children and adults saw national group membership: it is something that is stable and cannot easily be shed, it is informative about a person's behaviors and preferences, and its meaning goes beyond the formalities of citizenship.

"The early-developing belief that nationality tracks deep, meaningful aspects of the social world appears to remain a part of adults' concepts of national identity, providing further insight into why these concepts are psychologically powerful," observes Hussak.

Yet there were developmental differences as well. Young children were relatively more likely to assume that national identity has a physical or biological basis—something that can be detected in one's body and passed on from one generation to the next. However, this aspect of children's concepts of [national identity](#) diminished among the older [children](#) in the sample and was notably much less prevalent among adults.

In addition, and perhaps more significantly, as subjects aged, the belief that a person's nationality is informative became increasingly likely to be linked to inequality-rationalizing attitudes: the stronger [older children's](#) expectation was that a person's nationality conveys rich information about them, the more accepting they were of status inequalities favoring their own national group.

"This work may provide a unique source of insight into current sociopolitical trends that prioritize national interests over globalization and cosmopolitanism," says Cimpian.

More information: Larisa J. Hussak et al, "It feels like it's in your body": How children in the United States think about nationality., *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2019). [DOI: 10.1037/xge0000567](https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000567)

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