

German National Identity: Patriotism and Stigma

Hilary Burbank

Introduction

The intertwined issues of German national identity and patriotism are not just matter for idle contemplation: divergent approaches to these controversial topics have shaped aspects of Germans' lives ranging from the government's official immigration policies to the everyday experiences of Germans abroad, from Germany's position in the international community to German schoolchildren's history lessons. The present study explores the singular topography of German national identity and patriotism with an appreciation of the specific situations or stigmas that Germans may encounter and is an attempt to interpret some of these findings in a more global framework. For historical reasons, Germany offers an unusual, even unique, arena in which to study the difficulties people may experience with these issues, but Germans are not—or at least should not be—the only ones confronting their national identity, and especially patriotism, at both individual and societal levels.

This investigation examines patriotism, national identity, cultural affiliation, ingroup preferences, and ethno-

centrism reported by older and younger Germans from various regions in the former East and West Germany. More specifically, the study aims to document and possibly account for any relationships between these variables, to weigh in on the contested distinction between nationalism and patriotism, and to ascertain whether the predictions of social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) seem to be supported. According to SIT, people maintain positive, self-enhancing identities as members of an ingroup by comparing themselves favorably to an outgroup. The "ingroup" refers to a group of people perceived to share one's category membership (e.g. female) or social identity (e.g. Stanford student). Tajfel (1978) frames SIT as a conflict theory: social groups compete for symbolic and material resources, striving to preserve the "evaluative superiority of the ingroup at all costs" (Hogg & Abrams, 76). SIT requires four conditions (Tajfel, 1974), which national identity satisfies. First, classification of the social world occurs based on various attributes (e.g. nationality), which often contain an implicit value dimension (good-bad). Second, individuals ascer-

This study investigated Germans' self-reported levels of patriotism, national identity, cultural affiliation, ingroup preferences, and ethnocentrism in order to explore the predictions of social identity theory (SIT) with reference to members of a stigmatized national group. Participants were 795 Germans born either before 1946 or after 1976 and currently residing in six federal states of the former East and West Germany. The data reveal moderate regional and strong generational variation: older people and former East Germans reported overall higher levels of patriotism, national identity, cultural affiliation, ingroup preferences, and ethnocentrism, relative to younger Germans and to former West Germans. The results also challenge SIT by demonstrating that Germans can positively identify with their nation and culture without inevitably exhibiting national chauvinism.

tain the categories that correspond to their own attributes (e.g. speaking German) and assign themselves to those groups. Third, social comparisons arise between the ingroup and the outgroup (e.g. Germans and French). Fourth, group members affirm their own identities through these negative outgroup comparisons. In this markedly relational theory, the individual's reference group is not the self but the outgroup, leading some to contend that "there is

Demographics	N	%
Dresden (East)	88	11.1
Rostock (East)	37	4.7
Berlin (East/West)	69	8.7
Landskron (West)	40	5.0
Hannover (West)	438	55.1
Cologne (West)	123	15.5
Born before 1946	134	16.9
Born after 1976	661	83.1
Male	334	42.0
Female	450	56.6
German citizen	726	91.3
Non-German citizen	56	7.0
Protestant	207	26.0
Catholic	94	11.8
Muslim	29	3.6
TOTAL	795	100.0

Table 1. Demographic make-up



no ‘we,’ no collective identity, without demarcation from ‘others,’” and that “attitudes towards others should be seen as a component of the national identity itself” (Blank, Schmidt, & Westle, 2001, 10).

This question—is it possible to be “pro-us” without being “anti-them?”—corresponds to a distinction drawn between patriotism and nationalism. This conception posits a continuum of national identification, ranging from national consciousness (or awareness of national membership) to jingoistic nationalism, with patriotism somewhere in the middle (Blank et al., 2001). In simplified terms, both patriotism and nationalism involve positive affective ties to the nation, but only the latter entails the derogation of other nations and nationals. Moreover, empirical measures of patriotism and nationalism have proved separable or independent, and only the latter typically correlates with xenophobia (Blank et al., 2001). Such findings have led some researchers to conclude that, contrary to SIT, a positive and self-affirming patriotism exists independently from nationalism and is not linked to outgroup derogation (Blank et al., 2001; Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Müller-Peters, 1998).

In light of German history, this distinction between patriotism and nationalism makes German national identity intriguing and deeply problematic. Although nationalism, especially in its extreme forms, may meet with criticism in most sociopolitical contexts, many Germans perceive a strong national and international norm against any expression of German patriotism. In the wake

of two world wars and the Holocaust, a threefold stigma against German nationalism as militaristic, extremist, and ethnocentric has developed. While taboos against nationalism do not necessarily proscribe patriotism, recent controversies reveal that many Germans blur this distinction. In fact, a prominent politician’s March 2001 comment that he was “proud to be German” drew massive criticism and ignited a debate that stretched on for months and focused national attention on German patriotism (Brüning, Krumrey, Opitz, & Stock, 2001).

This study explores the psychological consequences of attempting to positively identify oneself as a German national despite these stigmas against German nationalism and patriotism. Several possible reactions to this dilemma were hypothesized. A German individual could choose to reject the negative stereotypes and espouse patriotism or even nationalism regardless; to abandon a holistic patriotism and focus instead on specific aspects of Germany that merit pride; to dissociate from a primary identification as German in favor of a local, regional, continental, or global identity; to dismiss patriotism as inherently meaningless, absurd, or even inappropriate; or to accept the negative stereotypes of Germans and experience national identity as a source of shame or guilt. These options may not be mutually exclusive, although some combinations, for instance national pride with national shame, would likely indicate deep-seated conflict or ambivalence. Challenges to SIT would arise if individuals reported positive attachments to their German identity with no outgroup derogation.

Method

Design

In an interregional, intergenerational study made possible by a President’s Scholar grant, 795 participants from two cohorts and six locations in Germany completed a brief

questionnaire on German national identity. The primary independent variables were demographic (birth cohort, geographic location, gender, religion, citizenship, etc.), while the four primary dependent measures were agreement with the statements: (1) Overall, I am proud to be German. (2) I am glad that I am German. (3) Sometimes I am embarrassed/ashamed to be German. (4) Sometimes I wish I were not German. Other items (assessing cultural affiliation, ethnocentrism, ingroup preferences, and so forth) were included as possible predictors or correlates of these German identity indices.

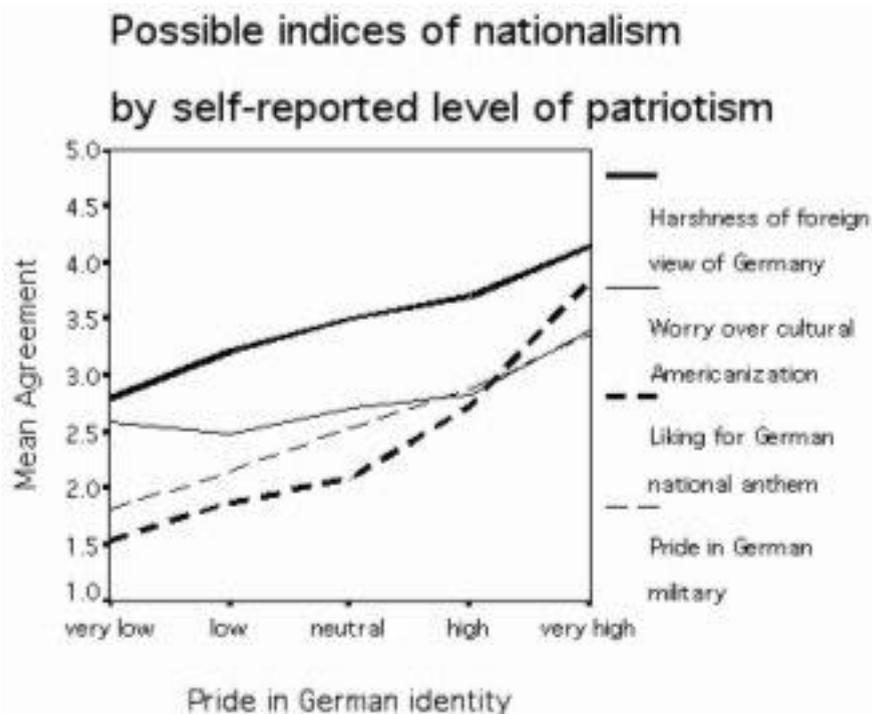
Participants

The older cohort comprised individuals born before 1946, who had thus either lived through the war or grown up in its immediate aftermath, and were directly affected by Germany’s National Socialist past. The younger cohort included people age 18 and older born in or after 1976. These individuals were born a full generation after the war, but were old enough to have formed an opinion about patriotism and engaged with the recent public controversy. This cohort-based selection method involved comparisons between two age groups separated by multiple decades—whose average birth years were 1920 and 1982—making shifts in attitudes across generations easier to detect.

To investigate the effect of regional variation, research was conducted at six sites in widely separated regions of Germany. From the former West Germany, Landshut, Cologne, Hannover, and West Berlin were selected, while East Berlin, Rostock, and Dresden represented the former East Germany. Landshut and Rostock are both relatively small cities relative to the others. Landshut, Bavaria, is very predominantly Caucasian; by contrast, Berlin has the second-largest Turkish population of any European city. Germany’s south and west are generally more conservative and Catholic; the north and east, more liberal and

COHORT	Pride in German identity	Happiness in German identity	Shame in German identity	Desire for non-German identity
Born before 1946	4.10 (1.24)	4.05 (1.22)	2.26 (1.60)	1.71 (1.27)
Born after 1976	3.05 (1.25)	3.18 (1.15)	2.39 (1.35)	2.47 (1.30)

Table 2



Protestant or atheistic. While Landshut and Cologne enjoy great prosperity, poorer cities in the east face massive unemployment, often around 20 percent. Bavarians are renowned for their regional and political chauvinism, whereas former East Germans more often emigrate. The study incorporated political, religious, economic, and ethnic diversity at both regional and individual levels (see Table 1, with missing values unreported), so as to present a representative depiction of national identity.

Measures

The survey instrument used was inspired by the General Ethnicity Questionnaire (GEQ), with which Tsai, Ying, and Lee (2000) showed that pride in a culture strongly predicted cultural identification for American-born Chinese. To test whether comparable relationships held for Germans, the present investigation borrowed seven GEQ items on cultural pride, cultural activities, and social affiliations.

Two public opinion polls conducted by German newspapers also added to the survey. The first explored various bases of patriotism, from the economy to the military, from history to art, from democracy to athletics (Brüning, Krümrey, Opitz, & Stock, 2001). The other poll defined specific ways in which Germans might relate to national

identity: pride, happiness, or shame in being German, or indifference to the question of patriotism (Beste, Hildebrandt, Leinemann, Mestmacher, & Rosenkranz, 2001). Contemporary press coverage of the patriotism debate also contributed, yielding a 33-item survey. Participants rated each declarative sentence on a 5-point scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Demographic questions elicited year and region of birth and upbringing, citizenship status and duration, gender, political activity and affiliation, as well as religious activity and affiliation.

Procedure

Data collection took place in the summers of 2001 and 2002. For each city, faxes were sent to every high school listed on www.schuleweb.de with grade levels high enough to include students 18 and older, and to every retirement home listed in <http://www.wohnen-im-alter.de>. The cover letter asked permission to distribute the attached survey at the high school or retirement home, and yielded an overall response rate of approximately 25-35%, including polite refusals. If all the schools in a given city required a state-granted research permit, the study was done instead at youth centers or boarding houses listed on www.gelbseiten.de. All aspects of the research were conducted in German.

The data reveal moderate regional and strong generational variation in attitudes toward German identity. Older people and former East Germans reported higher levels of pride and lower levels of shame in their national identity, as well as less of a desire to disidentify as German, relative to the younger cohort and former West Germans.

Cohort and National Identity

Strong effects for age emerged on three of the four primary dependent measures of ways in which Germans relate to their national identity. Table 2 shows the mean agreement of each cohort on a 5-point scale with the statements of pride, happiness, or shame in being German, as well as desire for a non-German identity. In each case except that of shame, t-tests revealed that the means differ significantly at the $p < .01$ (99% confidence) level. Moreover, although minimal variance due to age was found for the 1976-1984 cohort, age influenced several factors within the 1902-1946 cohort: older people were significantly more likely to report happiness ($p = .02$) and pride ($p = .002$) in their German identity.

Region and National Identity

Geographic location was found to have a secondary bearing on these four national identity indices. Regional variance between cities was non-significant among the older cohort and relatively minimal among the younger cohort. The East-West distinction did produce significant variance in dimensions of German identity, with former East Germans reporting more pride ($M = 3.49$) than former West Germans ($M = 3.15$), a result that was highly significant overall ($p = .004$). Conversely, East Germans reported significantly ($p = .02$) more shame ($M = 2.60$) than West Germans ($M = 2.30$).

Patriotism and Nationalism

Beyond demographic variation in dimensions of national identity, several correlates of these four dimensions emerged. Expressing pride in German

identity correlated moderately to strongly with several other items that may be related to nationalism (see graph), including: belief that “many foreigners have an undeservedly negative view of Germany” ($r=.37, p<.001$), concern “about the Americanization/Anglicization of the German language and culture” ($r=.22, p<.001$), liking for the German national anthem ($r=.56, p<.001$), and pride in “the achievements of the German military” ($r=.42, p<.001$). A factor analysis of the data yielded similar results. Responses to the 33 survey items were factor analyzed using a varimax rotation that yielded four principal components. The top two components accounted for 31.7% of the variance and had eigenvalues of 8.0 and 2.4, respectively. Examining the factors that load on these components at an absolute level greater than .45 (see Table 3) suggests that these two components bear on the contested nationalism-patriotism distinction. The first group of factors reveals a very strong pro-German orientation expressed in terms of global German pride, encompassing political symbols like the national anthem and the German military. These individuals are highly identified with their German (rather than European) national identity, and reject both any foreign prejudices against Germany and any taboos against expressing German patriotism. Also loading on the “pride” component was the belief that pride in Germany and in German identity were not distinct, implying a direct connection between individual identity and attitude toward the nation. The second group of factors corresponds to a set of ingroup preferences: for German music, travel, movies, lifestyle, books, and so forth. These individuals thus appear most strongly connected to a German cultural identity, and somewhat less so to an overtly proud or political German identity.

Discussion

To summarize, the main findings of this investigation were that (1) generational cohort was a strong predictor of the ways in which Germans relate to their national identity, that (2) geographic location also played a part—albeit a smaller one—in shaping people’s level of pride in that identity and

desire to renounce it in favor of another, and that (3) many of the variables surrounding aspects of patriotism versus implied nationalism proved separable.

The data suggest that younger Germans relate less positively to their national identity than older Germans. A congruent finding is that older individuals were much more likely than younger people to agree that “German culture has had a positive impact” on their lives, with means of 3.98 and 2.83, respectively ($p<.001$). This is not to say that younger Germans were markedly unhappy with their identity—after all, they reported a mean happiness of 3.18, just above the scale’s midpoint—but that they were less likely to have an actively positive identification as Germans. Moreover, even within the 1902-1946 cohort, older people—who, ironically, were more likely to have vivid memories of and active involvement with the Nazi era—expressed more pride and happiness to be German. Taken together, these findings suggest a trend and possibly even a trajectory in German identity, such that with time Germans are becoming less proud or contented and more critical when they think about national identity. Potentially, these changes could be the result of the three stigmas discussed earlier, conveyed to individual Germans either through popular international attitudes or through German culture—public discourse, educational curriculum, political movements—itsself.

As for the regional variation in dimensions of national identity, former East Germans reported more pride and more shame than former West Germans, a somewhat counterintuitive result. The higher level of shame among former East Germans, however, is significant only within the younger ($p=.02$) and not the older ($p=.26$) cohort. This discrepancy suggests that something—like having to suddenly confront war guilt after decades of projecting Nazism, militarism, and genocide onto West

Factor analysis: Top two components

Factors loading on "pride" component	
.73	Pride in German technology
.69	Pride in German identity
.68	Pride in German economy
.65	Desire for acceptance of German patriotism
.63	Happiness in German identity
.60	Pride in German military
.56	Pride in German culture
.52	Liking for German national anthem
.52	German influence on personal worldview
.49	Positivity of German culture's personal impact
-.48	More European identification
.48	Harshness of foreign view of Germany

Factors loading on "preference" component	
.72	Preference for German music
.71	Preference for travel in Germany
-.63	Willingness to emigrate
-.62	Preference for foreign movies
.52	Worry over Americanization of German culture
-.50	Preference for foreign lifestyle
.47	Preference for German books
.46	German influence on personal worldview

Table 3

Germany—caused young former East Germans to feel more shame in their national identity than their older counterparts or the former West Germans. The higher levels of pride reported by former East Germans could perhaps be related to their greater happiness over the German Reunification ($M=4.33$) relative to former West Germans ($M=3.64; p<.001$), although that effect, too, is specific to the younger cohort ($p<.001$). In short, former East Germans on the whole were prouder to be German than their Western counterparts, while the Eastern youth were both more ashamed of that identity and happier about the Reunification.

The results of this study also contribute to the discussion of patriotism as either a benign ingroup identification contrasted with nationalism or a nationalistic stance in itself. While nationalism could not be assessed directly because of both social desirability and offensiveness/sensitivity concerns—how would participants have reacted to an item such as “I feel superior [or nationalistic] as a German”?—several conceptually related items were included. Blank and Schmidt (1993) have found that German patriotism and nationalism are multidimensional and vary greatly according to the specific object of pride. Blank and his colleagues (2001) contend that patriotism corresponds to feelings of pride in the national constitution, social welfare

programs, and so forth, whereas nationalism correlates to pride in areas like the military, economy, and political symbols. Notably, in this study, pride in German identity, the military, and in the economy, as well as liking of the national anthem all correlated extremely highly one another ($p < .001$) and loaded on the same initial component in a factor analysis. Especially in light of twentieth-century German history, choosing to endorse the military's "accomplishments" or the national anthem, which remains "Deutschland über Alles" (albeit with the more objectionable stanzas now unsung), represents a highly controversial political move that may suggest a lack of concern with German wrong-doing or responsibility for its past. Moreover, self-reported patriotism was related to ethnocentrism and/or xenophobia: pride in German identity correlated negatively with endorsement of immigrants' contributions to German culture ($r = .27$) at an extremely significant level

($p < .001$).

At the same time, other participants' responses seem to reveal a form of positive ingroup identification more cultural than national, embodying the ideal of patriotism as "pro-ingroup" without being "anti-outgroup." Simple ingroup preferences (for German movies, music, language and culture, books, lifestyle, and so forth) loaded on the second component rather than the first, along with a more European and (marginally) more regional than German identity, more of a focus on Germany's past relative to future, as well as more acceptance of immigration and foreigners' (sometimes negative) appraisals of Germany.

Taken together, these results suggest rather compellingly that Germans' relationships to their national identity has changed across generations and varies somewhat by region, and also that patriotism and nationalism may indeed be overlapping but nevertheless separable constructs. Some individuals

evinced the positive attitudes about their culture and acceptance of (though not preference for) others that one might associate with patriotism, yet were less likely to describe themselves as patriotic. By contrast, the people who self-identified as patriotic Germans were, ironically, most likely to show signs of nationalism—as indicated by endorsement of the military, national anthem, and ethnocentrism—rather than benign patriotism. To answer, finally, the question posed in the recent patriotism debate, saying one is "proud to be German" is indeed problematic. Trouble arises, however, not because German patriotism itself inevitably involves aggression, extremism, or ethnocentrism, but because the very act and attitude of endorsing *overt* pride in German national identity, despite its threefold historical stigma, may tend in the direction of nationalism.

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