

**SELF-CATEGORIZATION THEORY AND THE
DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN ENGLISH
CHILDREN**

Martyn Barrett, Hannah Wilson and Evanthia Lyons

**Department of Psychology, University of Surrey, Guildford,
Surrey GU2 7XH, UK**

Poster presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development,
Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA, April 15th-18th, 1999

ABSTRACT

Self-categorization theory (Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994) proposes that the salience of a social identity is context-dependent, with the salience of that identity being dependent upon the particular social comparisons which are available in any given context. Thus, in the case of national identity, when the context contains a comparable national outgroup, the salience of the national ingroup increases; when the context contains the national ingroup alone, the salience of that ingroup decreases. The theory also proposes that when a particular social identity becomes salient to an individual, self-stereotyping occurs and perceived ingroup homogeneity increases. Finally, the theory postulates that comparative context can affect group evaluations; depending upon the particular comparison outgroup which is available in the given context, the evaluation of the ingroup can change. Previous empirical studies have shown that these effects do indeed occur in individuals aged 18 years and over (see Oakes et al. 1994 for a review of these studies). The present study was designed to explore whether these various effects also occur in children. 307 English children aged from 5 to 11 years old were asked to attribute adjectives to their own national ingroup (English) in one of three different conditions: either alone; or in conjunction with a liked national outgroup (American); or in conjunction with a disliked national outgroup (German). In addition, the children were asked to rank the importance of their own national identity in relationship to their other social identities immediately after the attribution task, in order to assess the relative salience of their national identity in these three different comparative contexts. It was found that intergroup comparative context did not influence the salience of the children's own national identity, their attributions of ingroup homogeneity, or their evaluation of the ingroup. These findings imply that the processes postulated by self-categorization theory do not operate in 5 to 11 year old children, as least as far as their national identity is concerned. However, it was also found that the younger children were more positive towards their own national ingroup, and more negative to both of the national outgroups, than the older children. The younger children also made more homogeneous evaluations of all the national groups than the older children. In addition, national identity became more salient with age. The implications of these findings for self-categorization theory are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The development of national identity in children has been, until recently, a relatively neglected area of research. Previous studies in the area, most of which were conducted in the 1960s and early 1970s, concentrated upon children's geographical knowledge about nations and their attitudes towards foreign nationals (Jahoda, 1963; Lambert & Klineberg 1967; Middleton, Tajfel & Johnson, 1970; Piaget & Weil, 1951). These studies found that knowledge of national territories develops through the early years of schooling. They also indicated the emergence of different attitudes towards specific groups of foreign nationals during the same period, with some foreign groups being strongly liked and some strongly disliked, even though the child may have very little factual knowledge about these groups.

In recent years, there has been a renewal of interest in this area (Barrett & Short, 1992; Barrett, 1996, 1997; Barrett & Farroni, 1996; Barrett, Lyons, Purkhardt & Bouchier, 1996; Barrett, Lyons, Bennett, Vila, Gimenez, Arcuri & de Rosa, 1997). This has been fuelled, at least in part, by the application of social-psychological theorising about identity and intergroup relations (e.g. Brown, 1995; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994) to the study of adults' national identities (Breakwell & Lyons, 1996). This approach has yet to be applied to the development of national identity in children. The present study was designed to ascertain whether one particular social-psychological theory, namely self-categorization theory (SCT), can help to explain some of the phenomena characterising the development of national identity in children.

SCT (see Oakes et al., 1994) postulates that there are three levels of category abstraction which can be used to categorize the self: personal identity (the self as an individual), social identity (the self as a group member) and interspecies (the self as a human being). Each level is as valid as the next, with the self being defined equally both as an individual and as a social group member. This tripartite system of self-categorization forms the basis of SCT.

SCT postulates that, when a social identity is elicited, there is a depersonalisation of self-perception (that is, self-stereotyping occurs), group behaviour which is appropriate to the social identity is elicited, and perceived group homogeneity increases. The theory proposes

that the level at which the self is categorized is context-dependent, with the relevance of any one category depending upon the social comparisons which are available in any given context. In the case of national identity, when the context contains a comparable national outgroup, the salience of the national ingroup increases, and perceived group homogeneity increases; when the context contains the national ingroup alone, the salience of the ingroup decreases, with individual categorizations, personal identities and individual differences becoming more salient instead (that is, perceived group homogeneity decreases). Finally, SCT also postulates that comparative context can affect group evaluations; depending upon the particular comparison outgroup which is available in the given context, the evaluation of the ingroup can change.

The bulk of SCT research has concentrated upon identity processes in adults, and the theory has been well supported by evidence collected to date (see Oakes et al., 1994, for a detailed review). However, the theory has not yet been applied to identity development in children. Thus, little attention has been given to the child's acquisition of the integrated system of personal and social identities, or to whether the processes postulated by SCT might operate from the outset of the child's acquisition of this system or only from a later point in development. Also, the influence of comparative context upon children's evaluative judgements of social groups has not yet been examined. The current study was therefore designed to examine the possible application of SCT to the development of identity in children.

The study involved asking English children, aged between 5 and 11 years old, to evaluate their own national identity (English) either alone in a non-comparative context, or in a comparative context in which either a liked outgroup (American) or a disliked outgroup (German) was present. Barrett & Short (1992) have shown that English children tend to dislike Germans more than any other nationality, while Wilson, Barrett & Lyons (1995) have shown that Americans tend to be the most liked national outgroup amongst English children.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

The study had four main aims:

- To explore age-related trends in identity development, focusing in particular upon the relative subjective importance of children's national identity vis-à-vis their other social identities.
- SCT predicts that the salience of a particular social identity will increase when the context provides a comparable outgroup. Thus, the child's national identity ought to be more salient in the comparative contexts than in the non-comparative context. This prediction was tested in the study.
- SCT also predicts that ingroup homogeneity should be higher in the comparative contexts, with the perceived variability of ingroup members being greater in the non-comparative context. The study also tested this prediction.
- The study was also designed to test the predictions made by SCT that the presence of a comparative context can affect the evaluation of the national ingroup, and that the evaluation of the ingroup can vary according to whether the national ingroup is compared to a liked outgroup (American) or a disliked outgroup (German).

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS AND DESIGN

307 English children aged between 5 years 7 months and 11 years 9 months old participated in the study. All of the children lived in the town of Fleet in the south of England. 151 of the children were boys and 156 were girls.

The children were divided into three age groups according to their school years: 116 in years 1 and 2 (mean age = 6.8 years), 95 in years 3 and 4 (mean age = 8.9 years), and 96 in years 5 and 6 (mean age = 10.6 years). Within each age group, the children were further

subdivided randomly into three experimental conditions: condition 1 (evaluating English alone); condition 2 (evaluating English and American together); and condition 3 (evaluating English and German together). The experiment therefore used a 3 (comparative context) x 3 (age group) independent groups design.

MATERIALS

Attribution Task

Five boxes measuring 15 x 15 x 15 cm. were used. Written on each box was either '*English*', '*American*', '*German*', '*Both*' or '*Neither*'. Each box had a posting slot across the front measuring the full width of the box. The materials also included sixteen cards measuring 8 x 3 cm. On each of the cards was written one of the following words: '*clean*', '*dirty*', '*happy*', '*sad*', '*peaceful*', '*aggressive*', '*clever*', '*stupid*', '*hardworking*', '*lazy*', '*friendly*', '*unfriendly*', '*good*', '*bad*', '*nice*', and '*not nice*'.

Relative Subjective Importance (RSI) Task

A set of nineteen cards measuring 8 x 3 cm. was used. Written on each card were the following words describing the possible identities applicable to all the children: '*5 years old*', '*6 years old*', '*7 years old*', '*8 years old*', '*9 years old*', '*10 years old*', '*11 years old*', '*boy*', '*girl*', '*European*', '*English*', '*a person from Fleet*', '*white*', '*black*', '*Asian*', '*Christian*', '*Jewish*', '*Hindu*' and '*Muslim*'. A total of seven of these cards (i.e. those describing the child's actual age, sex, European, national, local, ethnic and religious identities) were used with each individual child.

PROCEDURE

Each child was interviewed separately in a quiet room. The children in all of the conditions completed the attribution task first, immediately followed by the RSI task.

Attribution Task

In the liked comparative context condition (English and American), the child was presented with four boxes labelled: '*English*', '*American*', '*Neither*' and '*Both*'. In the disliked comparative context condition (English and German), the child was presented with four boxes labelled: '*English*', '*German*', '*Neither*' and '*Both*'. In the non-comparative condition (English alone), the child was presented with just the '*English*' box alone. The sixteen cards

with adjectives on them were then placed in a randomly ordered pile in front of the child. In the comparative conditions, the child was instructed to place each card into the box representing the national group that they felt that word described. If the word could be used to describe both groups the child was told to place it into the *'Both'* box. If the word was thought not to be applicable to either group they were told to place it into the *'Neither'* box. In the non-comparative condition, the child was simply instructed to place all the words that they felt could be used to describe English people into the English box. If the child felt that any of the words were not applicable they were told to put them to one side. The children were allowed to discard any cards they felt were not appropriate in describing either the ingroup or the outgroups.

Relative Subjective Importance (RSI) Task

The seven cards applicable to the child were spread out in front of the child in a random arrangement. The experimenter explained that these were all things that could be used to describe the child. The child was then asked, if they could choose only one of the cards to describe themselves, to choose the one out of all of those shown which was the most important to them. This card was then removed from the set, and the child was then asked to choose the card that was the next most important to them. The process was repeated until all of the cards had been used. The cards were given a score of 1 to 7 with 1 being the most important and 7 the least important.

RESULTS

Relative Subjective Importance (RSI) Task

Kruskal-Wallis tests were applied to the rankings of the seven identities obtained in the RSI task, in order to see whether these rankings varied with age or with condition.

Saliency of national identity across the three age groups

Significant age effects were found for the ranks of European, English, being from Fleet, the child's age, the child's sex, ethnicity and religious identity. Table 1 gives full details of the mean ranks. As can be seen, the importance of the English, European and religious identities increase with age, whereas the importance of age, local and ethnic identities decrease with age, and the importance of sex first decreases than increases with age.

Saliency of national identity across the conditions

Kruskal-Wallis tests also revealed that there were no significant differences across the three comparative conditions in the ranked importance of the European, English, age, sex, ethnic or religious identities. The prediction of SCT, that the presence of an intergroup comparative context will enhance the saliency of the ingroup category (English), was therefore not supported.

Attribution Task

Variability scale

A variability score was computed for the adjectives attributed to the ingroup and to the outgroups. The adjectives consisted of eight pairs of adjectives, each pair consisting of a positive and a negative adjective. A score of 1 was given when only the negative or the positive adjective was attributed to the group, a score of 2 was given when the child attributed both the negative and the positive to the group, and a score of 0 was given if neither the positive nor the negative adjective was attributed to the group. A total score was then derived by summing across all 8 adjective dimensions. This total score was then divided by the number of adjective dimensions that the child had actually used. The variability scale ranged from 1 to 2.

A 3 (age) x 3 (comparative context) analysis of variance was then applied to the variability scores for the English ingroup. These scores exhibited a main effect of age ($F(2, 286) = 5.08, p < 0.01$). A Scheffe test revealed that the significant differences between the age groups fell between the youngest and the oldest children, with the youngest children giving more homogeneous responses concerning the ingroup (years 1&2 mean score = 1.21, years 3&4 mean score = 1.27, years 5&6 mean score = 1.34).

A 3 (age) x 2 (German vs. American) analysis of variance was then applied to the variability scores for the two outgroups. This only yielded a main effect of age ($F(2, 189) = 3.27, p < 0.05$). No other main effects and no interaction effects were found. A Scheffe test revealed that the significant differences between the age groups fell between the youngest and the oldest children, with the youngest children giving more homogeneous responses to the

outgroups (years 1&2 mean score = 1.19, years 3&4 mean score = 1.26, years 5&6 mean score = 1.30).

Negativity scale

A negativity score was also computed for the adjectives attributed to the ingroup and to the outgroups. A score of 1 was given when only the positive adjective was attributed to the group, a score of 2 was given when the child attributed both the positive and the negative adjectives to the group, a score of 3 when only the negative adjective was attributed to the group, and a score of 0 if neither adjective was used to describe the group. A total score was then derived by summing across all 8 adjective dimensions. This total score was then divided by the number of adjective dimensions the child had actually used. The negativity scale ranged from 1 to 3.

A 3 (age) x 3 (comparative context) analysis of variance was then applied to the negativity scores for the English ingroup. This only yielded a main effect of age ($F(2, 286) = 4.23, p < 0.05$). A Scheffe test revealed that the significant differences between the age groups fell between the youngest and the oldest children, with more positive attributions concerning the ingroup being made by the youngest children (years 1&2 mean score = 1.33, years 3&4 mean score = 1.37, and years 5&6 mean score = 1.48).

A 3 (age) x 2 (German vs. American) analysis of variance was then applied to the negativity scores for the two outgroups. This revealed a main effect of age ($F(2, 189) = 4.39, p < 0.05$) and a main effect of German vs. American ($F(1, 189) = 8.11, p < 0.01$). No other effects were found. A Scheffe test revealed that the significant differences between the age groups fell between the youngest and the oldest children, with the youngest children being more negative towards the outgroups (years 1&2 mean score = 1.81, years 3&4 mean score = 1.74, and years 5&6 mean score = 1.52). The main effect of condition was due to the children giving more negative responses towards the Germans than to the Americans (mean German score = 1.81 and mean American score = 1.58).

DISCUSSION

Developmental trends in the relative importance of national identity

The relative importance of the children's national identity increased with age, along with the relative importance of their European identity. A growing knowledge of these identities and an ability to attribute them to the self may account for these age effects, and this finding is consistent with the findings from previous studies which have indicated that children's knowledge of their own national identity develops through the early years of schooling (Jahoda, 1963; Middleton et al., 1970; Piaget & Weil, 1951). By contrast, the younger children tended to place greater importance upon their age and gender identities rather than upon their national or European identities.

The salience of national identity within comparative vs. non-comparative contexts

SCT predicts that, once a multiplicity of self-categorizations has been acquired, the particular comparative context in which the identities are evaluated should influence their relative salience. However, it was found that the relative salience of national identity was not affected by the presence of a comparative context in this study. Irrespective of whether the national ingroup was evaluated on its own, or in conjunction with other national groups, there was no effect upon the relative importance of the national identity.

This finding could be explained if the RSI task was not a reliable indicator of the salience of the national identity. However, previous studies have shown that the RSI task is reliable and has convergent validity (Wilson 1998), and it yields measures which display patterns of meaningful correlations with parental attitudes (Wilson and Barrett, 1996). This suggests that the failure to find effects of comparative context upon RSI task performance cannot be explained by the poor reliability or the poor validity of the RSI task.

One possible explanation of the lack of context effects upon the subjective salience of national identity could simply be that the cognitive processes and mechanisms postulated by SCT do not operate in children of this age. Alternatively, it could be the case that the national identity of the children in this study (as opposed to their age or gender identities) was not yet sufficiently developed for its salience to be influenced by the manipulation of comparative

context. Although children as young as 6 years old do acknowledge their membership of their own national group, it could be the case that they do not yet have a sufficiently developed understanding of the beliefs, values and attitudes which are associated with that identity. The sensitivity of the child to contextual factors which could, in principle, influence the salience of the national identity, might therefore be reduced.

The homogeneity of the attributions

The youngest children displayed the highest levels of homogeneity in the attribution of adjectives to both the ingroup and the outgroups regardless of condition. Intragroup homogeneity decreased with age, with the older children producing more variable evaluations of all three national groups.

SCT predicts that in intergroup comparative contexts, the ingroup should be perceived as being more homogeneous than it is when judged on its own in a non-comparative context. However, this prediction of SCT was not supported by this study.

The evaluation of national groups

The younger children were more positive about the ingroup and more negative about the outgroups, regardless of comparative condition, when compared with the older children. Ingroup positivity and outgroup negativity both decreased with age.

It is possible that the evaluation of the national ingroup could change when compared with a disliked rather than with a liked outgroup. For example, the positive attributes of the ingroup could be accentuated in a context where the ingroup is compared with a disliked outgroup, in order to enhance ingroup positive distinctiveness. Alternatively, the positive attributes of the ingroup could be accentuated more when compared with a liked outgroup than when compared with a disliked outgroup, in order to ensure that ingroup positive distinctiveness is still maintained despite the overall positivity of the comparison outgroup in the former case. However, neither of these ideas receives any support from the data obtained in the present study, as there were no effects of comparative condition upon the evaluation of the national ingroup.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

- The salience of national identity in relationship to the child's other identities was not affected by the presence of a comparative context.
- The homogeneity attributed to the national ingroup was not affected by the presence of a comparative context.
- The evaluation of the national ingroup was not affected by the presence of a comparative context, and was not affected according to whether the national ingroup was compared to a liked or a disliked national outgroup.
- The salience of national identity in relationship to the child's other identities increased with age.
- The younger children made more homogeneous judgements about all of the national groups than the older children.
- The younger children were more positive to the national ingroup, and more negative to both of the national outgroups, than the older children.

Thus, none of the predictions of SCT concerning the effects of comparative context were upheld, and the appropriateness of trying to apply SCT to the development of national identity in children is called into question by the findings of this study. However, it should be noted that the age-related developmental changes documented in this study parallel other findings that have been reported in the literature, particularly those which have been obtained in relationship to the development of ethnic identity in children (see, for example, Doyle, Beaudet and Aboud, 1988, and Doyle and Aboud, 1995).

REFERENCES

- Barrett, M. (1996). English children's acquisition of a European identity. In G. Breakwell & E. Lyons (Eds), *Changing European Identities: Social Psychological Analyses of Social Change*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Barrett, M. (1997). The development of national identity in childhood and adolescence. Paper presented at the 8th European Conference on Developmental Psychology, Rennes, France, September 1997.
- Barrett, M. & Farroni, T. (1996). English and Italian children's knowledge of European geography. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 14, 257-273.
- Barrett, M., Lyons, E., Purkhardt, C. & Bouchier, A. (1996). English Children's Representations of European Geography. End of Project Report, ESRC Grant No. R00035753.
- Barrett, M., Lyons, E., Bennett, M., Vila, I. Gimenez, A., Arcuri, L. & de Rosa, A.S. (1997). Children's Beliefs and Feelings about Their Own and Other National Groups in Europe. Final Report to the Commission of the European Communities, DG XII, Human Capital and Mobility (HCM) Programme, Network Contract No. CHRX-CT94-0687.
- Barrett, M. & Short, J. (1992). Images of European people in a group of 5-10 year old English children. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 10, 339-363.
- Breakwell, G. & Lyons, E. (1996). *Changing European Identities: Social Psychological Analyses of Social Change*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Brown, R. (1995). *Prejudice: Its Social Psychology*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Doyle, A.B. & Aboud, F.E. (1995). A longitudinal study of white children's racial prejudice as a social-cognitive development. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 41, 209-228.

- Doyle, A.B., Beaudet, J. & Aboud, F.E. (1988). Developmental patterns in the flexibility of children's ethnic attitudes. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 19, 3-18.
- Hogg, M.A. & Abrams, D. (1988). *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes*. London: Routledge.
- Jahoda, G. (1963). The development of children's ideas about country and nationality. Part 1: The conceptual framework. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 33, 47-60.
- Lambert, W.E. & Klineberg, O. (1967). *Children's Views of Foreign Peoples: A Cross-National Study*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.
- Middleton, M., Tajfel, H. & Johnson N. (1970). Cognitive and affective aspects of children's national attitudes. *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 9, 122-134.
- Oakes P.J., Haslam, S.A. & Turner, J.C. (1994). *Stereotyping and Social Reality*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Piaget, J & Weil, A. (1951). The development in children of the idea of the homeland and its relation with other countries. *International Social Science Bulletin*, 3, 561-578.
- Wilson, H. (1998) *The Development of National Identity in 5 to 11 Year Old English Schoolchildren*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Surrey, Guildford.
- Wilson, H. & Barrett, M. (1996). The development of national identity in children: a study to investigate the relationship between child and parent attitudes. Poster presented at the British Psychological Society Developmental Section Annual Conference, Oxford, September 1996.
- Wilson, H., Barrett, M. & Lyons E. (1995). The development of national identity in English children: a pilot study. Paper presented at the 2nd European Workshop on Children's Beliefs and Feelings about Their Own and Other National Groups in Europe, Girona, July 1995.

TABLE 1: The mean ranks of the seven identities in the RSI task, broken down according to the children's age, together with the results of the Kruskal-Wallis tests.

Identity / Age Group	Mean Rank	Kruskal- Wallis
AGE		
YEARS 1&2	2.23	$\chi^2(2)=68.79$ p<0.0001
YEARS 3&4	3.84	
YEARS 5&6	4.22	
SEX		
YEARS 1&2	2.87	$\chi^2(2)=12.87$ p<0.01
YEARS 3&4	3.73	
YEARS 5&6	3.18	
LOCAL		
YEARS 1&2	3.63	$\chi^2(2)=17.35$ p<0.001
YEARS 3&4	4.08	
YEARS 5&6	4.67	
ENGLISH		
YEARS 1&2	3.60	$\chi^2(2)=20.08$ p<0.001
YEARS 3&4	2.81	
YEARS 5&6	2.69	
EUROPEAN		
YEARS 1&2	5.49	$\chi^2(2)=61.65$ p<0.0001
YEARS 3&4	4.26	
YEARS 5&6	3.52	
ETHNIC		
YEARS 1&2	5.03	$\chi^2(2)=16.58$ p<0.001
YEARS 3&4	5.38	
YEARS 5&6	5.76	
RELIGIOUS		
YEARS 1&2	5.06	$\chi^2(2)=10.455$ p<0.01
YEARS 3&4	3.87	
YEARS 5&6	3.96	