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Beware of national symbols: How flags can threaten intergroup relations

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Abstract

The present research examines effects of exposure to the German flag on out-group prejudice in Germany. In line with Social Identity Theory, we demonstrated that exposure to the German flag increased out-group prejudice among highly nationalistic German respondents. This finding seems to contradict prior research illustrating that exposure to the U.S. flag reduced out-group prejudice among highly nationalistic American respondents. This contradiction is considered as the result of different concepts Germans associate with the German flag compared to concepts Americans associate with the U.S. flag. Practical implications for flag exposure are discussed.

Keywords: Flag exposure, Nationalism, Prejudice, Social Identity Theory

Word count: 92

In many countries, national flags are omnipresent, particularly during sports events, national holidays or when a nation's identity is threatened (e.g., Skitka, 2005). The research question we examine in the present paper is: Can flags threaten intergroup relations?

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) posits that humans seek to positively differentiate their own group from relevant out-groups to maintain or enhance a positive social identity. According to this theory, making groups salient can (but does not necessarily) lead to increased prejudice against those not belonging to the in-group (Brewer, 1999). This process, however, depends on how much the individual identifies with this group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Moreover, recent summaries (Brewer, 1999; Brown & Zagefka, 2005) conclude that in-group identification is more likely to result in out-group prejudice when the groups are interwoven in a conflict of interests or supported by ideologies of moral superiority and social exclusion. Nationalism is an example of such a fusion of identification (national identity) and moral superiority (national superiority). Nationalism refers to the idealization of the nation (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Sumner, 1906), which includes the idealization of the nation's history (e.g., Blank & Schmidt, 2003), an orientation toward national dominance as well as national superiority (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). This implies for the current research question that exposure to the German flag might elicit a motivation to positively differentiate one's national in-group from groups not belonging to the national collective particularly in highly nationalistic individuals.

Exposure to the U.S. Flag

Most of the existing research on the effects of exposure to national symbols was conducted in the United States and thus refers to the exposure to the U.S. flag. Against the expectations outlined above, it has been demonstrated that exposure to the U.S. flag was associated with less out-group hostility for participants high in nationalism compared to those not exposed to the U.S. flag (Butz, Plant & Doerr, 2007). Butz et al. (2007) argued and demonstrated that the U.S. flag activates the "core" American values of egalitarianism and

humanitarianism (Katz & Hass, 1988) and is therefore accompanied by increased out-group tolerance. Contrary to this, Kimmelmeier and Winter (2008) showed that direct exposure to the U.S. flag increased nationalism. Furthermore, the U.S. flag is also assumed to be linked with concepts like power, war and aggression (Ferguson & Hassin, 2007). In accordance with this, Ferguson and Hassin (2007) demonstrated that the perception of American cues (e.g., the U.S. flag) increased the accessibility of aggressive constructs, aggressive judgments and aggressive behavior for participants who follow the American political news media. Taken together, these heterogeneous findings, even within the United States, suggest that the consequences of flag exposure are not unidirectional but depend on the social context.

Exposure to the German Flag

Applied to the German context, it has been shown that Germans evaluate their nationality less positively than people from other countries assess their national identities (Noelle-Neumann & Kocher, 1987; Simon, Pantaleo & Mummendey, 1995). While many other nations (e.g., the United States) have not been reluctant to present their national symbols in public spheres, such as displaying their flag in schools, office buildings, libraries or homes (e.g., Ferguson & Hassin, 2007; Skitka, 2005), Germans often refrain from showing their flag in private and public contexts. This can be interpreted as a consequence of the crimes committed by Germans during the Holocaust (e.g., Elias, 1992). Thus, it is likely that Germans do not associate the same concepts with the German flag as Americans associate with the U.S. flag.

The use of national symbols increased significantly during the soccer world championship held in Germany in 2006, which was accompanied by a frequent display of the German flag in public (e.g., New York Times, 2006). However, this soccer event did not result in a new and positive form of national pride (Becker, Wagner & Christ, 2007). In contrast, using two representative surveys, Becker et al. (2007) measured national pride and prejudice among Germans before and after the soccer world championship and found that the

relation between national pride and prejudice increased over time. It is not clear whether this increase was based on exposure to the German flag or any other event that happened during the championship. Therefore, direct experimental tests are needed. The present study aims to extend results of Becker et al. (2007) by testing the effects of flag exposure under controlled conditions.

The Present Research

Butz et al. (2007), Ferguson and Hassin (2007) as well as Kimmelmeier and Winter (2008) explain their results by referring to the concepts that are associated with the U.S. flag. Thus, the concepts people associate with their national flag seem to be important. According to Kimmelmeier and Winter (2008), the flag summarizes the nation and its history. Because the National Socialism plays a fundamental role in Germany's history (e.g., Elias, 1992), it seems unlikely that the German flag activates humanitarian concepts.

Based on these considerations and by taking Social Identity Theory into account, we expect that for highly nationalistic individuals, the activation of their national identity—i.e., by exposing them to the German flag—elicits a motivation to express their nation's superiority in order to achieve a positive social identity. One way to express one's nation's superiority is to devalue those not belonging to the national in-group. In contrast, it is unlikely that individuals low in nationalism are motivated to present their nation's superiority by devaluing out-groups and are thus not expected to respond with more out-group prejudice once their national identity is made salient. Taken together, we posit and test that exposure to the German flag increases out-group prejudice, but only in highly nationalistic individuals.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and fifty-one Germans (57% female, 43% male) participated in an online experiment. They received the link of the study through email distribution lists. Most of the

participants (91%) were between the ages of 18 and 45, whereas 9% were older. Sixty percent had a high school diploma (Abitur), and 25% held a university degree.

Design and procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three flag conditions (German flag, $N = 85$; no flag, $N = 88$; U.S. flag, $N = 78$). The no flag condition served as control group, the U.S. flag condition was used to ensure that effects would not be driven by exposure to any random flag. As an explanation for the flag exposure, the study was introduced as a German-American research project. In the two flag conditions, one of the flags was permanently presented in the headline of the online questionnaire. Thus, participants were permanently exposed to the German flag, the U.S. flag, or no flag during the entire online survey. First, participants completed demographic questions including age, gender and education. Then they were asked to answer the dependent variable, prejudice against immigrants. To avoid heightened salience of the national in-group, a measure of nationalism was presented only after participants had completed the dependent variable. Finally, respondents were given the opportunity to write down what they associate with the German flag. We will use these materials for further exploratory analyses.

Measures

All items were answered on six-point rating scales ranging from 1, "fully agree," to 6, "fully disagree." Items were recoded so that higher values correspond to higher scores in the respective construct. *Prejudice* was measured with eight items from Heitmeyer (2002; e.g., "There are too many foreigners living in Germany") and Blank & Schmidt (2003, e.g., "With jobs getting scarce, the foreigners living in Germany should be sent back to their native country", $\alpha = .88$). *Nationalism* was assessed with three items "I am proud to be a German", "I am proud of Germany's history," and "All in all, Germany is better than most others countries" ($\alpha = .73$).

Results

Concepts associated with the German flag. We first examined which concepts participants associated with the German flag. Two hundred and twenty-two participants followed the request at the end of the questionnaire to write down what they associate with the German flag. Altogether, they produced 434 associations. Most of the participants mentioned rather neutral associations like soccer (80), sports in general (16), patriotic associations like home country (12), the Hambach festival (7), unity, justice, and freedom (7), and the unification of Germany (8). Fifty associations were related to National Socialism, for instance, Third Reich, Hitler, right-wing extremists. Participants also mentioned nationalism (10) and national pride (12). Only nine associations referred to humanistic values, namely democracy (7), tolerance (1), and peaceful Germany (1). These results indicate that the German flag does not imply such positive egalitarian associations for Germans as the U.S. flag indicates for Americans (Butz et al. 2007).

Nationalism. Univariate analysis of variance with nationalism as the dependent variable and experimental condition as the independent variable showed no significant effect for the experimental manipulation on nationalism, $F(2,248) = .65, p = .52$. Thus, the experimental manipulation of flag exposure did not affect participants' nationalism (German flag condition: $M = 3.10, SD = 1.38$; U.S. flag condition: $M = 3.14, SD = 1.25$; no flag condition: $M = 3.09, SD = 1.30$). Nationalism can therefore be used as potential moderator.

Prejudice. We conducted a moderated regression analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) to test the effect of German and U.S. flag exposure on prejudice considering nationalism as a moderator variable. The experimental conditions were recoded into two dummy variables (dummy1: German flag = 1, other = 0; dummy2: U.S. flag = 1, other = 0). These two dummy variables, centered scores of nationalism, and the two product terms (German flag x nationalism, U.S. flag x nationalism) were entered into the regression equation. A main effect of nationalism occurred ($B = .36, SE = .06, p < .001$), indicating that nationalism was positively related to prejudice. The dummy variables did not have significant effects,

indicating that flag exposure did not affect respondents' out-group prejudice per se (German flag condition: $M = 2.31$, $SD = .95$; U.S. flag condition: $M = 2.49$, $SD = 1.05$; no flag condition: $M = 2.29$, $SD = .85$). Further, the interaction between nationalism and exposure to the German flag was significant ($B = .32$, $SE = .13$, $p = .01$). Simple slopes analysis for individuals high in nationalism (one SD above the mean) revealed that, in accordance with our predictions, relative to the control group, exposure to the German flag led to increased out-group prejudice in highly nationalistic participants ($B = .38$, $SE = .15$, $p = .01$). Against expectations, the simple slope for individuals low in nationalism (one SD below the mean) was marginally significant, indicating a tendency that exposure to the German flag decreased out-group prejudice in individuals low in nationalism relative to the control condition ($B = -.29$, $SE = .15$, $p = .06$; see Figure 1). The interaction between nationalism and exposure to the U.S. flag was not significant ($B = .14$, $SE = .14$, $p = .32$).

Discussion

Our research aimed to test effects of exposure to the German flag on out-group prejudice. Consistent with Social Identity Theory and supporting our predictions, exposure to the German flag fostered out-group prejudice among highly nationalistic participants. At first glance, these results seem to contradict those found by Butz and colleagues (2007) in the U.S. They have argued that the U.S. flag activates America's "core" values of egalitarianism and humanitarianism (Katz & Hass, 1988) and instigate value-corresponding behavior (see also Butz, 2009). In accordance with this, they found that exposure to the U.S. flag decreased not only out-group hostility for participants high in nationalism, but also activated egalitarian concepts. We illustrated that German respondents did not associate the same egalitarian concepts with the German flag, which Americans have upon exposure to their national flag (Katz & Hass, 1988). Instead, Germans were more likely to associate soccer, patriotic values and concepts related to the National Socialism with the German flag. This result reconciles Butz and colleagues' (2007) findings with ours by illustrating that different associations with

the two flags may result in different reactions toward those not included in the national in-group (see also Butz, 2009). Therefore, in line with research findings of Ferguson and Hassin (2007) as well as Kemmelmeier and Winter (2008), our research highlights that consequences of flag exposure are not unidirectional in all countries but depend on the social context and the concepts people associate with the flag and other national symbols. In addition, and in accordance with Social Identity Theory, our results support the assumption that this process is moderated by nationalism. Future research is needed to examine whether the observed interaction of nationalism and flag exposure is due to different concepts people high and low in nationalism associate with the German flag. Such an investigation might point to reasons for our unpredicted finding that participants low in nationalism showed a tendency to respond with less out-group prejudice when exposed to the German flag.

Coming back to our opening question: Can flags threaten intergroup relations? Our answer is: Yes, under certain conditions. Therefore, our research contributes to the recent debate between advocates and opponents of a national symbol exposure and a flag revival (New York Times, 2006). Whereas one side contends that national states need a “sane patriotism” and, therefore, need a display of national symbols like flags, the other side counters that national symbols increase feelings of unity and thus contribute to exclusion of those not belonging to the national in-group (e.g., Bar-Tal, 1997). In conclusion, our findings suggest that a cautious dealing at least regarding the German flag is called for, particularly for highly nationalistic individuals.

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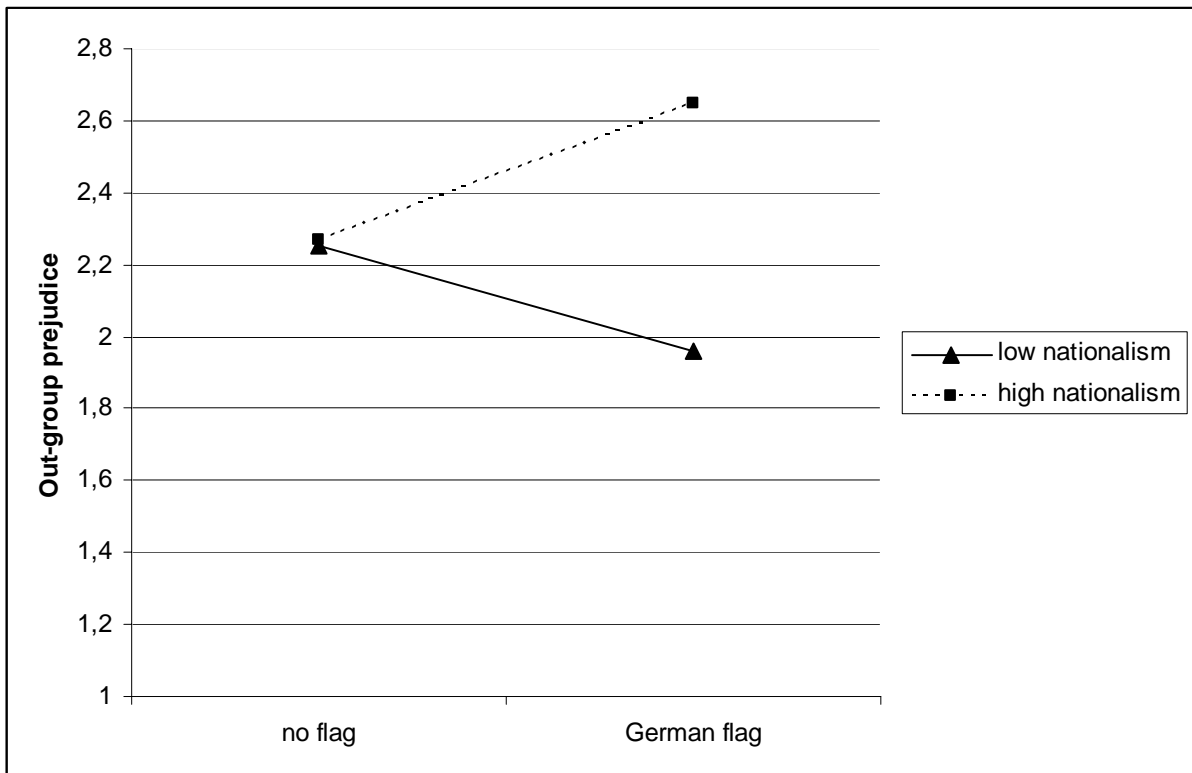


Figure 1.

Simple slopes of the relation between flag condition and prejudice as a function of nationalism