SILESIAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY PUBLISHING HOUSE

SCIENTIFIC PAPERS OF SILESIAN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY 2026
ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT SERIES NO. 255

CRONYISM IN THE PERCEPTION OF FUTURE MANAGERS – STUDENTS OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES

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Purpose: The purpose of this article is to synthesize existing knowledge on cronyism as a manifestation of pathology in human capital management, and to diagnose the attitudes of management degree students toward this phenomenon and its potential consequences?
Design/methodology/approach: The study covered a group of 200 management degree students representing three universities: two in the Podlaskie and one in the Masovian Voivodeship. The following research problems were formulated: 1. What is the scale of cronyism in enterprises operating in Poland, as assessed by students, who are future managers? 2. How do respondents evaluate the potential consequences of cronyism? 3. What situations, in respondents' assessment, justify cronyism in hiring practice? A questionnaire serving as the research tool.
Findings: Students had difficulty formulating an unambiguous evaluation of the potential consequences of cronyism. The most significant risks associated with cronyism, according to respondents, are the risk of unfair treatment of employees - and consequently a decline in the quality and standards of work - as well as the risk that informal divisions will emerge within the organization between those who are and those who are not within the circle of acquaintances. The risks rated lowest by respondents relate to the potential exclusion of individuals outside the inner circle and the favoritism of colleagues in the promotion process. The majority of study participants exhibited a lack of a clear stance on the issue of hiring someone through personal connections. Students identified a range of circumstances that justify hiring acquaintances and friends.
Research limitations/implications: The limitations of the study stem from the fact that the sample does not meet the criterion of representativeness, as participants were drawn from only two regions. It is therefore advisable to extend the research to students from universities in various regions with more diverse cultural backgrounds.
Originality/value: The originality of this article lies in its subject matter. This is the first study in Poland to examine student attitudes toward the phenomenon of cronyism.
Keywords: cronyism, students, management.
Category of the paper: Research paper.

1. Introduction

Cronyism (also referred to as favoritism) is defined as the granting of privileges to employees on the basis of social and personal connections, rather than on the basis of their competencies or work performance (Khatri, 2017; Zhang, Gill, 2019, pp. 322-344). It involves the favoritism of friends and/or acquaintances in hiring, promotion, or the awarding of other benefits arising from the employment relationship. Cronyism is also defined as a horizontal network of connections among acquaintances (cronies) who, having been placed in their respective positions, sustain or promote one another depending on who currently holds power. Cronyism involves unequal treatment and may occur in organizations in two forms: (a) horizontal cronyism, i.e., favoritism based on relationships at the same level within the organizational structure (e.g., friends, colleagues, classmates, social groups, and trade unions), or (b) vertical cronyism, which involves the favoritism of a subordinate on the basis of factors unrelated to their work performance, thus encompassing the relationship between a leader and a subordinate (Shaheen et al., 2017, pp. 308-323).

Cronyism is a manifestation of relational pathology in organizations, as it entails a range of negative consequences, including reduced job satisfaction, declining organizational commitment, increased destructive stress, and voluntary employee turnover. Despite these serious potential consequences, cronyism in the Polish context remains relatively under-researched, and available research focuses primarily on the public sector and the phenomenon of crony capitalism (Bartnicki, 2019, pp. 65-70). The purpose of this article is therefore to synthesize existing knowledge on cronyism as a manifestation of pathology in human capital management and to diagnose the attitudes of management degree students toward this phenomenon and its potential consequences. The underlying assumption is that students' attitudes toward cronyism in professional relationships indirectly reflect their moral attitudes as future managers, and that the research findings can thus be utilized in the process of improving the management degree curriculum in areas related to ethics in management. The study covered a group of 200 management degree students representing 3 universities (two public, one private) in the Podlaskie and Masovian voivodeships. The following research problems were formulated:

1. What is the scale of cronyism in enterprises operating in Poland, as assessed by students, who are future managers?
2. How do respondents evaluate the potential consequences of cronyism?
3. What situations, in respondents' assessment, justify cronyism in hiring policy?

A survey-based research method was employed, with a questionnaire serving as the research tool.

2. Cronyism as a Manifestation of Pathology in Management – A Literature Review

There is no consensus in the literature as to when the term was first used. Some researchers maintain that this occurred in 1665, when Samuel Pepys first used the word crony in the sense of an original, long-standing friendship or association between individuals in the context of persons connected with the universities of Cambridge and Oxford (school companions). Other sources indicate that the term's first use occurred in 1840, where it was defined as "the skill and inclination to form friendships" (Khatri, Tsang, 2003, pp. 289-303). In its contemporary sense, it gained currency through a New York Times journalist who applied the term cronyism to practices employed by the Truman administration in the early 1950s, involving the appointment of individuals to government offices through personal connections. It has been confirmed that in the public sector, cronyism negatively affects organizational effectiveness (Awaah, 2022; Coco, Lagravinese, 2014, pp. 443-450), heightens the risk of corruption (Roberts, 2010, pp. 1-12), and engenders pathological behaviors among public servants (Arkorfu, 2022, pp. 708-727; Shaheen et al., 2017, pp. 308-317).

A distinction must be drawn between cronyism and crony capitalism. Crony capitalism is an extension of the general concept of cronyism, as it concerns economic entities or other organizations that derive benefits by virtue of their political connections (Reinsberg et al., 2021, pp. 607-626; Rubin, 2016, pp. 105-120; Chekir, Diwan, 2014, pp. 177-180). Crony capitalism is a term describing an economy in which business success depends on close relationships between businesspeople and government officials and politicians. It may manifest in the form of favoritism in the distribution of legal permits and licenses, government subsidies, special tax concessions, grants and loans, or other forms of state interventionism. Such a politicized economic system poses a threat to the free market, as it involves the deliberate and systematic use of policy to manipulate markets in ways that benefit politically connected entities. Crony capitalism cultivates political entrepreneurs while suppressing market entrepreneurs by undermining transparency and competition (Diwan, Keefer, Schiffbauer, 2016). It is a pathological phenomenon in which the relationships between politically connected capitalists and corrupt bureaucrats and politicians perpetuate both petty corruption (bribes in interactions between state officials and social actors) and grand corruption (the abuse of power by political elites to increase the gains of economic elites) (Reinsberg, Kentikelenis, Stubbs, 2021, pp. 607-625). The expansion of networks of privilege generates widespread social frustration and, consequently, crony capitalism can provoke serious social unrest, as occurred, for example, in Egypt and Tunisia (Chekir, Diwan, 2014, pp. 177-198).

Crony capitalism may also take another form: politicians may exploit the public sector or state-owned enterprises to offer attractive positions to associates at the expense of organizational efficiency and general welfare. Research conducted in Portugal, for instance,

demonstrated that public sector employment increases significantly in the months immediately preceding or following a change of government, but only when the incoming government is formed by a different party (or coalition) than its predecessor (Martins, 2020).

Cronyism constitutes an interdisciplinary subject of study primarily within economics and finance, the social sciences, public administration and political science, ethics, and psychology. In management and quality sciences, this phenomenon is treated as one of the key manifestations of organizational pathology, as it leads to numerous negative consequences (Turhan, 2014, pp. 295-308). Employees who are not "cronies" feel they are being treated unfairly, which reduces their organizational loyalty, commitment, and job satisfaction (Mao et al., 2018, pp. 745-756; Christensen-Salem et al., 2021, pp. 619-624), and increases work-related stress and readiness to change employers (Erdem, Karataş, 2015, pp. 55-67; Pearce, 2015, pp. 41-44). Research places particular emphasis on the destructive impact of cronyism on intra-organizational relations and social capital (Shaheen et al., 2020). Cronyism causes informal divisions to form within organizations between those who are and those who are not within the inner circle, as a result of which members of out-groups feel excluded and cut off from key information (Quade, Greenbaum, Petrenko, 2017, pp. 675-689). They experience ostracism and a sense of being ignored (Ferris, Chen, Lim, 2017, pp. 315-325). Excluded out-group members have limited opportunities to contribute to organizational processes and reduced access to organizational resources, including knowledge resources (Bedi, 2021, pp. 861-880). Cronyism significantly diminishes the sense of trust within a divided team, which consequently reduces the quality of communication and leads to destructive conflicts between those favored and those excluded from the privileged personal network (Howard, Cogswell, Smith, 2020, pp. 577-589; Riaz, Zaman, 2018, pp. 831-841). Cronyism is often accompanied by the promotion of a poor work culture, ultimately causing a decline in organizational effectiveness of teams and entire organizations. Placing incompetent individuals in senior positions reduces the quality of management (Ignatowski, Sułkowski, Stopczyński, 2021, p. 59). Furthermore, in accordance with social exchange theory and equity theory, when employees perceive injustice and a lack of correlation between input and outcome, or when they believe they are not being treated in accordance with the principles of fairness and professionalism, they may engage in negative counterproductive or anomic behaviors as a form of "retaliation" against the organization (Kowalewski, Moczydłowska, 2020, pp. 45-50) or quiet quitting (Moczydłowska, 2024, pp. 442-450).

Cronyism is often confused with nepotism (Niemiec, 2024, pp. 475-479). The most important distinction between these two phenomena stems from the degree of kinship between the individuals granting favors and those being favored. On the one hand, there are similarities between cronyism and nepotism, as in both cases privileges, duties, or positions are assigned to individuals on the basis of factors other than merit (Pasamonik, 2024, pp. 3-26). On the other hand, there are also significant differences. In cronyism, the favored individual is not a family member, which is the defining characteristic of nepotism. Cronyism as a term encompassing,

for example, members of a social group, children of friends, and colleagues is a broader concept than nepotism (Kuforiji, 2024, pp. 1-105; Shah et al., 2025, pp. 177-180; Rasheed, Roques, Rashid, 2025, pp. 1-18). The foundation of nepotism is a family relationship, and the favoritism it entails constitutes amoral familism, which often arises from emotions characteristic of family members (e.g., love for relatives, loyalty, and attachment to close ones). In the case of cronyism, the emotional context is also relevant; however, the emotions involved are less intense or more varied, ranging, for example, from affection for a university acquaintance to fear of exclusion from a group (Gusman, 2024, pp. 239-246).

3. Research Methodology and Sample Characteristics

The aim of the study was to explore the opinions of management students regarding the prevalence and potential consequences of cronyism in human resource management within organizations. It was assumed that raising awareness of the occurrence and effects of cronyism constitutes an important element in developing the moral competencies of future managers, thus justifying a diagnostic study in this area. The study encompassed a group of 200 full-time management students representing three universities (two public, one private) in the Podlaskie and Masovian voivodeships. Part-time students were deliberately excluded in order to minimize the influence of respondent age as a variable. The sample consisted of 60% male and 40% female participants. As many as 52.5% of respondents (105 individuals) were currently employed, of whom 34.3% held employment contracts (full- or part-time), while the remaining individuals in this subgroup worked under civil law contracts. The sample was dominated by first-cycle (Bachelor's) students (140 individuals, 70%), reflecting the distribution of first- and second-cycle students within the general population of this field of study. Figure 1 shows the distribution of participants by year of study.

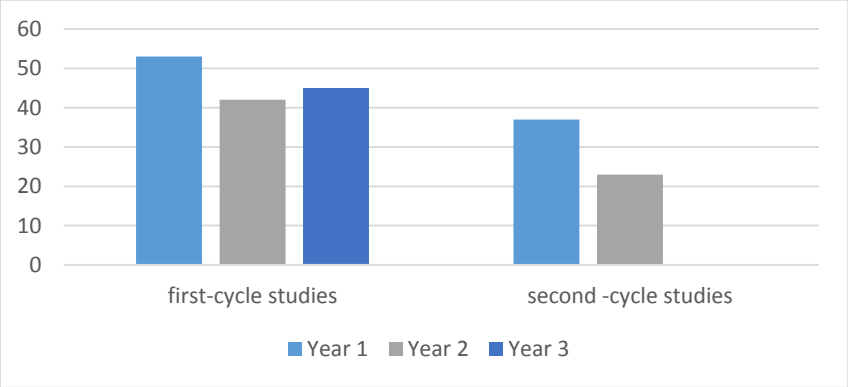


Figure 1. Distribution of participants by year of study.

Source: own work.

The following research questions were formulated:

1. What is the scale of cronyism in enterprises operating in Poland, as assessed by students, who are future managers?
2. How do respondents evaluate the potential consequences of cronyism?
3. What circumstances, in respondents' assessment, justify cronyism in hiring policy?

To address these research questions, the survey-based research method was employed, with a questionnaire as the research tool. It was assumed that students might not be familiar with the term cronyism (kronizm), and therefore the questionnaire used the colloquial Polish expressions kolesiostwo (meaning: networking turned nepotism) and "through personal connections". The study was conducted in January 2026.

4. The Phenomenon of Cronyism as Perceived by Management Students – Research Findings

In the assessment of the large majority of management students, the practice of hiring someone "through personal connections" is widespread in Polish enterprises. Among first-cycle students, 83.5% selected the responses "very often" or "often", while among second-cycle students this figure stood at 88.4% (see figure 2). The gender of respondents, university location, and level of study had no significant effect on the distribution of responses.

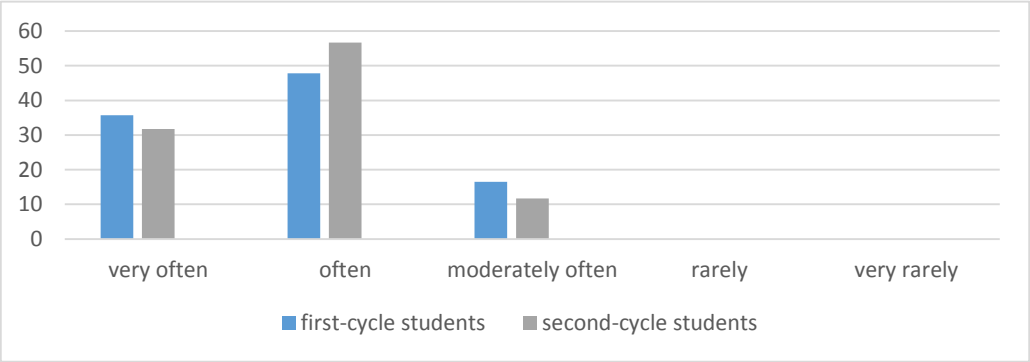


Figure 1. Distribution of participants by year of study.

Source: own work.

When evaluating the potential risks associated with working in a team composed of the owner's or manager's friends and acquaintances, students largely avoided clear-cut extreme assessments. Although the median score on a 1-to-5 scale was 4 (high risk) for most potential risks, the mean scores ranged within the moderate interval of 2.9 to 3.9. According to study participants, the greatest risks arising from cronyism are the risk of unfair treatment of employees and the consequent decline in work quality and standards (mean 3.9, median 4), as well as the risk that informal divisions will emerge within the organization between those who belong and those who do not belong to the manager's personal network, leading to

a deterioration of the workplace atmosphere (mean 3.7, median 4). The greatest dispersion of results occurred in the assessment of the statement "Employees outside the manager's circle of friends and acquaintances often feel excluded" (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Risks associated with cronyism as assessed by management students

Statement	Mean (scale 1-5)	Variance	Standard Deviation	Median
Employees outside the manager's circle of friends and acquaintances often feel disadvantaged, which reduces their job satisfaction.	3.5	0.9857	0.9928	4
Employees outside the manager's circle have limited opportunities for promotion.	2.9	1.1271	1.0617	3
Employees outside the manager's circle of friends and acquaintances often feel excluded.	2.9	1.2846	1.1334	3
Cronyism generates the risk of unfair treatment of employees and, consequently, a decline in work quality and standards.	3.9	0.9275	0.9631	4
Due to cronyism, informal divisions emerge within the organization between insiders and outsiders, leading to a deterioration of the workplace atmosphere.	3.7	1.0537	1.0537	4
Cronyism is a frequent source of destructive conflict within organizations.	3.3	1.2273	1.0314	3
Cronyism generates the risk of employee turnover among those outside the inner circle.	3.6	1.0639	1.0315	4

Source: own work.

An important element of the study was the assessment of students' level of acceptance of cronyism in hiring practices. When evaluating the truthfulness of the statement "I see nothing wrong with hiring friends and acquaintances (e.g., from school or university)", the majority of participants selected the response "I partially agree and partially disagree", which, given the relatively low variance, indirectly indicates an absence of a clear-cut position on the matter and/or a high awareness of the complexity of this phenomenon (see Table 2).

Table 2.
Level of acceptance of cronyism in hiring practices

Statement	Mean (scale 1-5)	Variance	Standard Deviation	Median
I see nothing wrong with hiring friends and acquaintances (e.g., from school or university).	3.3	0.6575	0.8109	3

Source: own work.

A more in-depth diagnosis of students' acceptance of cronyism was enabled by the analysis of responses to the open-ended question: Are there situations in which hiring 'through personal connections' is justified? If so, what are they? (see Table 3).

Table 3.
Situations justifying hiring "through personal connections" as assessed by students

Category of Response	Frequency of Responses (N = 128) - Number/% *
If the person being hired possesses the competencies required by the organization	74 (60.2%)
If it is employment within a family business	23 (18%)
If the person is an outstanding expert in their field	16 (12.5%)
If it constitutes assistance to a friend in a difficult personal situation	15 (11.7%)
If a trusted and proven individual is needed	11 (8.6%)
If there is no time for formal recruitment and an employee is needed immediately	10 (7.8%)
Only if no other candidate can be found	8 (6.2%)
If there is a guarantee of fair and impartial treatment of all employees	8 (6.2%)
If the position does not require specific competencies and it makes no difference who is hired	5 (3.9%)
There are no circumstances that justify hiring "through personal connections"	5 (3.9%)

* Percentages exceed 100% due to multiple responses.

Source: own work.

Of the total sample, 128 respondents chose to answer the open-ended question. Over 60% of this subgroup believe there are no objections to hiring someone "through personal connections" if that person possesses the required competencies. An additional 12.5% of respondents within this subgroup (16 out of 128 students) expressed the view that such hiring is fully justified when the prospective employee is an expert in their field, or when the organization has no time for formal recruitment and needs an employee immediately (10 responses, 7.8%). Notably, as many as 11.7% of students in the open-response subgroup (7.5% of the total sample) believe that a friend's or acquaintance's difficult personal circumstances also fully justify hiring them "through personal connections". For 23 respondents, this form of hiring is equally acceptable in family-owned businesses. Only 5 individuals unequivocally stated that there are no circumstances that justify hiring "through personal connections". It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the majority of management students struggle to adopt an unequivocally negative stance toward a phenomenon that in the academic literature is described as a manifestation of organizational pathology. They relativize this phenomenon by identifying a range of factors that justify offering employment to friends and acquaintances, conditioning such practices on the one hand on the professional competencies of the candidates, and on the other on the needs of the organization.

5. Conclusions

The aim of the study presented in this article was to diagnose the attitudes of management students toward the phenomenon of cronyism. The analysis of the research findings enabled responses to the formulated research questions:

1. What is the scale of cronyism in enterprises operating in Poland, as assessed by students, who are future managers? In the assessment of the vast majority of management students, the practice of hiring someone “through personal connections” is widespread in Polish enterprises.
2. How do respondents evaluate the potential consequences of cronyism? Most students encountered difficulty in formulating a clear-cut assessment of the potential consequences of cronyism, the list of which was developed on the basis of a review of the current state of research on this phenomenon. Although the median score on a 1-to-5 scale was 4 (high risk) for most potential risks, mean scores ranged within the moderate interval of 2.9 to 3.9. According to management students, the greatest risks arising from cronyism are the risk of unfair treatment of employees and the consequent decline in work quality and standards, as well as the risk that informal divisions will emerge within the organization between insiders and outsiders, resulting in a deterioration of the workplace atmosphere. The risks rated lowest by respondents relate to the potential exclusion of individuals outside the inner circle and the favoritism shown to acquaintances in promotion processes.
3. What circumstances, in respondents' assessment, justify cronyism in hiring policy? The majority of study participants demonstrated an absence of a clear-cut position on the issue of hiring “through personal connections”. Management students identified a range of circumstances that justify offering employment to friends and acquaintances. The most prominent among these are high professional competencies of the candidates, the family-owned nature of the business, and the difficult personal circumstances of a friend or acquaintance.

The university's location, as well as variables such as age and gender, had no significant effect on the distribution of respondents' answers.

In the course of the study, a number of limitations were identified. These stem primarily from the fact that the sample does not meet the criterion of representativeness, as study participants came from only two regions. It is therefore advisable to extend the research to universities operating in different regions of the country, thus encompassing respondents with more varied cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, in the author's opinion, it is justified to continue research on attitudes toward cronyism among students of disciplines other than management, which would provide insight into the generational perception of this phenomenon. Given the ambiguous results obtained across many of the examined dimensions, the future use of qualitative research methods appears valuable, as they would allow for a deeper understanding of the nuances associated with future managers' attitudes toward cronyism.

Acknowledgements

The research was conducted as part of Project No. WIZ/WZ-INZ/3/2026 at the Białystok University of Technology and funded by a research grant provided by the minister responsible for science.

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