

Commentary

Nations and nationalisms: Particular cases and impossible myths

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‘What is . . . important is a clear realisation that the “general” case is an impossible myth’ (Tajfel, 1972, p. 74).

When Tajfel discussed the problems involved in isolating genotypic aspects of social behaviour for the purposes of experimental investigation and the formulation of social psychological laws, he was addressing an issue that has been discussed regularly in philosophical accounts of the process of ‘worldmaking’ both within and outside the scientific laboratory. Goodman (1978), for example, has characterized the scientist’s project as an exercise in deletion and supplementation, of:

‘rejecting or purifying most of the entities and events of the world of ordinary things while generating quantities of filling for curves suggested by sparse data, and erecting elaborate structures on the basis of meagre observations. Thus does [the scientist] strive to build a world conforming to his chosen concepts and obeying his universal laws’ (p. 15).

In representing scientific activity in these terms, Goodman was not presenting a critique, nor was he espousing a form of relativism which might suggest that all forms of worldmaking are equally (in)valid. However, his account does alert us to the need to consider the specific forms of deletion and supplementation that may be at work in the construction of social psychological accounts. We should not take it for granted that constructs invoked in our research reports necessarily map unproblematically onto similarly named concepts apparent in the discourses of other academic worlds (e.g. sociology or political science) or in the worlds of everyday things.

The world according to ‘nationalism and patriotism’

Towards the end of their study, Mummendey and her associates argue for the acceptance of their theoretical premises on the grounds that these were broadly

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supported by the data. However, as Goodman (1978) argues, if all that were required for a version of the world to be accepted were the availability of confirmatory data within a prescribed setting, we could end up accepting contentions that, in other contexts, we would recognize as quite ludicrous.

Another strategy for evaluating research might be to consider the conceptual transformations, gains and losses associated with the particular concepts that the authors use when promoting their particular version of the world. We might, for example, consider issues of operationalization: the deletions and substitutions involved in the transformation of theoretical constructs into specific observable, calculable 'variables'. With respect to the present study, one might question, for example, the way in which one particular event in the experimental episode was singled out for characterization as the independent variable, whereas other, ostensibly similar, action sequences came to be presented as dependent measures. Why, for example, should a request to evaluate one's nation's 'political influence in the world' be treated as a non-reactive measure of belief when, in the same article, a request to generate reasons why one prefers to live in one's 'home country rather than a different country' is represented as a stimulus that has an active role in priming participants to use intercategory comparisons? One might also consider the extent to which the variables invoked in this particular research report translate into constructs from the wider world of Social Identity Theory (SIT): can measures of individual differences in strength of social identity be equated with the construct of (salient) group identification?

To what extent does the version of the world presented in the research report correspond to the ways in which nations and national sentiment are understood in other academic texts, and in the world of everyday things? With respect to the present article, the key concepts of patriotism and nationalism have been discussed by Hopkins (this issue). I shall focus on two further concepts: (temporal vs. international) comparison, and the construct of nation itself.

Temporal and international comparisons

Mummendey *et al.* set out, perhaps somewhat contentiously, by arguing that social identity researchers have tended to conflate positive in-group sentiment with out-group derogation. They present an alternative account in which the construct of 'comparative judgment' is decomposed and subsequently respecified in terms of three distinctive components: social (intergroup) comparisons, intragroup (temporal) comparisons, and autonomous judgments (in which a group is evaluated against an abstract standard).

The authors suggest that the validity of this distinction is borne out by the data—that the priming of a particular type of comparison resulted in noticeably different responses to the dependent measures. However, even within the research report, there is little evidence to confirm the assumption that respondents in the 'temporal comparison' and the (rather curiously labelled) 'control' conditions were not also using international comparisons. The results suggest that the experimental manipulation did not influence respondents' mean scores on the out-group derogation measure (Table 4), which is what, according to the logic of the present

argument at least, we might expect if it was differentially priming intragroup vs. intergroup comparisons. Moreover, the assumed distinctiveness of temporal and international comparisons is at no stage warranted with reference to the actual responses to the experimental manipulation. It is perfectly possible to imagine a situation in which a response to a temporal prime would also involve attention to the 'world of nations' (cf. Billig, 1996). For example, in the case of the British respondents, whereas a comparison between life now and during the Great Plague might not involve an international frame of reference, a comparison with life during the Blitz probably would.

Once we step outside the world of the research report, the contention that temporal and international comparisons can be meaningfully distinguished appears rather implausible. Is it likely that national historiographies (and British or German historiographies in particular) present a narrative concerning the birth and subsequent life-course of a single nation independent of any international context? In the everyday world, are not international judgments imbricated routinely with temporal comparisons: formulated, for example, in terms of comparative stages of civilization, levels of advancement, or rates of development (Fabian, 1983)?

National categories

While the construct of 'comparison' is fragmented into three ostensibly separate variables, the construct of 'nation' is treated as a singular entity. Not only do the authors bracket consideration of any differences between nations and other forms of social category (cf. Billig, 1996), but they also overlook the quite different ways in which various (European) nations may be understood (cf. Bryant, 1997; Lloyd, 1995; Svallfors, 1996).

The Methods section informs us that respondents were recruited from Germany (the former East or West?) and Britain (which particular countries?), but little further attention is paid to the respondents' national provenance. The implication is that Britain (or England, or Scotland, or Wales¹) and Germany may be treated as homogenous and functionally equivalent membership categories, and as interchangeable examples of nations in general. This is reflected, for example, in the use of an identical set of questions to measure national pride, irrespective of the particular nation under consideration.

Only in a footnote is the question of national specificity raised, and then in the form of a rather curious argument to the effect that the case of Germany might be of 'particular interest' since contemporary German citizens tend to hold 'ambivalent if not negative attitudes towards the whole topic of a German nation'. However, the explicit concern of this study is to distinguish between two forms of national pride: patriotism and nationalism. It is not clear, then, why a specific country (or possibly countries—since a similar argument could be made with respect to England: Condor, 2000) in which evocations of

¹This issue is further complicated by the fact that the adjective 'British' pertains to Northern Ireland, whereas the noun 'Britain' does not.

national pride are currently regarded with ambivalence, if not suspicion, should be regarded as an appropriate, let alone an exemplary, context within which to study this phenomenon.

Elsewhere in the social sciences, theorists often distinguish between two broad types of nation. Civic nations in which nationality is understood in terms of a common political allegiance (of which France and the USA are often cited as prototypical examples) are contrasted with ethnic nations, in which nationhood is understood in terms of primordial bonds of blood and kinship (of which the prototypical Western example typically cited is Germany). Within this scheme, the British state represents a somewhat anomalous case, which, having developed historically before current ideologies of nationhood, is technically constituted as a sovereign territory rather than as a modern (civic or ethnic) nation.

The particular ways in which Germany and Britain are constructed as political entities has relevance for almost every aspect of the current research enterprise. It has a bearing, for example, on the construction of out-groups ('foreigners'). The tendency, apparent throughout this article, to equate *international* with *interethnic* differentiation might be regarded as more appropriate in a German than in a British context. It is certainly worth noting that Pettigrew and Meertens' (1995) scale (used as a basis for the 'out-group derogation' measure) is not worded in a manner appropriate for use in the UK, where, in the absence of anything equivalent to a *gastarbeiter* system, the construct 'foreigners living here' does not relate to any available category of everyday discourse.²

The specificities of Britain (England?) and Germany as national categories also have a bearing upon the conceptual distinction between nationalism and patriotism. In the present study, these variables are operationalized as individual differences in measured attitude within different national populations and are discussed with sole reference to existing social psychological research—significantly referred to in the Abstract as '*the literature*'. However, most current work on patriotism–nationalism lies outside the domain of social psychology. The distinction between nationalism and patriotism was originally used by political scientists as a means by which to classify different national political cultures. Within *this* literature, benign patriotism is regarded as a possibility specifically within civic forms of nation, whereas nationalist discourses and practices are often regarded as an inevitable consequence of ethnic constructions of nationhood (e.g. Viroli, 1995).

Any simplistic and reified distinction between civic and ethnic nations may well be questioned. However, we may still acknowledge that while a benign ('patriotic') national pride may be oriented to as a possibility in some national contexts (e.g. the USA and France), this is currently not generally the case in either England or Germany.

With respect to England—in which neither discourses of civil nor those of ethnic nationhood are well established—the distinction between nationalism and patriotism eludes contemporary common sense. The distinction itself does not form part of the currency of everyday political rhetoric (as it does in many other

²The assumption of international equivalence is also reflected in the assumption that there can be a simple translation of terminology. The reader is not, for example, informed how the English term 'foreigners' was presented to the German samples.

parts of the world), and among young people, at least, it appears that almost all evocations of nationhood have the potential to be interpreted as (nationalist) allusions to a shameful Imperialist heritage (Condor, 2000).

Even if we are unwilling to accept versions of the world in which civic and ethnic nations, nationalist and patriotic attitudes, exist as pure and distinct entities, it would still be reasonable to suppose that, in so far as a nation is (or regards itself as having been) constructed primarily in ethnic terms, the possibilities for non-exclusionary ('patriotic') forms of social representation might be somewhat limited. This is precisely what lies behind the current crisis of German nationhood alluded to by Mummendey and her colleagues in their introduction: the basic understanding of what the German nation is (or has been) cannot easily be reconciled with values of internationalism and social inclusion.

The task of constructing a world of nations that is not necessarily predicated upon hostile sentiments, percepts and practices is one that bedevilled the advanced liberal democracies throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In their introduction, Mummendey and her associates imply that their study will address these everyday political dilemmas. However, a dialogue between the world of the social psychological research report and the worlds outside can be achieved only in so far as our variables have not become so generalized as to become purified of all specific content. In order for research to have any ecological validity or applied relevance, we cannot afford to treat different nations as equivalent and interchangeable entities. A simultaneous concern for generality and specificity entails a delicate juggling act, but one that is necessary if social psychological science is to become anything other than internally referential, pertaining only to its own mythical universe in which abstract variables (and the statistical relations between them) come, ironically, to be granted more veracity than the very world of ordinary things that they are intended to illuminate.

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