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## **Better the Devil you know: Threat effects and attachment to the European Union**

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### **Abstract**

The EU is facing unprecedented challenges and significant threats to its economic and political security. Austerity, the Eurozone crisis, rising immigration and heightened fear of terrorism all present serious challenges to the process of integration. How does this context of insecurity impact on what the EU means to its citizens? Will the public become increasingly Eurosceptic or will they discover a hitherto unrecognised attachment to the EU as the prospect of its collapse becomes real? Psychological research has demonstrated that individual exposure to threat decreases cognitive capacity, inducing a tendency towards rigidity or conservatism - a tendency to cling to the 'devil you know'. So what might this mean for the European integration process? Using experimental techniques drawn from political psychology, the authors find a dual threat effect. The EU symbol has a negative (anti-EU) effect on EU-related attitudes when presented in neutral context. This is consonant with conceptualisations of the EU as a threat to national cultural and political norms. In contrast, however, visual priming of participants with EU symbols has a positive (pro-EU) effect on related attitudes when these are presented in a context that implies a subtle but imminent threat to the benefits of EU membership.

**Keywords:** identity, threat context, visual cues, attitudes, European Union

## **Introduction**

The EU is facing unprecedented challenges and significant threats to its economic and political security. The context of austerity, the Eurozone crisis, rising immigration and the heightened fear of terrorism all present serious challenges to the process of integration. How does this context of insecurity impact on what the EU means to its citizens? Will the public continue to become increasingly Eurosceptic or will they discover a hitherto unrecognised attachment to the EU as the prospect of its collapse (or in the UK case, of withdrawal) becomes real? Psychological research has demonstrated that individual exposure to threat decreases cognitive capacity, inducing a tendency towards rigidity or conservatism - a tendency to cling to the 'devil you know'. So what might this mean for the European integration process?

Threat is a central concept in the study of identity - that identities are often developed and strengthened in the context of conflict between 'them' and 'us' is well recognised. Threat has also played a key role in the European integration process. Historically the formation of the EU took place in the shadow of threat: strategic threat, in the cold war context; the threat of economic domination of small states in a globalising world economy; and the internal threat of a rising communist presence. There exists, however, little systematic empirical engagement with the role played by threat in relation to public attitudes to the European Union. Using experimental techniques drawn from political psychology, we examine the effect of implicit exposure to the EU symbol on a variety of EU related attitudes and ask whether this effect varies according to context, specifically in relation to threat.

Exposure to the EU symbol and exposure to a threatening or neutral context are manipulated using a group of Scottish national identifiers drawn from a Scottish University. Although partly directed by practical considerations, namely access to participants in a controlled environment, a Scottish sample has intrinsic value considering the ongoing public debate surrounding the forthcoming Scottish independence referendum (September 2014) and its implications for Scotland-EU and rest of the UK-EU relationships.

In line with existing research on the attitudinal effects of exposure to implicit visual cues (Butz, Plant & Doerr, 2007a; Butz, 2009; Ehrlinger et al., 2011; Hassin et al., 2007, 2009; Kemmelmeier & Winter, 2008) and of exposure to threat contexts (Jost et al., 2003; Lavine & Lodge, 2005; Staw et al., 2007; Thórisdóttir & Jost, 2011; Pantoja & Segura, 2012: 265-6), we expect to observe an interaction effect between implicit exposure to the EU symbol and manipulated threat context. Specifically, we hypothesise that visual priming of the EU will have a positive (pro-EU) effect on related attitudes when presented in a context that implies a subtle but imminent threat to the benefits of EU membership. Indeed, our results suggest that the EU symbol has a negative (anti-EU) effect on EU-related attitudes when presented in neutral context. In contrast, implicit exposure to the EU symbol produces pro-EU responses when the symbol is presented in a subtly threatening context. As insecurity and threat become increasingly commonplace in the EU context, the

insights from this experimental approach are timely and present new avenues for future research.

In the theoretical framework, we examine the treatment of threat in the literature on European integration. It is argued that the extensive psychological literature that examines the cognitive, behavioural and motivational effects of threat has significant insights to offer. In the methodology section, we explain how an experimental approach, employing implicit visual cues, can elicit new empirical insights into the effect of threat contexts on EU related attitudes and discuss our expectations. The logic and design of the experiment is followed by the results. The empirical examination of the impact of contextual effects (specifically threat effects) on EU-related attitudes provides insights into key debates in EU integration studies. Specifically:

- (i) the relative importance of cultural/instrumental aspects of support for the EU system;
- (ii) the existence of implicit support for the European Union - or the normalisation of EU membership as the status quo;
- (iii) the factors that influence the self-categorisation of individuals as national or as EU group-members.

In conclusion, we consider limitations and wider implications of these findings.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Attitudinal and Behavioural Responses to Threat*

Political contexts in which threat, whether existential or manipulated, is present have long been recognised to have cognitive, behavioural and motivational effects (for an overview see Thórisdóttir & Jost 2011: 790; Pantoja & Segura 2012: 265-6). In a recent experimental study Thórisdóttir and Jost (2011: 806) confirm this effect and demonstrate that a threatening context affects individual motivation and, in so doing appears (at least temporarily) to alter social and political attitudes.

A well established position in relation to group cohesion is that ‘an external threat draws group members together and increases group cohesiveness’ (Staw et al. 2007: 507). The study of intergroup conflict and the threat effect has a long history, particularly in relation to the study of race (Key 1943; Blalock 1967). Early studies of intergroup conflict in boys’ camps also identified the significant role played by external threat in inducing internal group cohesion (Sherif & Sherif 1953; Sherif et al. 1961). More recently, Campbell (2006) has shown that the threat effect, and its underlying logic of group conflict, is generalisable to the case of religion. Using survey data, Campbell demonstrates that ‘just as the racial threat literature shows whites responding to the presence of blacks, evangelicals respond to the presence of secularists—suggesting that their presidential vote is at least partly motivated by “religious threat.”’ (Campbell 2006: 111)

A strong link emerges between conservatism and threat contexts. A tendency to cling to the known is observed: 'The status quo, no matter how aversive, is a known condition and is therefore easier to predict and imagine than a potentially different state of affairs that could be either better or worse' (Thórisdóttir & Jost 2011: 789). Reviewing the literature on the effects of threat, and building on the insights of Jost et al. (2003), Lavine et al (2005: 221) argue that threat, however it is conceived, 'provides the primary motivation for the internalization of society's prescriptions (conventionalism), submission to perceived legitimate authority, and aggression against out-groups'.

### *Threat and European Integration*

This wider literature provides useful insights for the study of the EU. Both: (i) the impact of threat on group cohesion and; (ii) the tendency towards conservatism when faced with threat, deserve further empirical exploration. The concept of threat has, of course, played a more or less explicit, role in a number of debates on the European integration, and most commonly on the role of the EU as a threat to national practices and identities. A key task for scholars of the multi-level EU is to establish the conditions under which the EU is itself viewed as a threat – the 'them' to the national 'us' – and, conversely, under what conditions the EU is perceived, by national identifiers within the member states, to form part of their concept of 'us'.

i. The EU as Threat: The 'Them' to our National 'Us'

Key to understanding what shapes attitudes towards the European Union is an appreciation of the nature and complexities of the relationship between European Union identity and the range of national state identities and sub-state national identities with which it interacts. Mols and Haslam (2008) emphasise, for example, the importance of context in their study of the effect of regional identity salience in shaping support for European integration. An extensive literature also draws upon the social group considerations – as opposed to purely individualistic ones – developed by the social identity theoretical approach (Tajfel et al. 1971; Tajfel & Turner 1979, 1986; Turner 1985; Turner et al. 1987) to understand the relationship between the range of identities at play in the European Union and to analyse their effect on attitudes to European integration (Marcussen et al. 1999; Mols & Haslam 2008; Mols et al. 2009; Carey 2002; McLaren 2006; Lubbers 2008; Caporaso & Kim 2009; Hooghe & Marks 2008; Curley 2009; Genna 2009; Risse 2010).

Drawing on similar insights, McLaren, for instance, has argued that the traditional focus on individualistic cost/benefit analyses in the EU attitudes literature has led to a neglect of the explanatory power of perceived threat to group (cultural) values (McLaren, 2002, 2006). For some, McLaren argues: 'opposition to integration stems from concern over the degradation of the national community's symbols, identity and resources' (McLaren 2006: 191). Lubbers and Scheepers (2005) similarly find that



research on Euroscepticism has been skewed by the focus on individual instrumentalism rather than shared political culture (see also Lubbers, 2008).

The extent to which support for European integration is driven more or less by group/cultural or instrumental motivations is a longstanding debate. In one of the earliest quantitative studies of EU identity, Gabel found that utilitarian theories, which emphasised the contingency of political regime support, provided a more robust predictor of support for European integration than cognitive mobilization and political values theories (Gabel, 1998). This utilitarian approach, though subject to criticism (Anderson, 1998; Sanchez-Cuenca, 2000) dominated the study of EU support for many years. In a series of recent articles, Hooghe and Marks examine the relative roles of group identity and economic rationality in driving public attitudes towards the European Union. Their conclusion is that, in fact identity may have the explanatory edge. Although along with communal identities, economic interests continue to play a crucial role in determining support for the EU (Hooghe & Marks 2004, 2005).

From the perspective examined in this section, the EU represents the 'them' to the national 'us' of member state citizens.

- ii. The EU under Threat: The EU 'Us' to an undefined 'Them'

There has been a growing normalisation of the EU in the lives of its citizens. In terms of daily reality - including personal and business relationships, travel and consumer trends (Diez Medrano, 2008) – ‘banal Europeanism’ is increasingly evident (Cram 2001). There is a growing recognition that while few would ‘die for Europe’ (Smith, 1995), daily exposure to EU related norms, symbols and practices is likely to play a role in shaping identification with and support for the European Union (Bruter 2003, 2009; Castiglione, 2009; Manners, 2011; McNamara, 2010; Priban, 2009; Trenz 2004, 2006). For most EU citizens their relationship with the EU is largely based on daily low-level engagement with the EU in unremarkable ways (carrying passports or driving licences, conforming with legislation, walking past EU flags), which remind citizens of their involvement in the larger EU system whether for good or ill.

These routines and habits, by acting as daily reminders of belonging, in Billig's (1995:43) terms, ‘serve to turn background space into homeland space’. Normalization of the EU occurs as new rules and routines or integrative habits transform understandings of the place of the EU within the lives and imaginings of its citizens into a state of normality such that a re-imagination of the EU and of the meaning and utility of membership of the EU becomes possible and a collective forgetting that life was ever otherwise takes place. Even the very term ‘Member State’ is an unremarkable but constant implicit reminder of membership/belonging to the EU.

However, while a growing implicit normalisation of EU membership may be taking place, for a mass of individuals to identify explicitly with a state they must first 'actually experience the state' and that experience must be such as to 'evoke identification' (Bloom 1990: 61). Central to this experience, Bloom argues, is the concept of psychological security. This requires either that 'symbols of the state present an appropriate attitude in situations of perceived threat' or that 'symbols of the state behave beneficently towards the individual'. Deutsch et al. (1957: 85), meanwhile, refer to the 'double process of habit-breaking': the process through which citizens, exposed to the benefits available from a new level of government, start to break the habit of allegiance to the existing political unit. The extent of the emerging habit of attachment to the alternative political unit is revealed when the new benefits come under threat - thus challenging the value of the current allegiance. Building on these approaches, Cram (2012:83) has argued that, explicit attachment to the EU is most likely to become manifest: 'when hitherto unrecognized benefits from the integration process come under threat'. From this perspective, a latent EU 'Us' might emerge in a threatening context.

### *Implicit Visual Cues*

A growing body of research in the field of cognitive psychology demonstrates the impact on political preferences and behaviour of subtle exposure to primes that are connected to national associations, such as flags, emblems or anthems (Butz Plant & Doerr 2007a; Butz 2009; Ehrlinger et al. 2011; Ferguson & Hassin 2007; Hassin et al. 2007, 2009; Gilboa & Bodner 2009; Kimmelmeier & Winter 2008). Since the human

ability for conscious processing of information is limited, Hassin et al argue that ‘if ideologies depended on conscious resources for their operation, they would have been much less efficient in controlling our behavior than if they did not depend on these resources...[W]e hence hypothesise that ideologies and, more specifically, national ideologies can operate nonconsciously’ (Hassin et al. 2009). Central to this literature is the importance of unconscious associations and behaviours provoked by exposure to national symbols.

Most of these experiments employ Billig's (1995) ‘banal nationalism’ concept and find that implicit exposure to images, such as the flags of established nations, has a measurable effect on related attitudes moderated by existing national attachments (Hassin et al. 2009, 2007). Hassin et al. (2007, 2009) and Butz et al (2007a) demonstrate the effects of subtle exposure to the Israeli and US flags, and how these flags activate existing attachments (positive or negative). In a more recent study, Ehrlinger et al. (2011) found that US participants primed with the Confederate flag were less willing to vote for Barack Obama and were more likely to view black candidates negatively. These experimental findings provide support for the argument that ‘the primary function of national symbols is to bring to mind the concepts and emotions associated with one’s nation’ (Butz 2009: 173) and for the context-dependent, situational nature of group identifications (Tajfel & Turner 1979; Turner et al. 1987).

Similar experimental studies have been adapted for application in the EU context. Bruter's (2003) innovative experimental study of the effect of news and symbols on EU identity makes a major contribution to this literature. As does his panel analysis on the time-bomb effect of news and symbols on political identity (Bruter 2009). An experimental study comparing four national identity groups in the UK, also found that functional visual cues, which associate the EU with practical benefits, such as the free mobility of EU citizens (the EU symbol at passport control) have a stronger effect on mass attitudes than abstract symbolic reminders of EU membership (the ceremonial EU flag). The study found, moreover, that *instrumental* attitudes to the EU (characterised by cost/benefit calculations) were more affected by exposure to the implicit visual cues than *affective* associations (characterised by emotional or sentimental attachment) (Cram & Patrikios, forthcoming).

### *Expectations*

Linking the role of implicit visual cues with the role of threat in forging group cohesiveness and regime support, we expect:

Hypothesis 1: *In a neutral context, exposure to the EU symbol will have a negative (anti-EU) attitudinal effect, inclining respondents to prioritise allegiance to the nation - confirming the EU as the 'Other'.*

Hypothesis 2: *In a subtly threatening context, exposure to the EU symbol will have a positive (pro-EU) attitudinal effect, inclining respondents to prioritise allegiance to the EU– confirming the EU as part of the concept of the ‘Us’.*

## **Research Design**

We examined the effect of implicit exposure to the EU symbol on two related types of responses, and assessed how context moderated this effect. We manipulated exposure to the EU symbol and exposure to a threatening or neutral context (text). In detail, we distributed a short survey questionnaire, which included a front page that combined image and text, plus instructions. The front page combination included one of two versions of a photographic image (control vs. EU symbol), accompanied by an excerpt from a mock news story (threatening vs. neutral headline text) (see Appendix). The control image plays an important role in ensuring that it is the effect of the specific EU symbol that we are measuring rather than simply the presence or otherwise of a flag. The image was used to achieve the subtle exposure of participants to the EU symbol (or its absence).

Based on the findings of a recent study (Cram & Patrikios, forthcoming), we used the EU symbol in a functional context, that is, displayed at passport control in an airport. Presentation of the EU symbol in a functional context, as opposed to its presentation simply as a flag, was shown to make a difference in this study. To achieve an equally

implicit manipulation of context, the mock news headline and excerpt were worded without any mention of the “EU” or “Europe” or national referents.

Participants were asked to provide responses to closed questions that gauged attitudes towards the EU (adapted from recent Eurobarometer surveys). Drawing on our discussion of the pivotal role of implicit threat, we predict that exposure to the EU symbol will produce more negative responses towards the EU (“anti-EU” responses) when presented under a neutral context. Exposure to the EU symbol will produce more positive responses towards the EU (“pro-EU” responses) when presented within a threatening context.

A note is in order here. We attempt to measure the short term effects of exposure to the implicit visual cues. It may therefore be the case that the display of signage and the impact of threat context, especially through repeated exposure, has a more permanent effect on EU related attitudes (see Bruter, 2009). Our dataset does not allow us to test this possibility. Nevertheless, recent findings (Carter, Ferguson, and Hassin, 2011) suggest that even a single, brief exposure to a flag has durable consequences for voting behaviour.

Additionally, this study deals only with Scottish national identifiers. National identity and member state citizenship are not always contiguous in the EU. The UK is, for example, the member state of the EU and citizens of all four UK nations are UK

citizens, and EU citizens. However, only some of these citizens would identify themselves as primarily 'British' nationals when given the alternative option to identify themselves as Scots, English, Welsh or Irish. A similar situation applies, for example, in Belgium, Spain and Italy. We thus distinguish in this study between citizenship status (legal membership of a member state) and declared national identity (a sense of belonging to a territorial unit). Of course, analysis of the responses of Scottish identifiers might suffer in terms of generalisability to the other countries of the UK. Indeed, there is some evidence that Scottish and Welsh identifiers are more strongly affected by exposure to the EU functional symbol than equivalent groups of English national identifiers (Cram & Patrikios, forthcoming).

### *Procedure*

One-hundred-and-thirty-six students participated in the experiment, all first year politics undergraduates. The study adopted a 2 (control image vs. EU image) x 2 (neutral vs. threatening text) design. We analyse here only the responses of the ninety-three respondents who identified as "Scottish" ("If you were forced to choose, would you identify yourself as..." Scottish, British, Other).

Following standard procedure in the experimental literature cited in this paper, the study took place in a lecture theatre and involved the completion of a printed questionnaire. Upon arrival, respondents were randomly assigned to one of the four



versions of the questionnaire cover (two images by two mock headlines; see Appendix). While typically a pre- and post-test design might be superior, the risk of making participants aware of the nature of the study, and therefore cancelling the implicit nature of our intervention, makes a one-off randomised assignment the preferable option (see examples of this design used with similar, small student samples in Hassin et al. 2007, 2009; Kimmelmeier & Winter 2008; Butz 2009; Gilboa & Bodner 2009; Ehrlinger et al. 2011). We analyse the impact of the implicit visual cue and whether this is moderated by context (type of text) on the following dependent variables:

Variable *a*: Reaction to hypothetical dissolution of the EU

*If you were told tomorrow that the European Union had been scrapped, how sorry or pleased would you be: 1=very sorry; 2=somewhat sorry; 3=wouldn't make any difference; 4=somewhat pleased; 5=very pleased*

Variable *b*: Future self-image

*In the near future do you see yourself as: 1=Scottish only; 2=Scottish and European; 3=European and Scottish; 4=European only*

Dependent variable *a* (to hypothetical dissolution of the EU) was recoded as an inverse scale with higher values showing more positive feelings towards the EU (“sorry” with EU dissolution). This variable was entered into a regression with the following predictor variables: exposure to the visual prime (image type: neutral=0 or EU=1); exposure to type of context (headline text: neutral=0 or threatening=1); interaction term (image x headline). Dependent variable *b* (*Future Self-image*) was recoded as a dichotomous variable with the following categories: Scottish only, with 56 cases; Scottish and European, with 37 cases (includes the following categories: “Scottish and European” with 36 cases; “European and Scottish” with a single case; “European only” with zero cases). This variable was analysed in a 2 (image type) x 2 (dichotomous dependent variable) cross-tabulation, replicated across the two contexts (neutral vs. threatening headline).

The final question of the short questionnaire asked participants to add any comments about the questionnaire. None of the participants indicated awareness of the manipulation.

## **Results**

We first analyse responses to dependent variable *a* (Reaction to Dissolution). Table 1 shows results of two ordered logit regression models. The estimates in Model 1 suggest that the main effect of each of the two variables – exposure to image and

exposure to headline - is not significant. In other words, exposure to each of these variables alone does not affect responses on the outcome variable. This is consistent with existing research, cited in previous sections, on the attitudinal effects of exposure to national flags.

[Table 1 about here]

However, the interaction term in Model 2 in Table 1 is significant ( $b=2.05$ ,  $p<.05$ ). It is also the only positive estimate produced by the model. Therefore a score of 1 on the interaction term predicts a higher score in the outcome variable on the ordered log odds scale. A score of 1 in the interaction term measures exposure to the EU symbol *and* to the threatening headline. It appears then that exposure to the EU visual cue has a positive (pro-EU) effect on reactions to dissolution only when moderated by exposure to the (threatening) headline. Exposure to the EU visual cue has no effect on its own.

Figure 1 illustrates this interaction effect in terms of percentage changes. The vertical axis shows percentages of pro-EU (“sorry”) responses to the hypothetical dissolution question. The horizontal axis shows exposure to the control/treatment visual cue. The two panels show exposure to the neutral/threatening headline. As the figure suggests, when accompanied by a neutral headline, exposure to the EU

symbol produces negative (anti-EU) reactions to a hypothetical EU dissolution (respondents are more likely to feel pleased) compared to the group exposed to the control image. When accompanied by a threatening headline, exposure to the EU symbol produces positive (pro-EU) reactions to a hypothetical EU dissolution (respondents are more likely to feel sorry) compared to the group exposed to the control image.

[Figure 1 about here]

The second dependent variable we used was a dichotomous variable about respondents' future self-image solely as nationals or as nationals and Europeans. We analysed the relationship between exposure to the visual cue and the dummy dependent variable across the two contexts (mock news excerpt), by creating a square table for each context. The upper panel of Table 2 suggests that, in a neutral context, the EU symbol affects self-image in an anti-EU direction: 81% in the group exposed to the EU symbol would see themselves as "Scottish only" in the near future, compared to 41% who would say the same in the group exposed to the control image. It would appear then that in a neutral context, the EU image creates a backlash phenomenon: a push away from future identification as European. This is a significant effect [ $\chi^2(1)=7.09, p=.01$ ]. Regarding the strength of this relationship, the magnitude of Kendall's tau-b (-.41) suggests that this is not a trivial effect. The

finding is consistent, for example, with McLaren's (2002) insights in relation to the explanatory power of perceived threat to cultural values.

[Table 2 about here]

The lower panel of Table 2, however, suggests that when the EU symbol is presented in a threatening context, this backlash effect disappears. Specifically, the percentage split now suggests that the EU flag makes no difference. In other words, exposure to subtle threatening textual cues moderates the previously "nationalising" effect of the EU symbol (neutral context, upper panel of Table 2), whereby respondents exposed to the EU symbol reacted by saying they would see themselves as "Scottish only". Responses among those exposed to the EU image under threat are now evenly split between the two identity options: 52% say "Scottish only", while 48% choose the mixed identity option. Therefore, when exposed to the EU image in an implicitly threatening context, participants may become less likely to see themselves as "Scottish only" in the near future, and more likely to opt for the national/EU identity mix option (48% compared to only 19% in the neutral context). The relationship between exposure to the visual cue and future self-image is not significant [ $\chi^2(1)=.79$ , ns] in the lower panel of Table 2 (threatening context). Compared to the significant relationship in the upper panel of Table 2 (non-threatening or neutral context), this indicates an interaction effect between visual cue and context, with context moderating the effect of the cue.

These effects dovetail with theoretical expectations regarding how a subtle threat to the practical benefits associated with the EU (primed by the visual cue) could move respondents to positive opinions on and identification with the EU. On the other hand, when threat is absent, the visual reminder of those benefits works in the opposite direction by producing anti-EU responses.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the concept of threat in the EU literature is most commonly invoked in relation to the EU as a 'symbolic threat' – the EU 'them' to the national 'us' for member state citizens. However, it has also been argued that presenting the hitherto unrecognised benefits of EU membership under threat might reveal a greater degree of implicit attachment to the EU than previously recognised (Cram, 2012). The empirical analysis presented here builds upon two key insights from cognitive research: (i) the importance of implicit exposure to national symbols such as flags for related attitudes; and (ii) the importance of contextual effects, specifically threat contexts, in shaping attitudinal and behavioural responses. Our interpretation of what we have observed in the EU context is consistent with what might be described as a 'dual threat effect':

- i. In a neutral context, the EU symbol itself appears to represent threat - a potential threat to national group identity. In this case, the salient social identity is the national – in this case Scottish identity. The tendency to preserve the status quo thus manifests itself in a relative willingness to see the EU dissolved and as attachment to the national group identity. This effect is consistent, for example, with the arguments of McLaren (2002, 2006) and Lubbers & Scheepers (2005) who have emphasised the importance of 'cultural threat' in shaping attitudes towards European integration. From this perspective the potential functional benefits of EU membership appear secondary to the threat that membership poses to national identity.
- ii. In contrast, when the EU symbol is presented in a subtly threatening context – whereby the practical benefits of EU membership primed by the symbol appear to be under threat - recognition of the 'normality' of EU membership appears to emerge. This time, the symbolic threat to national identity is clearly secondary to the practical benefits or 'goods' that might be lost. In this case, the tendency to preserve the status quo is manifested in an increased reluctance to see the EU dissolved. What we also observe, by manipulating the threat context, is an increase in perceptions of shared national/EU identity. Perhaps even an emerging EU 'us' to an undefined, external 'them'.

The findings are consistent with the wider literature on threat rigidities (the tendency towards conservatism when respondents are placed in threat context) and on the implications of threat for group conflict/categorisation (the shifting

evaluations of 'us' and 'them' in threat context). In a neutral context, the functional EU symbol itself represents the threat to the salient social identity – the Scottish national identity. The tendency to conservatism results in this case in greater willingness to see the EU dissolved and greater attachment to the national group identity. In contrast, when the EU symbol is presented in a threatening context, the EU becomes the 'devil you know'. This time, the tendency to rigidity results in greater reluctance to see the EU dissolved and in an increased perception of shared national/EU identity.

There are certain points that could not be addressed within the present study. First, the results are based on a narrow and perhaps idiosyncratic group of respondents - young, educated Scottish identifiers (but see the use of equally idiosyncratic samples in Carter et al., 2011). Beyond considerations of external validity, a Scottish study is valuable in itself since the EU dimension (continued Scottish membership, differences in Scottish-English levels of EU support and the implications of any future UK referendum on EU membership) is a key aspect of the constitutional debate surrounding the forthcoming Scottish independence referendum. And addressing considerations of generalisability, the research design employed here can be applied to other national identity groups (including those in prospective member states) and comparatively. Different types of threat effects could also be measured. Second, the empirical results refer only to short term effects of experimental exposure. In real life, these effects would probably be repetitive and would work through accumulation and reinforcement. This limitation of the research design partly



explains the low explanatory power of the model presented in Table 1 (low Pseudo  $R^2$ ). An experimental design that accommodates both repeated and implicit exposure poses technical challenges that could not be tackled in the present paper and with the resources available. However our study provides an experimental design on which such a future study could be developed. Finally, although the interpretation of the findings relies heavily on the role of group identity, our research design does not examine this role directly (but see Cram & Patrikios, forthcoming).

Limitations notwithstanding, there is clear evidence of an interaction effect between implicit exposure to the visual cues and the manipulated threat context. These findings, along with future comparative work on the topic, can contribute to the wider literature on threat rigidities (the tendency towards conservatism when respondents are placed in threat contexts). They can also inform scholarship on the implications of threat for group conflict/categorisation (the shifting evaluations of 'us' and 'them' in threat contexts).

On more substantive implications of the findings, as the very real prospect, for example, of an in-out referendum on UK membership of the EU unfolds, the issue of how the threat of a UK exit impacts on public attitudes and behaviour is likely to be a prime concern. The most recent polls (e.g. the IPSOS MORI Political Monitor, October 2014) suggest that the PM's promise of an EU referendum was followed by a sudden surge in public support for staying in the EU. More widely, the current context of insecurity surrounding the Eurozone, growing geo-political insecurity and

the high visibility of Eurosceptic voices in the European public sphere appear to put the future of the EU project at great risk. We consider the tone of the current debates as a quintessentially threatening context for EU-related attitudes. As this study finds, however, a threatening context is not necessarily a negative development for levels of public support for the EU.

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## **Appendix: Experimental Procedure and Materials**

Four versions of a printed questionnaire were placed face-down in four separate sections of the lecture theatre. Each section corresponded to a different version of the short questionnaire, specifically to a different cover page. Each section of the lecture theatre was separated from the adjacent section either by a corridor (vertically) or by a number of empty rows (horizontally). Upon arrival to the lecture theatre, students were randomly assigned by the research team to one of the four sections. The study was conducted at the beginning of class and was introduced as part of a departmental research project. Participants were not informed about the experimental nature of the study. They were first asked only to read the cover page very carefully. They were then asked to complete the short questionnaire that appeared overleaf. The cover page had “landscape” orientation. The survey questions that appeared overleaf were in “portrait” orientation. The cover page contained a high quality photographic image (7.5cm x 10cm, in colour), a title in large capitalised font, and an excerpt from a mock newspaper report. These were accompanied by brief instructions (including “Please read the report”). The capitalised title of the survey read “Social Trends Survey 2011”. The excerpt made no reference to the EU. The four versions of the cover page (two versions of the image by two versions of the excerpt) were the following:



## AIRPORT REFURBISHMENT COMPLETE



### NEW LOOK LOUNGES

Authorities 'delighted with new image'

Travellers enjoy the facilities following the recent airport refurbishment. New decor and seating were welcomed by holiday-makers and business travellers setting off on their journeys. Public authorities stated, 'we are delighted with our new image'.

**Figure A1:** Control cue under a neutral frame

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**Figure A2:** EU cue under a neutral frame

## TERROR THREATS DISRUPT TRAVEL PLANS



### HIGH ALERT STATUS CONTINUES

Authorities 'safety of our citizens is paramount'

Passengers reported continued concern about disruption to travel plans. Heightened security measures remain in place and a series of new measures are under consideration. Public authorities state that the alert status of airports is kept under constant review. 'Our primary concern is the safety of our citizens'.

**Figure A3:** Control cue under a threatening frame

## TERROR THREATS DISRUPT TRAVEL PLANS



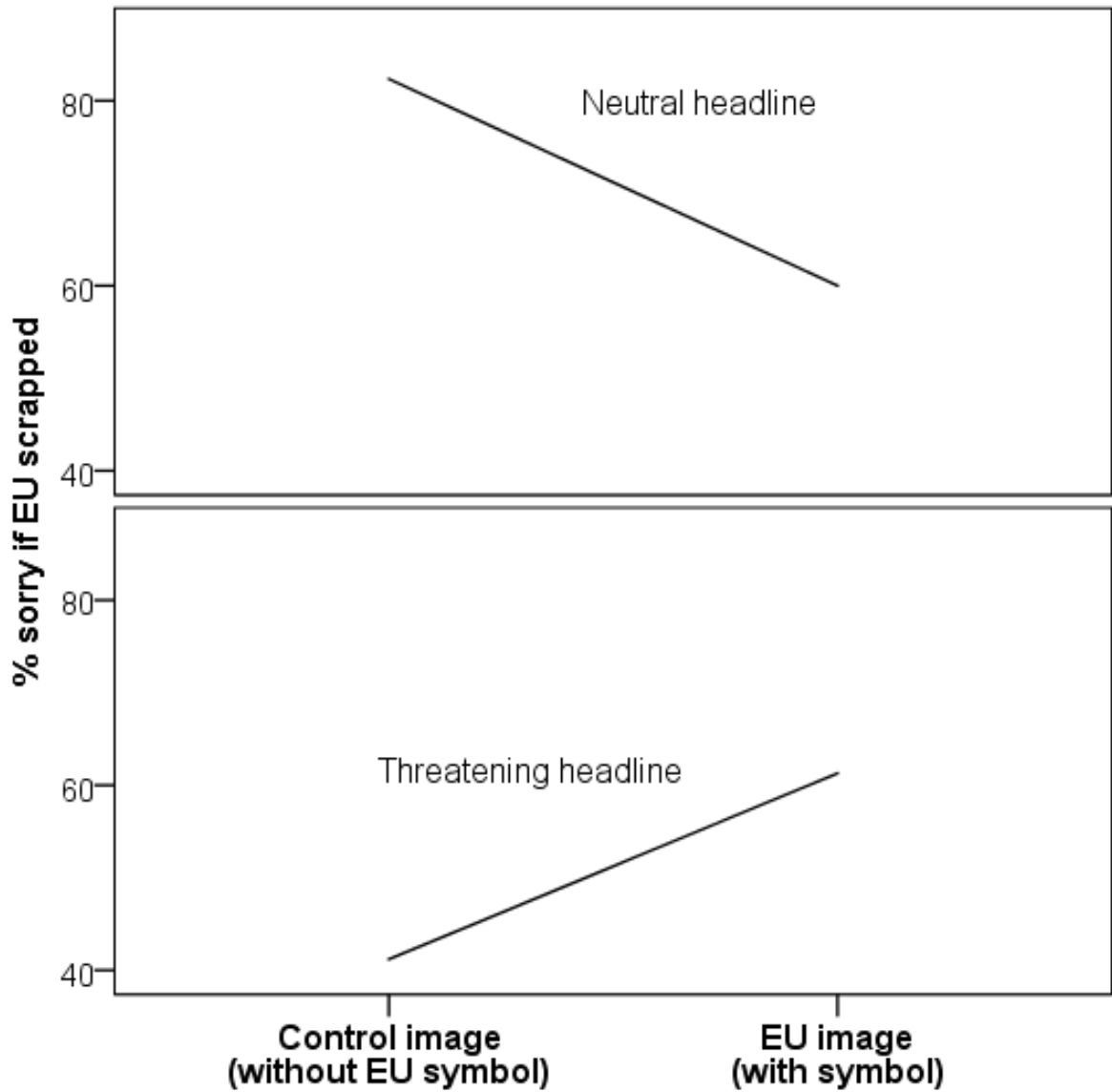
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**Figure A4:** EU cue under a threatening frame

**Figure 1.** Exposure to the EU symbol in a threatening context creates pro-EU reactions on EU dissolution question



*Note:* The vertical axis shows collapsed percentages of “very sorry” and “somewhat sorry” responses. The horizontal axis shows exposure to control/treatment visual cue. The two panels show exposure to the neutral/threatening headline.

**Table 1.** Exposure to the EU symbol in a threatening context affects reactions to hypothetical EU dissolution

<u>Dependent variable:</u>		
<i>Reaction to EU dissolution</i>		
	Model 1	Model 2
Exposure to symbol	.21 (.41)	-.91 (.62)
Exposure to headline	-.52 (.41)	-1.84** (.69)
Symbol × headline	-	2.05* (.87)
-2LL difference ( $\chi^2$ )	1.86	7.62*
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.02	.09
N	90	

*Note:* Main cell entries are ordered log odds. Standard errors in parenthesis. Higher values on the dependent variable show positive EU responses (sorry for dissolution). A score of zero in the dichotomous variables shows exposure to the control condition.

\*\* p < 0.01 \* p < 0.05

**Table 2.** Exposure to the EU symbol in a threatening context affects perceptions of future self-image

<b>NEUTRAL HEADLINE</b>			
	<u>Future self-image</u>		Total
	Scottish	Scottish-European	
Control image (Base=17)	41%	59%	100%
EU image (Base=26)	81%	19%	100%
Total	65%	35%	100%

<b>THREATENING HEADLINE</b>			
	<u>Future self-image</u>		Total
	Scottish	Scottish-European	
Control image (Base=17)	65%	35%	100%
EU image (Base=33)	52%	48%	100%
Total	56%	44%	100%