

NEPOTISM AND FAVOURITISM: HOW HARMFUL ARE THESE PHENOMENA?

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Abstract

'Nepotism' and 'favouritism' have an international scale and negatively influence the economies of particular countries. Therefore, the current study analyses the attitude of Polish and Lithuanian employees working in private and public sector companies to these phenomena (this article presents only part of the results of the study, analysing nepotism and favouritism at the level of individual items, breaking down the respondents' answers into percentages of approval and disapproval respectively). Research sample in our study involved 337 Polish and Lithuanian respondents, representing both public and private sector organisations. We used a closed-type questionnaire in our survey. Statistical differences between countries were calculated using the Chi-square criterion.

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Introduction

'Nepotism' and 'favouritism' are often observed in the modern economy. Research conducted in many countries shows that no country (or even sector) is completely free of it. Though there have been many studies and works devoted to nepotism and favouritism, the evaluation of these phenomena is not easy as no unambiguous answer has been found so far as to when it causes harm, or when and in what cases it may be useful. In addition, there are studies which demonstrate that, even in enterprises of industry sectors operating in the same state, the manifestation of nepotism can vary significantly (Sroka and Vveinhardt, 2017). Although one may observe a general acceptance of their negative impact, some authors view nepotism as a kind of social network that may bring

some benefit in certain cases (Jaskiewicz et al., 2013), relating naturally existing kinship ties to knowledge sharing and greater responsibility.

In the literature there is a wide stream of research analysing the prevalence of both phenomena in private and public sector organisations. Those studies showed, *inter alia*, that nepotism was related to lower labour productivity in both sectors (Ombanda, 2018), and employees experienced a sense of insecurity (Arasli et al., 2019), religiosity and intercommunity conflict (Caputo, 2018). Nevertheless, there is still a lack of research analysing nepotism in the public and private sector, especially that which analyses the impact of nepotism and favouritism on the atmosphere and microclimate in the organisation. Unfortu-

nately, studies on CSR and ethics and/or management quality address this problem only to a certain extent. One should add that a connection between nepotism and favouritism and the CSR concept undoubtedly exists. Some critical votes on CSR (e.g. Chwistecka-Dudek, 2016) don't change it. Therefore, if nepotism and favouritism exist in an organisation, it will not be perceived as one that behaves ethically (Vveinhardt and Sroka, 2020). Given the deliberations presented, our study analyses the attitude of employees of Polish and Lithuanian organisations to the phenomena of nepotism and favouritism.

1. Literature review

1.1. Identification of the concepts and areas of analysis

Many researchers have analysed the problem of the existence of nepotism and favouritism in public sector organisations (Vveinhardt and Sroka, 2020). In the literature, both phenomena do not have the same meaning, though commonly they are regarded as synonymous. Pelletier and Bligh (2008) define nepotism as the act of showing favouritism to family members during a recruitment process or during promotional decisions. In turn, Arasli and Tumer (2008) define favouritism as *"the provision of special privilege to friends, colleagues and acquaintances, in areas of employment, career and personnel decisions"*. As one can see, the basic difference between the phenomena is that nepotism relates to relatives and family members, whilst favouritism refers not necessarily to relatives, but also friends and colleagues.

The studies on nepotism and favouritism conducted so far have analysed different aspects, such as the impact on the effectiveness of the organisation, religious aspects (Ignatowski et al., 2020), gender (Iqbal and Ahmad, 2020), ethnic identity (Hudson et al., 2017), union membership

(Ravetti et al., 2019), managers' behaviour towards employees (Hsiung and Bolino, 2018; Arici et al., 2020; Ranki et al., 2019 etc.), or an ethical dilemma that needs to be addressed by improving rules and regulations (Massey et al., 2018). The religious context seems to be an especially interesting area of research. Ignatowski et al., (2020) carried out a comparative analysis of the dominant view of Catholics and Protestants on nepotism. Their research revealed two basic findings: 1) nepotism is more frequently recognised as a negative phenomenon by Protestants than by Catholics, and 2) the phenomenon of nepotism is more common among Catholics than Protestants, which may stem from their milder evaluation of nepotism and the higher level of acceptance of this phenomenon. It seems that the perception of nepotism and favouritism by Muslims would be more similar to that of Catholics than Protestants.

1.2. Benefits and drawbacks

Some authors stress that there are positive aspects of nepotism and favouritism, which are mostly associated with the usefulness of social networks in attracting new employees to organisations (Chervenak and McCullough, 2007; Ferlazzo and Sdoia, 2012). Key issues raised by researchers relate to the hope that those providing the recommendations will remain honest and objective. One should, however, remember that the use of social relations to hire new employees should be linked to the professionalism and ethics of the managers (Janoskova and Klietkova, 2018). It means that clear norms and responsibility for unethical actions are necessary (Wated and Sanchez, 2015). In addition, managers who respect employees' views when it comes to decision-making might not take any decision to satisfy the selfish interest of the leader by favouring

their friends (Akuffo and Kivipöld, 2020). Such an approach is rather in the minority, and the vast majority of researchers underline the drawbacks and negative aspects of both phenomena. It is stressed that they disturb the psycho-emotional climate in the organisation, as well as eroding confidence in the managers, and above all the values declared by the organisation. Given this fact, many organisations have policies that remove family members from personnel decisions (Jones and Stout, 2015). The scholars stress a number of negative aspects of those phenomena, including dissatisfaction, motivation and work, commitment and trust among employees, risk (Oláh et al., 2019 a, b), as well as reduced social capital of the company (Ignatowski et al., 2019), an increase in employees' intention to leave their jobs (Kerse and Babadag, 2018), a decline in organisational commitment and worse practices in the field of human resource management (Büte, 2011). Moreover, nepotism and favouritism are also criticised for the recruitment of less skilled employees (Vveinhardt and Sroka, 2020). One should also add that these phenomena are damaging, because any claims that family members make must take precedence over any organisational requirements (Pearce, 2015).

1.3. Sectoral coverage

Research on nepotism and favouritism has been conducted in variety of countries and in many sectors. For example, Büte (2011), using a research sample comprising 243 respondents, studied the impact of nepotism on the behaviour of employees of public banks operating in Ankara (Turkey). His findings showed that nepotism had significant negative impact on job satisfaction, organisational commitment and the intention of employees to leave their jobs. Furthermore, Nadeem et al. (2015) analysed telecom sector organisations in

Pakistan. Their research also presented a negative aspect of nepotism and favouritism, revealing that a common practice was for vacancies to be filled on the basis of personal liking and preferences. Though in the past this was common practice in public organisations only, this is no longer the case.

Both examples presented were related to Muslim countries where nepotism plays a key role in finding jobs for relatives (Abdalla et al., 1998). The reason for this is that the widely understood public sector in those countries (as in other less developed countries) is the largest employer. In other words, private companies play a much less important role from this perspective. Another reason may be to do with cultural aspects: in such countries, obligations to protect family members and help them to advance are very strong (Vveinhardt and Sroka, 2020).

In contrast to developing countries, private sector organisations in developed countries usually perform better. This does not mean, however, that one cannot observe nepotism and favouritism in those countries. On the contrary, this phenomenon is also widely observed in such countries as well. For example, based on surveys conducted in Denmark and Canada, Ferlazzo and Sdoia (2012) revealed that 6% of respondents indicated that they were employed by the same employers who had earlier employed their parents as well. It is worth adding that similar data was obtained in research by Scoppa (2009). Furthermore, Sroka and Vveinhardt (2018) analysed the prevalence of nepotism and favouritism in the steel industry in Poland. Their results showed that, although most companies declared their commitment to anti-nepotism principles, in practice, the situation was much worse, as any declaration rather pertained to a standard "procedure", not individual cases.

The analysis conducted leads to three main conclusions. Firstly, scholars' views in analysing both phenomena differ. Some (though a minority) emphasise the benefits of these phenomena, e.g. Donnelly (1983) claims that family members with positive reputation can lend this reputation to the organisation. The majority of researchers, however, draw attention to negative aspects of both nepotism and favouritism (e.g. Pearce, 2015; Mohammed Abubakar et al., 2017; Sroka and Vveinhardt, 2018 etc.). Furthermore, one can see that these negative opinions have prevailed in recent years. Naturally, these opinions may diverge when it comes to the public and private sectors (Krizanova et al., 2019). Secondly, nepotism and favouritism are multidimensional phenomena which are analysed from different points of view. The research conducted in different countries has taken into account a variety of factors, such as the impact on the health and feelings of the employees (e.g. Büte, 2011), the prevalence of the phenomena in particular sectors (e.g. Mohammed Abubakar et al., 2017; Vveinhardt and Sroka, 2017; Sroka and Vveinhardt, 2018) or countries/groups of countries (Redding, 1990; Al-Aiban and Pearce, 1993; Hooker, 2009; Androniceanu and Tvaronavičienė, 2019), as well as the impact of religion on the perception of nepotism (Ignatowski et al., 2020). Some research has been dedicated to particular respondents such as MBS students (Chao et al., 2004) and case study analyses (Pearce and Huang, 2014). The diversity of research areas show how important and topical the analysed area is. Thirdly, these phenomena are observed in a variety of countries (both developed as well as developing ones) and sectors of the economy. No country is free of these phenomena, though there is no doubt that developing countries are more prone to their prevalence.

2. Methodology

In total, a group of 337 Polish and Lithuanian companies from both the private and public sectors was selected for analysis. Questionnaire survey was used to collect the data. The respondents were senior managers of the companies analysed. The research was conducted in 2019. When preparing the questionnaires, we used the studies of Abdalla et al., (1998) and Arasli and Tumer (2008). The statistical verification of the validity and reliability of the questionnaire during the exploratory research (Comrey and Lee, 1992; Ashander et al., 2019) demonstrated its highly psychometric characteristics.

Cronbach's alpha coefficient values were calculated separately for every subcategory. The results obtained show that the internal consistency of the subcategories of the questionnaire is strong, i.e. the lowest value of Cronbach's alpha coefficient when comparing 15 subcategories was recorded in only one subcategory (0.65). According to psychologists, this coefficient should not be lower than 0.5; in other social sciences, the coefficient is acceptable only if its value is not lower than 0.7 (Vveinhardt, 2012; Lušňáková et al., 2019; Vveinhardt and Gulbovaite, 2018). In all other subcategories, values ranged from 0.80 to 0.94 (for more details, see: Vveinhardt and Sroka, 2020).

3. Results and discussion

Table 1 presents the size of the organisations (very small, small, average, and large companies respectively) and the sectors of their activity (services, production, and trade).

Table 1. Size of the organisations and sectors of their activity

The size of the organisation	PL, N=164	LT, N=173
	%	%
A very small company (with less than 10 employees)	7.3	13.9
A small company (with less than 50 employees)	23.8	30.6
An average company (with less than 250 employees)	27.4	35.3
A large company (with more than 250 employees)	41.5	20.2
The nature of the activity	PL, N=164	LT, N=173
	%	%
Services	61	50.9
Production	23.8	27.7
Trade	15.2	21.4

Source: Own elaboration.

As one can see from Table 1, the majority of Polish respondents represented large companies (41.5%) who worked in services. In turn, in Lithuania, the number of respondents from large companies was half the size of Poland. In this case, SMEs companies are predominant. In both countries the least number of respondents represented very small entities employing less than 10 people, i.e. 7.3 % in Poland and 13.9 % in Lithuania.

Using the Chi-squared test criterion at the level of individual items (see Paseková et al., 2019; Šafránková and Šikýř, 2018), it was found that manifestations of nepotism at the level of individual items were in some cases more common in Polish work organisations than in their Lithuanian counterparts. The familial relationships between ordinary employees and high-level managers are perceived as a certain threat to both non-relative ordinary employees and lower-level managers, while the latter aspect is almost twice as important in Polish organisations. Besides, slightly less than half of respondents (in Lithuania, approximately one-third) feel that kinship is a weighty argument when competing for positions in the organisation, while having relatives in positions of authority is perceived as a significant protection against demotion (this is a typical response of more than half the

respondents from both groups). In other words, kinship “labels” and creates negative associations and hostility. However, although most respondents do not think that kinship somehow encourages employees to work better than others, it is acknowledged that relatives are more committed to the organisation, and the emerging trends in this case are similar in both countries. On the other hand, kinship-based privileges are more pronounced in Poland than in Lithuania, as well as the perception that these relationships become the cause of problems in communication, trust, interpersonal conflicts and business itself (Table 2).

Table 2. The influence of nepotism on interrelationships and careers

Nepotism		LT, N=173		PL, N=164		Chi-Square test results	
		N	%	N	%	χ^2	p
The heads of divisions in our organisation are wary of co-workers who have family members in leadership positions	Disagree	96	55.5	61	37.2	12.551	0.002**
	Agree	43	24.9	66	40.2		
Relatives of leaders experience pressure from their colleagues to perform better so as not to be seen as shameful by their closest relatives	Disagree	74	42.8	91	55.5	6.442	0.040*
	Agree	40	23.1	24	14.6		
Relatives of managers try to perform better than their co-workers, as they try not to disgrace their relatives	Disagree	98	56.6	81	49.4	1.861	0.394
	Agree	26	15.0	27	16.5		
Relatives of managers have to put in more effort to prove they are not protected	Disagree	67	38.7	70	42.7	3.233	0.199
	Agree	54	31.2	37	22.6		
Ordinary staff members cannot expect a position in which a relative of the manager is employed or is aiming for	Disagree	79	45.7	52	31.7	6.931	0.031*
	Agree	59	34.1	69	42.1		
Relatives of the management are uncertain whether their promotion is due to their achievements or their family ties	Disagree	49	28.3	54	32.9	1.368	0.505
	Agree	52	30.1	41	25.0		
The policy of protecting relatives requires less time for training and introducing ideology	Disagree	77	44.5	51	31.1	7.998	0.018*
	Agree	35	20.2	32	19.5		
Protecting and promoting relatives is useful, as it consolidates the family, ensuring they work together towards common goals and values	Disagree	89	51.4	77	47.0	1.378	0.502
	Agree	24	13.9	20	12.2		
In organisations where relatives are promoted, it is difficult to sack or demote family members, even if they prove to be unsuitable for their position	Disagree	33	19.1	28	17.1	0.286	0.867
	Agree	98	56.6	97	59.1		
I carefully consider every word when I communicate with colleagues who are relatives of the administrative staff	Disagree	69	39.9	52	31.7	2.505	0.286
	Agree	74	42.8	78	47.6		
I take all precautions when talking to relatives or members of managers' families employed in our organisation	Disagree	72	41.6	51	31.1	4.500	0.105
	Agree	80	46.2	85	51.8		
The presence of relatives contributes to the betterment of communication within the organisation	Disagree	96	55.5	96	58.5	0.968	0.616
	Agree	16	9.2	18	11.0		
Communicating with relatives of top management is complicated, because they usually act or are suspected of acting as spies on behalf of top management	Disagree	62	35.8	40	24.4	6.704	0.035*
	Agree	63	36.4	80	48.8		
Relatives of managers feel more responsibility and commitment to the organisation than other employees	Disagree	35	20.2	18	11.0	5.529	0.063
	Agree	77	44.5	84	51.2		
I take a dim view of a colleague who is a relative of the boss	Disagree	112	64.7	82	50.0	11.711	0.003**
	Agree	25	14.5	48	29.3		
I get frustrated when a co-worker is praised just because of his/her family connections	Disagree	64	37.0	37	22.6	8.429	0.015*
	Agree	72	41.6	86	52.4		
There is mutual mistrust between me and a relative of the manager	Disagree	100	57.8	59	36.0	26.444	0.0001**
	Agree	19	11.0	53	32.3		
Most conflicts arise due to relatives employed and favoured by the top leaders	Disagree	108	62.4	69	42.1	20.031	0.0001**
	Agree	18	10.4	45	27.4		

In organisations where relatives are promoted, family conflicts often cause business (organisational) problems	Disagree	51	29.5	33	20.1	6.176	0.046*
	Agree	66	38.2	83	50.6		
Relatives of the managers are useful as they ensure the smooth transition of managerial practices when power is passed from one generation to another	Disagree	56	32.4	34	20.7	13.452	0.001**
	Agree	71	41.0	56	34.1		
In organisations where relatives of the top management are a priority, attracting and keeping employees who are not related is a hard task	Disagree	39	22.5	26	15.9	7.735	0.021*
	Agree	92	53.2	76	46.3		
Organisations which promote relatives care more about the welfare of their family members than the prosperity of the business (organisation)	Disagree	47	27.2	38	23.2	1.118	0.572
	Agree	69	39.9	74	45.1		
In organisations where family members are promoted, internal conflicts cause the breakup of the business (organisation)	Disagree	41	23.7	33	20.1	0.817	0.665
	Agree	66	38.2	69	42.1		
I wish I had a relative in a high position in our organisation	Disagree	89	51.4	84	51.2	0.880	0.644
	Agree	39	22.5	43	26.2		
The connections and relations of managers allow them to avoid taking part in time-consuming routine chores of the organisation	Disagree	82	47.4	51	31.1	14.785	0.001**
	Agree	28	16.2	53	32.3		

Note: * statistical significance level $\alpha = 0.05$; ** statistical significance level $\alpha = 0.01$.

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 3. The influence of favouritism on interpersonal relationships and the organisation

Favouritism		LT, N=173		PL, N=164		Chi-Square test results	
		N	%	N	%	χ^2	p
It is difficult to dismiss or demote an employee in organisations where relatives are promoted	Disagree	27	15.6	44	26.8	12.150	0.002**
	Agree	109	63.0	73	44.5		
I take all precautions when communicating with friends of the managers employed in our organisation	Disagree	67	38.7	48	29.3	3.373	0.185
	Agree	86	49.7	95	57.9		
Very often the official information differs significantly from the real story, which is usually available/known exclusively to a small group of the privileged few (the in-crowd)	Disagree	70	40.5	59	36.0	1.970	0.373
	Agree	63	36.4	72	43.9		
The manager of our department/organisation does everything the management wants and cannot communicate these decisions to the subordinates	Disagree	56	32.4	75	45.7	13.825	0.001**
	Agree	96	55.5	58	35.4		
A co-worker who is a friend/relative of the manager fails to fulfil my professional expectations	Disagree	82	47.4	62	37.8	4.444	0.108
	Agree	32	18.5	44	26.8		
In my eyes, the manager's friend/relative is the cause of internal conflicts in the organisation	Disagree	82	47.4	63	38.4	2.889	0.236
	Agree	50	28.9	53	32.3		
In organisations where friends are promoted, internal feuds become nuisances for the business (organisation)	Disagree	45	26.0	27	16.5	5.706	0.058
	Agree	75	43.4	89	54.3		
In organisations where friends and acquaintances of the top management are a priority, attracting and keeping employees who are not related is a hard task	Disagree	41	23.7	23	14.0	7.224	0.027*
	Agree	88	50.9	82	50.0		

I wish a close friend or a relative of mine were employed in a high position in our organisation	Disagree	82	47.4	78	47.6	0.168	0.919
	Agree	48	27.7	48	29.3		

Note: * statistical significance level $\alpha = 0.05$; ** statistical significance level $\alpha = 0.01$.

Source: Own elaboration.

The negative impact of favouritism at the levels of possibilities of dismissal, access to information and attraction of new employees is more pronounced in Lithuanian work organisations than in Polish ones, while the differences identified are statistically significant. As in the case of relatives, a significant proportion of employees perceive those who enjoy managers' favour as privileged, associate their presence with threats, and distrust them (e.g., for this reason, about half of respondents from both

states tend to be "cautious" with such people), which stems from a sense of injustice. In other words, part of the employees who do not fall into the category of those protected by management feel discriminated against. Nevertheless, it is significant that more than a quarter of respondents in both countries tend to benefit from patronages themselves, which shows certain culturally specific trends of giving prominence to unfair privileges (Table 3).

Table 4. Consequences of nepotism and favouritism on the emotional state and the organisation

Nepotism and favouritism		LT, N=173		PL, N=164		Chi-Square test results	
		N	%	N	%	χ^2	p
Employees do not feel safe in the knowledge that there are employees with ties of kinship in our organisation	Disagree	102	59.0	57	34.8	19.846	0.0001**
	Agree	49	28.3	72	43.9		
I do not think that top management is concerned with the quality of work performed by their relatives or friends	Disagree	90	52.0	51	31.1	15.207	0.001**
	Agree	50	28.9	70	42.7		
In our organisation, the criteria for promotion are not related to work tasks	Disagree	91	52.6	56	34.1	12.753	0.002**
	Agree	54	32.1	63	38.4		
Promoting an employee just because of his/her relationship to the management is harmful to the organisation	Disagree	28	16.2	17	10.4	2.467	0.291
	Agree	121	69.9	123	75.0		
Working in an organisation is always related to having the right connections and relationships	Disagree	84	48.6	73	44.5	1.410	0.494
	Agree	54	31.2	49	29.9		
The exaggerated support and protection of some employees contaminates the atmosphere in our organisation	Disagree	72	41.6	71	43.3	4.148	0.126
	Agree	60	34.7	68	41.5		
Friends and relatives of highly influential people are easily institutionalised in our organisation and are awarded posts far beyond their competencies	Disagree	77	44.5	61	37.2	2.167	0.338
	Agree	55	31.8	55	33.5		
You may be subject to discrimination simply due to your social status (origin, family, position, income, etc.)	Disagree	120	69.4	86	52.4	37.435	0.0001**
	Agree	16	9.2	60	36.6		

Note: * statistical significance level $\alpha = 0.05$; ** statistical significance level $\alpha = 0.01$.

Source: Own elaboration.

Comparing the percentages of Polish and Lithuanian respondents' agreement with the questionnaire items, the role of social status was prominent, which explains employees' negative interactions. In this case, Polish respondents (approximately one-third) tend to relate interpersonal disagreements to social status more often than Lithuanian respondents (approximately one in ten). Promotion, which means a higher status in the organisation, is more closely related to results in Lithuania, where employees feel safer and give less prominence to the link between management's attitude to work quality and the tendency to favour individual employees. In spite of this, about seven out of 10 respondents in both countries treat patronage-based promotion as a practice which is harmful to the organisation, although only about one-third believe that jobs are generally obtained through patronage (Table 4).

Conclusions

Our study analysed the attitudes of employees of Polish and Lithuanian organisations to nepotism and favouritism. The differences in the reactions that have arisen between employees indicate minor differences in the prevalence of patronage of loved ones and friends itself. Although some processes have developed differently in private and public organisations, both sectors share some common features, which means one may expect similar reactions to these phenomena too. An especially significant observation in both countries was that approximately 70% of respondents treat patronage-based promotion as a practice which is harmful to the organisation, although only about one-third believe that jobs are generally obtained through patronage. Our study also revealed that discrimination processes differ within different subcategories. There-

fore it shows the necessity of a systemic approach to these phenomena.

Our study makes several contributions to the broader topic. First of all, it adds to the current knowledge of nepotism and favouritism. Second, the study is based on analysis of two countries (an international approach) and takes into account a relatively large sample of respondents (337 in total) which may be regarded as a substantial added value of the study.

Our research has several implications. First of all, it confirmed the generally accepted thesis that Polish and Lithuanian organisations, from both the public and private sectors, are not free of these pathologies. Knowledge of this fact may be very useful for managers as it allows them to take preventive actions.

Our study had several limitations. Firstly, our study was quantitative, whereas a qualitative approach might be used in future research. Secondly, this study reflects only employee reactions to people who are considered "favourites". The issue of which individual or organisational circumstances lead to such negative "labelling" of some of co-workers was not investigated. Therefore, we cannot rule out psychological processes promoting the devaluation of co-workers who achieve more, the influence of stereotypes, as well as communication mistakes made by managers, which are worth investigating separately in the future. Such possibilities are evidenced by both a sufficiently significant trend of employees seeking management's patronage and the trend towards the lack of information from management (i.e. there may be insufficient objective information about the reasons why some employees are valued more than others).

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