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Research plan

Title: European Identity in a Comparative Perspective: A Mixed Methods Approach

Abstract

Does a European identity exist? And if so, *who* feels European, and how strongly does (s)he feel this way? What does it *mean* to be European? The present research deals with these questions, eventually specifically answering them for higher educated 'cosmopolitan' youth in three different European countries (suggested are the Netherlands, Italy, and Estonia), but maintaining a distinctly comparative approach throughout. This study offers an innovative methodological approach, and should be placed within the *mixed methods* research tradition. Utilizing advanced quantitative *and* qualitative approaches, and combining both data collection as well as analysis in a 'nested' strategy, this study offers an inspiring new research design. Although intrinsically interdisciplinary in orientation, it is most heavily grounded in Sociology and Anthropology.

Research questions

European integration, whether social, cultural, political, or only economic, leads to an intensification of cross-border flows of goods, people, knowledge, ideas, and eventually; culture (cf. Appadurai, 2005). Public debate concerning this topic often focuses on the perceived homogenization of cultures or even 'loss' of national identities to 'Europe'. However, throughout the history of the continent, tribes, empires, and later, nation-states have been engaged in constant cultural exchange. Separate, singular 'national cultures' never existed to begin with, which makes the question of their disappearance ill-informed. In this sense, one should rather pose the question to what extent European integration causes nation-states to become culturally intertwined even further. Yet, such a question presupposes that nation-states *themselves* are homogenous cultural entities, while in reality they are not. In addition to sub-national identities that can be found all over Europe,¹ one should keep in mind that societies are stratified, each 'layer' presumably having its own values, norms, and cultural codes. What we *should* be asking, therefore, is *who* is 'Europeanizing', and to which point in the future does this Europeanization occur? The central research question of the suggested project therefore reads:

Has a European identity emerged, and if so, to what extent, among whom, and how is it socially constructed?

Higher echelons of societies benefit most directly from cross-border flows of capital, goods and knowledge. Since people from these strata are more often professionally connected to other (European) cultures, it seems reasonable to assume that they tend to acquire a cultural framework that is adapted to such a context. While national elites converge to form a new *European* elite, lower strata remain 'national' in their orientation, and may even emphasize these 'allegiances' in a response to the 'loss' of national culture that they perceive. If this holds true, then European societies potentially face a new and growing kind of inequality; the 'European gap'. The present research project examines this problem, and specifically focuses on the newly emerging culture of the European elite. After examining the existence or surfacing of the 'European gap' and assessing its extent cross-nationally, this study will provide an answer to a number of sub-questions, which correspond to four consecutive steps in the research design. The first of these sub-questions simply reads:

Who identifies with Europe, and to what extent?

This first question, which will initially be examined using a multilevel analysis based on existing data (e.g. Eurobarometer or European Social Survey), addresses the matter of 'where' we should look for people who feel European (step 1). Which regions within which countries?

¹ Such as Basques, Scots, and Silesians.

Which social and ethnic groups? And to what extent do these individuals identify with Europe? Also, a distinction will be made between different 'components' of identification with Europe (i.e. political / cultural; see below). A *specific* comparison will be made between people with a European outlook and individuals with a 'national' orientation.

Following this step, three 'cases' will be selected for further analysis (step 2). Suggested at this point are the Netherlands, Italy, and Estonia, for theoretical and pragmatic reasons.² Here, focus groups on national and European identity will be formed among higher and lower educated people. The data collected using this approach will help to answer what it 'means' to 'feel' European. What is European identity 'made' of, and to what extent is this conceptualized differently in various national contexts? Also, this strategy allows the researcher to focus on *when* people feel European – under which circumstances they experience and express it. The second sub-question thus reads:

What does it mean to feel European and/or national, and when do people experience this?

The third step in the research design goes even further into the social construction of 'Europeanness', by conducting an empirical ethnographic analysis of specific groups within the three selected 'cases'. More specifically, the ethnographic study will focus on higher educated 'cosmopolitans', who are arguably most likely to experience and express an identification with Europe, and who often maintain transnational social networks (see Beck & Grande, 2007). Here, the research focuses on 'bottom-up' symbolic constructions of Europe, and how it is socially constructed and negotiated in collective memory and the present 'national' contexts. Different representations of history, collective memory, and heritage across the continent are riddled with ambiguities and discrepancies. Evening these out is a symbolic and political process that is dealt with both on an individual and collective level. Novel ways of 'doing' ethnography will have to be examined, because collective identification is becoming 'detached' from geographical 'place' as such, and especially younger generations are likely to express their identities through the use of new media. Theoretical and practical ways to achieve this can be found in the relatively new domain of 'virtual', or 'connective' ethnography (Hine, 2000). This sub-question reads:

How is Europe symbolically and socially constructed within national and cosmopolitan frames of reference?

The fourth and final step of the research design quantitatively examines the social networks of the individuals involved in the prior data collection steps. A standardized set of questions is presented to participants of the focus groups and informants of the ethnographic research. If resources permit it, a smaller-scale survey could be conducted before 'step 2', in order to gather an additional step in the collection of network data (and thus be able to analyse changes though a short period of time), and to create a 'pool' of individuals who would be willing to join a (short-term) focus group. Also, it would aid the researcher's understanding of the 'national' context in which the focus group results should be seen. At any rate, the data collection process should be 'nested' in the sense that the ethnographic informants are selected from the focus group participants, who, in turn, are ideally selected from the (possible) smaller-scale survey. The social network analysis will provide an answer to the final sub-question:

How does identification with Europe spread through social networks, and what are the qualities of such networks?

² These three national frames of reference provide for a useful theoretical comparisons because of specific regional, historical, and political backgrounds. Pragmatically, Italy would be within geographic range, the Netherlands would provide no language barrier, and I already have a number of contacts in Estonia.

Theoretical debates: Europe and identity

The theoretical starting point of research on European identity is often identification with the nation-state. However, as has been suggested by several studies that have been undertaken on the topic, European identities tend to have distinctly 'culturally open' and cosmopolitan outlooks (Beck & Grande, 2007; Bruter, 2004; Paasi, 2001; Stevenson, 2006). The argument here is that European identity, if found to exist, should be conceptualized anew instead of being grounded in the limiting framework of nationalism studies. Below are the building blocks that form the foundation for this endeavour, which will take place in the first year of the PhD project.³

Europe and/or the nation

Earlier political and academic perspectives have often assumed that European nation-states are socially constructed partly *in opposition* to Europe, and vice versa (see Carey, 2002). While this perspective corroborates much of the critical public debate, more recent studies show a different kind of relation, and often even suggest positive correlations between nation-state and European identifications (Moes, 2008; Bruter, 2005; Duchesne & Frogner, 2008; McLaren, 2002, 2004). Therefore, instead of looking at Europeanization as the inevitable demise of the nation-state, we should focus on the "[...] more complex political process of repositioning, remapping, and rebranding of the nation-state" (McNeill, 2004, pp. 36-37), in order to understand European identity.

Political perspectives: civic and cultural identification

Michael Bruter (2003, 2004, 2005), a key contemporary political theorists on European identity, makes a very useful distinction between 'civic' and a 'cultural' components of European identity in his empirical analysis. By civic identity, Bruter refers to the extent to which people experience a sense of citizenship of Europe – to be citizens of a transnational political system (2003, p. 1155; see, for a similar concept, Habermas, 1992). Cultural identity is defined by him as people's feelings that Europeans are "closer to them" than people from elsewhere, regardless of their political affiliations with Europe or the EU (2003, pp. 1155-1156). While both components will be analyzed in the present study, the main focus will be on the latter because civic identity has been the subject of much prior research – even though it has not always been labelled as such (see Duchesne & Frogner, 2008; McLaren, 2002).

Approach: comparative perspectives

Whose European identity?

This project first compares the identification with Europe and/or the nation among groups with a 'higher' and 'lower' socioeconomic status. As the research design becomes progressively specific, the focus shifts towards the identification with Europe among the higher educated. More specifically, the research then concentrates on higher educated, 'cosmopolitan' *youth*. They constitute one of the most (socially and geographically) mobile group of people, and are relatively easily accessible for research. They operate on a Europe-wide scale and maintain cross-national social networks. Additionally, they are the first generation that largely grew up in a relatively borderless, prosperous and peaceful Europe. They are also the first to incorporate English as a European *lingua franca* into their daily lives, the first to use instantaneous communication technologies on a day-to-day basis, and the first to go on international education exchanges on such a massive scale. Therefore, they may well turn out to become the 'link' between elite academic and political European discourses and the 'general public' acceptance of a European identity dimension.

Methodology

Due to its range in types of questions, this study requires a *mixed methods* design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This will be achieved by intertwining the data

³ The more 'general' literature and theories on, for example, identification, nationalism, and social mobility, have been omitted due to space restrictions. Some of these key publications have been included in the list of references.

collection process as well as the analyses. The research design itself is discussed above (under ‘Research questions’). As is shown in Table 1, the project is based on one external source of data (large scale survey), and one set of intertwined *mixed methods* data that will be gathered by the researcher. This second source is rooted in the focus groups and the short-term ethnographic fieldwork periods (and possibly a smaller-scale survey preceding the focus groups), within which short survey and network analysis questions are included, thereby creating a ‘true’ *mixed methods* design.

Table 1 – Overview of methods and data.

Approach	Details	Quan	Qual
Existing large scale survey data analysis (step 1)	Analysis using multilevel regression analysis and event-history analysis. Data from <i>Eurobarometer</i> and/or <i>European Social Survey</i> .	X	
Focus group interviews (step 2a)	Small focus groups with higher and lower educated people, lead by semi-structured interview-guides. Native language discussion leaders where necessary.		X
New smaller scale survey data analysis (step 2b)	Regression analysis and structural equation modelling. Data collected among focus group members.	X	
Ethnographic fieldwork (step 3)	Short-term participant observation among higher educated youth. ⁴		X
Social network analysis (step 4)	Analysis using <i>Simulation Investigation for Empirical Network Analyses</i> (SIENA). ⁵ Data collected among focus group members and ethnographic informants.	X	

Academic contributions

It is suggested that five journal articles will be written, and the researcher will visit relevant conferences to discuss the project. The first paper analyses European identity in a comparative perspective (article 1), and will present the results of a multilevel analysis based on existing data (step 1). The second journal article (article 2) will be published in a mixed methodology journal,⁶ and will discuss the research design and preliminary results. Next, an article on the results of the focus groups (step 2) will be submitted (article 3). After that, an article (article 4) on the social construction of Europe and the application of ‘connected ethnography’ (step 3) on this topic will be written. The fifth and final article will present the findings of the social network analysis (step 4), interpreting these in the light of earlier conclusions (i.e. the mixed methods design). These articles will subsequently be combined to form the PhD dissertation.

Scientific and social relevance

The proposed project is relevant to the social sciences for three reasons. First, it is relevant theoretically. The potential emergence of a European identity may provide us with the exciting opportunity to witness the birth a ‘new kind’ of identification that may well shape our social reality in the decades to come. It is crucial, therefore, to understand how people provide this social reality with new meanings. Second, the study is relevant conceptually. National and European identities are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and nor should European identity be defined as a new kind of nationalism. Rather, we should start looking at

⁴ See Spradley, 1980; Hine, 2000.

⁵ SIENA is a relatively novel way of analysing social networks and their changes through time. The researcher is currently studying this technique (and others, see CV) in order to familiarize himself with it in advance (for an overview, see Burk, W. J., Steglich, C. E. G., & Snijders, T. A. B. (2007). Beyond dyadic interdependence: Actor-oriented models for co-evolving social networks and individual behaviors. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 31(4), 397-404.).

⁶ e.g. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, SAGE Publications

transnational identities from a globalized, 'cosmopolitan' frame of reference rather than a national one. Third, the study is relevant methodologically, as it innovatively adds to the fairly limited number of social science studies that truly employs a *mixed methods* approach. Additionally, the use of an advanced quantitative network analysis and the application of 'connective ethnography' offer relatively novel methodological tools as well.

Socially, this project is relevant for two reasons. First, because it refers to potentially severe (future and current) social cleavages. In a situation where higher 'layers' of societies have become cosmopolitan Europeans, and lower echelons cling all the more forcefully to national identities as a result, there is a real possibility of social and/or political conflict. Second, the extent to which European identity exists has a direct relevance to the political legitimacy of the EU. The infamous 'democratic deficit' is socially flanked by this 'identification deficit'.

References

This list of references shows entries used in the text above. Additionally, some key references have been added without in-text citations.

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