

# Nationality likely a key factor in life-and-death decisions

13 November 2018



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People making decisions about life-and-death situations consider individuals' nationalities when deciding who should be sacrificed to save others, according to a study out of the University of Waterloo.

Examining how we think and come to a decision in a [moral dilemma](#), the study concluded that most people think of [group members](#) who share the same nationality as replaceable, making any of those members equally expendable within their research scenario.

"The question of how people decide who to sacrifice is often overlooked in research into moral-decision making," said Ori Friedman, professor of psychology at Waterloo and co-author of the study. "In our experiments, we examined how people choose victims in situations where sacrificing one person ensures a gain, such as the survival of the others in a group."

In conducting the research Friedman, Jonathan Fugelsang, professor of psychology at Waterloo, and Michał Białek, a [postdoctoral researcher](#) at Waterloo and a professor of economic psychology at Kozminski University, Poland, did a series of

experiments with 558 [participants](#).

Participants were presented with [hypothetical scenarios](#) in which they had to make decisions about who to sacrifice in order to save endangered members of a group. When several members of one nationality were all in danger of being killed, participants chose to save them by sacrificing a member of their nationality, rather than sacrificing someone from a different nationality.

"Our findings suggest that people viewed the members of the same nationality as interchangeable with one another," said Bialek. "They responded as though they viewed people in a nationality as resources that can be exchanged for one another."

In contrast, when the group members in a scenario were characterized by age, the [study participants](#) did not view those of the same age as interchangeable. Furthermore, when the scenario did not require exchanging lives, nationality did not factor into the participants' decision about the fate of group members.

The study suggests that the influence of nationality in moral decisions of who to sacrifice may be specific to situations where one person's life can be sacrificed to save the lives of others. By contrast, in cases where sacrifices may be necessary for other reasons, different factors could influence people's decisions. The findings also raise the possibility that people might make some counter-intuitive judgments about members of their own nationalities.

The study "Choosing victims: Human fungibility in moral [decision](#)-making" was recently published in the journal, *Judgment and Decision Making*.

Provided by University of Waterloo

APA citation: Nationality likely a key factor in life-and-death decisions (2018, November 13) retrieved 15 November 2019 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-11-nationality-key-factor-life-and-death-decisions.html>

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