

Article

The Eurozone Crisis: Psychological Mechanisms Undermining and Supporting European Solidarity

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Abstract: Europe has become a vivid example of intergroup dynamics with all the risks and chances it holds for peaceful and respectful co-existence. While Europe as a superordinate social category has the capability of solidarity between its subcategories (*i.e.*, nations), negative emotions and behaviors among the countries' citizens have become more prevalent throughout the emerging crisis. This article aims to analyze the psychological outcomes (*i.e.*, negative attitudes) following on from the structural and economic imbalances within the European Union. More precisely, we argue that political reactions towards the Euro crisis facilitated routes to nationalism and thereby fostered supremacy in a few countries. This perceived supremacy of some countries, in turn, legitimized negative reactions towards others. Based on predictions from a social identity perspective, we describe how these processes perpetuate themselves. We also suggest strategies that might prevent the idea of a common Europe from failing.

Keywords: the euro crisis; intergroup behavior; prototypicality; negative attitudes; social identity

1. Introduction

International relations between Europe's nation states have seen brighter days. Despite efforts to establish a European political community and identity, several years of economic crisis have unhinged the idea of a united Europe. In recent years, parties with strongly national, if not thoroughly right-wing, agendas such as the Alternative für Deutschland (Germany), Jobbik (Hungary), Vlaams Belang (Belgium) and the Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden)—to name just a few—have gained increasingly strong support and influence within the European Union (EU). One recent example is the February 2014 majority vote in favor of capping immigration proposed by the Schweizer Volkspartei (Switzerland) [1]. Moreover, a January 2014 Gallup poll showed that the nationalist party “Golden Dawn” (Greece) has become the third-largest party in the country [2]. This trend poses at best challenges, at worst a serious threat to diversity and democracy within the EU [3]. Given these premises, can Europe still function as a superordinate identity, and if so, how?

From a social-psychological point of view, the respective European nations can be understood as subcategories of a superordinate social category, namely “Europe”. While members of the subcategories frequently interact with each other, the economic crisis has a negative impact on positive interactions and thus on identification with Europe as a whole. Put differently, one could say that the idea of a European community suffers from the growing focus on national subcategories instead of on the overarching, inclusive social category Europe.

The Global Attitudes Project published by the Pew Research Center (PEW) helps to illustrate our point. Over the last year, support for the European Union has dropped by several percentage points across various European nations [4]. The PEW researchers describe a rather grim outlook for the EU, explicitly linked to the economic crisis that has been causing problems ever since its beginning in 2007: “The prolonged economic crisis has created centrifugal forces that are pulling European public opinion apart, separating the French from the Germans and the Germans from everyone else.” Arguably, the major problems reported throughout the survey are economic in nature, for example, lack of employment opportunities [4]. This, in and of itself, may explain why participants do not report positive expectations for the future. It does not, however, offer an explanation for the rise of right-wing populist and nationalist parties and the decline in support for the European Union. After all, one could also suggest that a crisis like this presents the possibility of rallying under a common flag and trying to resolve problems together. However, a closer look at the PEW data highlights another problem alongside the economic ones: those countries particularly affected by the crisis (e.g., Greece) perceive the intra-European wealth distribution as unjust, and less affected countries such as Germany as “arrogant” and “lacking compassion”. In turn, many Germans perceive Greece or Italy as the least trustworthy and hardworking EU countries. [4,5].

Stereotypes like these are a core topic within social psychology and various theoretical approaches suggest explanations as to why notions such as “lazy Greeks” and “German thrift dictators” and national separation have come more into vogue. In this article, we will draw on theoretical and empirical contributions from a social identity perspective, hoping to shed some light on the processes and causes underlying these phenomena and what might be done to counteract them. We will do this by focusing on two main questions:

- (1) Through which theories can we understand the negative perceptions of European nations' citizens towards others and the current developments towards nationalism?
- (2) How can we draw on these theories to develop mechanisms which could help to (re)unite European citizens and establish a positive European identity?

In order to provide answers to the questions we raise here, we will first turn to more general processes which provide a broader framework of the psychological dimensions at work. We will then apply a recent intergroup research model, showing that the subcategories within a European supra identity have a profound impact on how Europe as such is perceived, and are themselves a source of conflict. To conclude, we present psychological mechanisms which may help improve citizens' assessments of Europe in the hope of stimulating further research that focuses on how to repair what has been damaged.

2. Intergroup Conflict—or Why Europe Remains National

Evidently, the first and foremost problem Europe is currently facing is economic in nature. Regardless of several bailouts and political interventions, countries like Greece, Ireland, Spain, Italy and Portugal are still struggling with massive budget deficits. While the respective political interventions aiming to reduce debt have in some cases led to severe austerity and thus could explain some countries' anti-European sentiments, there is more to the picture. The problems are not merely the debts themselves, but also the distribution of wealth and the political interventions within Europe, which are perceived as gravely unfair [4]. This is particularly true when there is a direct creditor and debtor relationship, as in the case of Germany and Greece. As Brosnan and de Waal [6] argue, violating norms of fairness (e.g., in economic simulations) comes with strongly negative connotations, quite possibly even evolutionary in origin. Within social sciences, the feeling of being deprived of privileges (e.g., not having the same financial autonomy as others) is a well-established precursor to discontent and the founding of social movements, especially when this lack of privileges is felt, not only by some individuals within a nation, but by a broader group or groups ('fraternal deprivation') [7,8]. Hence, it is not surprising that conditions of unequal resource distribution can indeed breed conflict. This assumption lies at the heart of social psychology's earliest field studies into the nature of intergroup conflict. So, how do lack of resources and feelings of deprivation contribute to conflict and does this help us understand the current European turmoil?

2.1. Resource Conflicts: The EU as an IOU?

Whereas previous studies into group relations were primarily focused on individual factors (e.g., inter-individual sympathies), Sherif [9] suggested that a group perspective was necessary to understand how groups would come into conflict. His so called "Robber's cave experiment" and the resulting theory of Realistic Group Conflict are still of relevance today. In these studies, groups of 12 year old, well-adjusted school boys of similar social backgrounds were invited to participate in a summer camp, where they were—depending on the respective study—either in a common group and then divided into two groups or already started the camp as separate groups. Following this initial phase, Sherif and colleagues introduced a series of competitions between camps, which created a

“negative interdependence”: in other words, one group’s gain (e.g., winning a prize) was tied to the other group’s loss, akin to distribution of scarce resources. In line with Sherif’s expectations, the boys not only engaged in fierce competition over limited prizes and rewards, they also developed strong mutual antipathies and open hostilities, for instance name-calling or flag-stealing. Reconciliation between the competing groups only emerged when a situation of “positive interdependence” was established. In other words, merely declaring group boundaries dissolved or having a meal together did not lead to reconciliation behavior, but a task that could only be solved with common efforts (e.g., repairing the camp’s water tank) effectively reduced conflict.

At first glance, the situation in Europe does indeed constitute a situation of Sherifian negative interdependence: thus, conflict is not at all surprising. While the mechanisms of international finance are certainly not to be compared to summer camp competitions, they do share a logic of wins and losses. Some countries, such as Germany, are economically stable or even growing and act as creditors, while others are severely indebted, facing restrictions to their political autonomy and cuts to their budgets in order to balance their budgets. This situation could only be eased if the creditors waived some of their loans. From this perspective, the current anger expressed at demonstrations in Athens against Germany, portraying Angela Merkel as the Gestapo of finance, is a predictable outcome.

Why, however, are Germans also expressing anger at the Greeks and less support for the European Union; more to the point, how does this bi-national conflict account for the overall tendency towards nationalization? Countries like the UK and Hungary are increasingly distancing themselves from Europe; the assumption that this is based on the possibility of similarly ending up under a Troika government and being “bossed around” by Germany seems far-fetched, especially if bailing out individual countries should create a positive interdependence amongst the rescuing nations instead of even more schism. There has to be more to it than just economic disparities. As we have mentioned above, one way of understanding Europe is to look at it as a superordinate category, which in turn constitutes smaller, national subcategories. In order to achieve a sense of commonality and unity, it is important to look beyond material resources and take the individual meaning and significances of social categories into account as well. If people prefer national over supra-national identities, *i.e.*, rejecting a European identity while demonstrating connectedness to their nation, the national identities are likely to be more significant and meaningful both personally and in the context of their current social environment. Yet, national and supra-national identities are not antagonistic *per se* [10]. Sometimes, it is precisely because nations are embedded in a framework of supra-national institutions that they are particularly valued. Luxembourg, for example, quite possibly derives some of its national identity from its role as founding member of the EEC. At this point, however, we need to take a step back and answer the questions “How can we understand European and national identities?” and “Why do they matter that much?”

2.2. “Us and Them”: Nations through a Social Identity Lens

While Sherif [9] concluded that conflict over resources is the main catalyst of intergroup conflict, other researchers of that era were skeptical as to whether this was the only or the most important factor involved. In a seminal study, since then known as the Minimal-Group-Paradigm, Tajfel and colleagues [11] assessed under which conditions individuals are likely to discriminate against other

groups. Originally set up in a way that would strip groups of almost all otherwise present characteristics (e.g., status, history, inter-individual sympathies), Tajfel hoped to establish a baseline to which he could then gradually add other factors until discrimination would eventually set in. Surprisingly, this very baseline condition was already enough for his participants to favor their own group over another one and even to give up personal gain—if it helped to increase differentiation between groups. These findings were particularly surprising as the participants were individually distributing meaningless points, without a chance for individual payout, to members of their own group and an outgroup. Moreover, they would never knowingly meet any of these members and groups had been set up on the basis of entirely arbitrary criteria (e.g., “people who favor paintings by Kandinsky”). While options like a fair distribution of points or maximization of ingroup gain were available, participants predominantly opted for a distribution that would put their own group apart from the other (*i.e.*, creating a positive differentiation). For Tajfel [11], the only way these findings could be interpreted was to assume that the participants attached to their groups as the only possible source of meaning in an otherwise random and meaningless setting. They saw themselves as members of a particular group, which allowed them to make sense of their environment, as well as establish a relatively positive outcome by allotting points. This process came to be known as “Social Identification” and together with Self-Categorization Theory [12] allows us to understand the relevance of identity and social categories beyond a mere focus on resource allocation.

When individuals identify with a relevant group, they perceive themselves as part of a larger social unit (e.g., [11,12]). This redefinition of the self as a group member results in behavior that serves the group’s interest and maintains the group’s welfare. With regard to Europe and its collection of nation states, it is indeed an intriguing question how levels of identification on the nation level or on the level of “us Europeans” are established. While there is a plethora of psychology studies measuring different forms of patriotism (*i.e.*, liking one’s own country), nationalism (*i.e.*, disregard for other nations) and similar concepts of national attachment (for an overview see Sapountzis [13]), there are comparatively few studies explicitly framing nationhood as a social identity. This is somewhat surprising, given that Tajfel [11] himself used Emerson’s [14] example of national identity to buttress the theoretical underpinnings of social identity. Nevertheless, national identification has been linked to various forms of relating to one’s own nation, other nations, and people within them; for example, attitudes towards immigrants in Germany and Canada [15] and towards ethnic minorities within nation states [16]. It is professed to be a better predictor of nation-related behaviors compared to other measures [17].

Hence, an analysis of intergroup processes in the tradition of the social identity approach [11,12] offers a feasible framework towards explaining at least some of the behaviors citizens of one country show towards citizens from other European countries. That said, to the authors’ knowledge there are only a few studies into European identity as such [18–23]; moreover, quite a number of them predate the crisis by several years.

In a series of studies, Licata and colleagues examined the relationship between European identity, stereotypes about Europe and tolerance towards foreigners. Their findings are interesting in various ways. Firstly, Europe was generally associated with values such as “solidarity”, “fraternity” and “togetherness”, as well as “cultural diversity”; taken together, these indicate a perception of Europe as a viable ingroup, particularly as they were endorsed by strong identifiers in a Belgian student sample [18]. Secondly, national identification and European identification were both positively correlated as well as

seen as complementary [18,19]. Thirdly, European identification was (paradoxically) linked to lower levels of tolerance towards non-European foreigners [18], a pattern suggesting that “tolerance” and “solidarity” were perceived as intra-European values and did not apply to non-European foreigners. The findings of Klein, Licata, Azzi and Durala [20] buttress this interpretation, as Greek participants did not mind expressing negative attitudes towards Turks if they were (a) non-identifiable and (b) did so towards a presumed Greek audience. When presenting identifiable attitudes, especially when doing so towards an alleged European (ingroup) member, they refrained from expressing anti-Turkish sentiments.

Results from an interview study conducted by Sapountzis and colleagues shed more light on this. When talking about immigration and Europe, their Greek interview partners talked about Europe as a fairly organized and structured entity, mostly represented by Northern European countries, Germany, *etc.*, and about foreigners as potentially criminal and aggressive [21]. In these interviews, some participants openly admit that other countries are more representative of Europe and that Greece is probably less organized and more laid-back, while others (e.g., the Germans) take care of the bureaucracy. In these studies, even a few years prior to the crisis, economy is mentioned [21] but it is predominantly referred to by low identifiers and overall the tenor seems to be a positive understanding of an integrative, tolerant Europe composed of various nationalities. If anything was perceived as threatening, it was foreigners qua being a non-European, potentially aggressive outgroup. While some of the components of the current crisis are already present—e.g., perceptions of Germans as orderly and economy as an important factor—the question remains as to how the contemporary antagonistic climate could have emerged. Put differently, when did the positive outlook of nations united within Europe turn into a situation, where other intra-European nations are perceived as threatening?

Here, some further studies might help us understand the complex relationship of national and supra-national identification. Comparing European and national identification for British and Italian participants, Cinirella [24] found European identity to be higher than national identity for the Italian participants but not for the British ones. In both samples, European identity was positively correlated to positive attitudes towards European integration, stressing the importance of identity as an indicator of other political attitudes. However, British participants thought of European and national identification as incompatible, perceiving the former as potentially threatening to those qualities that made them feel positive about their own nation (e.g., history, traditions and the Royal Family). Thus, if Europe is seen as potentially threatening to those qualities people cherish about their own countries, they might reject it as a relevant category. We will return to a possible psychological mechanism underlying this phenomenon shortly.

Other studies into European identification report similar findings. Rutland and colleagues found that introducing different international contexts (e.g., thinking about Germany or the United States) led Scottish participants to report lower levels of European identification compared to thinking about Scotland by itself. In this study, their national identification remained similarly high, regardless of whether or not another nation was introduced as a context [22,23]. In a recent study looking into the effect of a European student exchange program (ERASMUS) on European identification, Sigalas [25] finds a possible negative effect of staying abroad and mingling with other co-Europeans on identification with Europe. Taken together, these studies suggest that the nation still remains an important frame of reference in terms of citizens’ actual identification—even if people are generally exposed to Europe as a social category.

While the aforementioned studies help to illustrate self-categorization as European and European identity, they were not conducted in order to address the recent problems of (re)nationalisation but rather as studies into more general identification processes. Hence, if we want to understand how current international relations within Europe are linked to a higher emphasis on national categories and a stronger rejection of European ideals, we need to revisit some theoretical fundamentals first.

According to Self-Categorization Theory (SCT, [12]), ingroups and outgroups are only comparable with reference to a common superordinate group that includes both the in- and the outgroup. The superordinate group provides the dimensions for intergroup comparisons: its prototype is the positive standard against which the inclusive subgroups are compared. Thus, the superordinate identity provides the relevant dimensions for comparison, resulting in a fundamental assumption of self-categorization theory [12] that one's own group is evaluated relatively more positively the more it resembles the prototype of the superordinate, inclusive group. Bearing in mind the increasing level of globalization in terms of exchange and connectedness across the globe, the ongoing (re)nationalization appears all the more puzzling. Certainly, on a global scale, a European identity would be relatively more positive to Europeans in comparison to other continents. Even if one takes into account the ongoing crisis, the overall economic and social situation is still better compared to large parts of the world. Looking at the Human Development Index [26], the European Union countries with the lowest scores match the countries with the highest scores in both Africa and Asia. So, by and large, Europe would still seem to be a fairly positive category to identify with. This perspective, however, misses a crucial point. The mere existence of a higher order category is not in itself a sufficient cause for higher identification, even if said category is made salient (e.g., through pro-European campaigns and legislation) and could be seen as relatively positive (as argued above). In order to be accepted as a social identity, people (a) need to know what constitutes the group, put differently "What it means to be a European" and (b) they need to perceive this particular membership as personally relevant, meaningful and appealing. As we will argue in the following section, the current turn towards nationalism can be understood to result from the different ways the respective nations establish the idea of "being European"; this diversity makes "being European" less appealing compared to their own national identity.

3. Nations within Europe—An Ingroup Projection Perspective

We have thus far presented theoretical approaches focusing on conflict (and sometimes cooperation) between at least two nations. However, intergroup relations—and relations between nations in particular—do not occur in a social vacuum. SCT [12] already posits that intergroup behavior always emerges in relation to a superordinate category. Therefore, when Germans and Greeks interact, they probably do so within the frame of being European (or with regard to another, temporarily relevant superordinate category, e.g., a UN meeting). Taking a step back, it is helpful to understand that according to SCT [12], individuals such as citizens of countries categorize themselves in order to structure and give meaning to their surrounding world. As such, individuals can perceive themselves as members of various social categories. For example, an individual could see him- or herself as a member of a town, local region, federal state, nation state, continent, or, on the highest level of abstraction, as a human being. According to SCT, this self-categorization results in accentuation of similarities between group members within one's social category (e.g., focusing on

things all Germans [supposedly] have in common), and an accentuation of differences with those individuals belonging to other social categories (e.g., stressing the differences between Greece and Germany or neglecting existing commonalities).

So, an individual perceiving him- or herself as German can, *at the same time*, perceive him- or herself as European or human. These higher order social categories, according to SCT, provide a background for comparisons between the respective lower level social categories. Here, Europe as the superordinate group provides the dimensions for intergroup comparisons: its prototype (*i.e.*, a prototypical European) is the positive standard against which the inclusive subgroups, such as Germans or Greeks, are compared. A prototype here is defined as “the ideal-type member of a category that best represents its identity in a given context and frame of reference” ([27], p. 335). To provide an example, if people working in a local bistro tried to compare themselves to a fast-food chain, they might do so against the background of the superordinate category of “businesses in the catering industry”, quite plausibly assuming that an ordinary three-star restaurant is the best prototype for catering businesses. Since a superordinate social category is by definition an ingroup—though on a higher abstraction level—it will usually also be evaluated positively so that its prototype reflects a positive comparison standard. Thus, the superordinate identity provides the relevant dimensions for comparison, resulting in a fundamental assumption of SCT [12] that one’s own group is evaluated relatively more positively the more it resembles the prototype of the superordinate, inclusive group. Returning to our example of a local bistro, the respective relevant dimensions of comparison derived from a “three star restaurant” prototype might include a specialized menu (e.g., Italian), quality of produce and personal service. Drawing on these dimensions, assuming a bistro is more likely to meet them than a fast-food franchise, our bistro staff would indeed evaluate themselves positively in contrast to the fast food restaurant, even though the latter might be better off with regards to other dimensions such as revenue.

For the superordinate category Europe with its nations being lower level categories, it means that Germans and Greeks are likely to compare themselves in terms of their shared identity as Europeans. They will compare themselves on relevant dimensions that define and describe Europeans. Their evaluation of their own and the other nation (and members) will be based on the degree to which each nation represents the ideal or “prototypical” European [27]. Thus, the more Germans (or members of any nation within Europe) believe they would be prototypical for Europeans in general, the more positively they will evaluate their own group. This begs the question, how people know what a prototypical European looks like?

The ingroup projection model (IPM, [28]) has been developed to take these prototypicality processes into account. Based on social identity theory’s (SIT) basic tenets that group members generally prefer their own social category (e.g., their nation) to be relatively positively valued, the IPM predicts that ingroup members project their own group’s characteristics onto the superordinate category prototype. As a consequence of this projection process, group members perceive their own group as closer to the superordinate prototype than they perceive members from other groups to be. This higher relative prototypicality leads to the view that “the prototypical subgroup is more normative and positively distinct, while the less prototypical group is more deviant and deserving of lower status” ([29], p. 386). Consequently, relative prototypicality of the superordinate group causes outgroup derogation [27]. This projection process, however, is subject to the valence of the

superordinate group. Only when a nation perceives the superordinate group as generally positive, is relative prototypicality related to negative outgroup evaluations [30]. However, when the superordinate group is negatively valued (e.g., when Greeks see Europe as rather negative), ingroup members are likely to engage in opposite projection behaviours, namely, distancing themselves from the superordinate group prototype [27].

To exemplify further, imagine Germans or French who project their own countries' characteristics (whatever these may be) onto the superordinate European prototype—consequently, they would perceive their own country as more prototypically European than they would perceive citizens of other countries (e.g., Portuguese, Latvians). Knowing that the French or the Germans were more prototypical for Europe would make them a normative standard, resulting in the view that other countries such as Portugal or Greece would deviate from this standard and thus legitimize their lower status (e.g., economy-wise) in Europe. These findings proved to be very robust, with ingroup projection being shown with explicit attribute ratings ([27], for a review), visual scales [31], reaction time measures [32] and even with regard to facial attributes (for example, Germans perceived a German-looking person as more European than a Portuguese-looking person, and *vice versa*, [31]). Overall, the ingroup projection model neatly depicts the processes among Europe's group members, and explains *why* negative sentiments between certain nations emerge.

4. Towards Solidarity

We have presented a theoretical explanation of the processes that predict negative sentiments of citizens of European countries towards citizens from other European countries. While this theoretical account may convey a rather bleak outlook on the current Euro crisis and the loss of solidarity between European citizens, we think there is also reason for optimism. Research in the tradition of SIT has focused on the processes that can help improve intergroup relations and ameliorate attitudes towards people from other groups. While an exhaustive review of these intervention strategies (e.g., decategorization [33]) is outside of the scope of this paper, we will instead suggest strategies directly linked to the IPM and its predictions of intergroup behavior.

As elaborated above, one tenet of the IPM is that the more prototypical individuals perceive their own group as a superordinate category, the more negative their responses are towards members of other groups who share the same superordinate category. Thus if the perceptions of prototypicality can be altered (and in particular, lessened), attitudes relating to these prototypicality perceptions should also change. As Mummendey and Wenzel [28] proposed, effective ways towards tolerance should be those that elicit a representation of the superordinate category or its prototype which hinders perceptions of prototypicality. As a means to reduce intergroup hostility and improve intergroup relations, the model proposes that the manipulation of the inclusive superordinate group towards a complex representation (*i.e.*, a representation that entails multiple prototypes) alters projection processes and thereby improves intergroup attitudes [27]. For example, in a study by Walz and colleagues [34], participants were asked to think about the “diversity of Europe” in order to induce a complex representation of Europe. As a result, prototypicality was reduced, and intergroup attitudes became more positive. An alternative, and more recent, suggestion has been proposed by Berthold and colleagues [35]. These authors showed that perspective taking (*i.e.*, taking and feeling the perspective

of an outgroup member) reduced relative prototypicality of the ingroup, and thereby negative attitudes. How far such an intervention could be implemented across different countries remains to be tested in future research.

5. Conclusions

The Eurozone crisis remains a challenge for its citizens—economically, socially, and psychologically. Besides the structural problems inherent in a unified Europe, there are psychological boundaries that can hinder the idea of an inclusive European identity. In this article, we have shown that the Eurozone crisis is accompanied by citizens' increasingly negative views of other nations within Europe—nationalism and a lack of solidarity seem to be consequences of the economic disparities. As we have argued, intergroup conflict can be a direct result of economic disparities and interdependencies that are abundant within Europe at this time in history. Also, we have shown that the representation of Europe and its nation states plays a crucial role in understanding prejudice and conflict between Europe's nations. The more typical a nation perceives itself to be for Europe, the more likely its members' responses are to be derogative towards other countries' citizens. This fundamental effect requires strategies to alter such conflict-breeding representations.

One way to improve relations between Europe's nation states thus lies in the representation of the superordinate category Europe. How can we manage to define a European identity that includes various prototypes instead of only one? This is an intriguing path which future research should follow in order to overcome hostility—in Europe and elsewhere.

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Author Contributions

Both authors contributed equally to the writing of the paper and wrote all parts in close cooperation. Gerhard Reese focused primarily on the ingroup projection analysis, solidarity and SIT background of the paper while Oliver Lauenstein focused on the European and national identification and resource conflict parts of the article. Introduction and conclusion were written in concert.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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