

Europe's Culture(s): Negotiating Cultural Meanings, Values, and Identities in the European Context

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Abstract

The intent of this Special Issue is to be a starting point for a broadly-defined European cultural psychology. Across seven research articles, the authors of this Special Issue explore what European culture(s) and European identity entail, how acculturation within the European cultural contexts takes place and under what conditions a multicultural Europe might be possible. The Special Issue also discusses what is currently missing from the research agenda. Therein, the findings of this Special Issue constitute an important starting point for future psychological research that accompanies Europe along its journey into the 21st century.

Keywords

Europe, cross-cultural psychology, values, attitudes, beliefs, identity, social networks, acculturation, multiculturalism

Europe has recently faced several unprecedented and deeply significant challenges to its identity: From terror attacks in London, Paris, Berlin or Brussels to nationalist movements or governments and anti-immigrant rhetoric in many European countries, from Brexit and pro-independence movements in Scotland and Catalonia to attempts to reunify in Cyprus, and, perhaps most importantly, from new waves of immigration to the recent refugee crisis. In all these cases, the meaning(s) of European culture and European membership are being negotiated, sometimes forcefully and other times in a peaceful manner. Yet, what is it that is being negotiated? Can we speak of a European culture? If so, what does it look like?

Social scientists have long been interested in the question of what constitutes European culture(s) and European identity. They have approached this question from diverse perspectives and disciplines including history, sociology and political science (e.g., Arts & Halman, 2014; Carey, 2002; Checkel & Katzenstein, 2009; Fligstein, Polyakova, & Sandholtz, 2012; Orchard, 2002). For example, surveys of Europeans' political and social attitudes abound (European

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Commission, 2018). Similarly, books that chronicle the development of Europe and of the European countries have provided important insights into this question (e.g., Bruter, 2005; Davies, 1996). Indeed, against the backdrop of European culture and European identity, research in social sciences has informed contemporary debates, from defending democracy and celebrating human rights (e.g., de Beus, 2001) to multiculturalism and immigration (e.g., Delanty, 2008; Kastoryano, 2009; Koopmans, Statham, Giugni, & Passy, 2005; Vertovec & Wessendorf, 2010). In this Special Issue, we ask what are the contributions of culture-oriented researchers to the psychological (and perhaps wider social science) literature on European culture(s) and European identity and on the negotiation of their meanings and memberships.

Surprisingly, psychological research taking European culture(s) and European identity as its focus has been rare. In fact, research on culture is conspicuously absent from European social psychology (Uskul & Mesquita, 2014). In other words, a cultural psychology of Europe does not exist. At the same time, numerous descriptions about North American or East Asian cultures abound, even if they are not uncontested (e.g., de Almeida & Uchida, 2018). The question then arises: If a European cultural psychology were to be developed and showcased, what would it look like and how would it differ from the cultural psychology developed in North America or elsewhere?

Most of the accumulated evidence showing cultural variation in human psychology comes from comparative work conducted with North American and East Asian cultures. A general hypothesis guiding this work is that the social orientation of individualism versus collectivism is a key dimension underlying cultural variation in psychological phenomena (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). This hypothesis has led to the tacit assumption that the results from cultural research conducted in North America would generalise to other so called individualistic cultures, such as those in Europe. Yet, it is unclear how much the seemingly unitary notion of (individualistic) mainstream/majority culture that is so often used in cultural psychological research conducted in the North American context can be applied to the much broader European context. Indeed, in the European context, existing cultures and their influence are defined by different historical, political and economic circumstances, and multiple and distinct majority cultures often co-exist within the same country (e.g., Belgium, Spain). Moreover, minority groups in Europe originate from cultural backgrounds (e.g., Middle-Eastern, North-African, Eastern-European) different from those that characterise minority groups typically examined in the mainstream (i.e., U.S.-focused) social psychological literature (e.g., African Americans, Hispanics, Asians). Relatedly, the traditionally immigrant-receiving social context of North America differs in very meaningful ways from the European context. For example, in the European context, immigration is historically more recent and the notions of cultural diversity and multiculturalism are still quite contested and thus not obvious components of past and present collective identities (Benet-Martínez, 2012).

The intent of this Special Issue is to be a starting point for a broadly defined European cultural psychology, in which we characterise European culture(s) and European identity in the context of the unique historical and demographic aspects mentioned above. As a starting point, this Special Issue can then only aspire to provide a snapshot of what European culture is about or what European identity entails. The resulting snapshot neither implies that European culture is stable nor that European culture(s) or European identity are internally homogeneous. To the contrary, the recent developments in Europe illustrate how the (European) context is dynamic and ever-changing. Negotiations about European values are *ongoing*. Characterising European culture and its dynamics is not to claim an unchangeable essence. Yet, Europe does have a common history, shared institutions and practices and, to some extent, a shared political discourse. Based on the cultural psychology axiom that mind and culture are mutually constitutive (Markus & Kitayama, 2010), we would expect that this common ground has shaped a European mind and identity. Accordingly, one aim of this Special Issue is to explore whether and how European

cultures, despite all the variations between them, have constituted a “European Mind” that can be distinguished from minds in other parts of the world.

Keeping the above theoretical considerations in mind, this Special Issue has three general goals: (a) to showcase and interconnect the emerging, and yet already diverse cultural and cross-cultural psychological research conducted within the European context, (2) to stimulate discussions on how European-based findings might compare with previously observed findings based on research with non-European cultures and (c) to shed light from a (cross-)cultural perspective onto the current challenges that European identity faces. In so doing, we hope to make a step forward through innovative articles that propose evidence-based and theoretically meaningful discussions of Europe’s culture(s).

What is European Culture? Toward a Description of the European Values and Identities

The first contribution to this Special Issue, by Vignoles, Smith, Becker, and Easterbrook (2018), examines whether European selves can be distinguished from selves in other parts of the world. Their study is a meaningful supplement to a cultural psychology that, for many years, has made distinctions between individualistic and collectivistic cultures (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1989) and between independent and interdependent cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In that reasoning, (Western) Europe would have fallen on the individualistic culture side of the dimension.

Vignoles and his colleagues (2018) start from the very open question of whether it is at all meaningful to speak of a European culture, and they answer this question with a resounding “yes”. Drawing on data from the World Values Survey (WVS), the results from their two studies show that despite the existence of large differences among European cultures, they all share a distinct model of selfhood characterised by commitment to others and egalitarian values, but *also* by an emphasis on seeing the self as unique (i.e., different from others) and decontextualized (i.e., with an essence that does not require contextual information). They find a distinctive European value profile that is consistent with this selfhood: European cultures uniformly value relationships that are agreeable and horizontal. They strongly endorse harmony–egalitarianism, rather than mastery–hierarchy. It is the commitment to others and the egalitarianism rather than individualism–collectivism that distinguish the European continent from other cultures in the world.

The main take-home message from this contribution is that European cultures share certain distinctive features, but there is also substantial diversity across European cultures with regard to facets typically associated with the individualism–collectivism framework. The autonomy—embeddedness dimension (a value dimension that may reflect important aspects of individualism–collectivism) neither unites the European continent nor distinguishes it from other global cultures. European cultures might, due to their diversity, configure a unique form of individualism, one that differs from that found in North American cultures, for instance. In sum, Vignoles and colleagues (2018) provide a rare empirical test of what European cultural values and meanings are and advance cultural psychological theory by showing the limitations of reducing “culture” empirically to monolithic comparison between nations a priori assumed to be individualistic/independent versus collectivistic/interdependent.

It is against the background of these characteristic European selfhoods and values that disidentification can sometimes be understood, too. The second contribution to the Special Issue, by Petkanopoulou, Sanchez-Rodriguez, Willis, Chrysochoou, and Rodriguez-Bailon (2018), describes the psychological consequences of perceived wealth disparities on individuals from two of its member states, Spain and Greece. In both countries, the perception of economic disparities within Europe was associated with disidentification from Europe. Of interest from a

cultural psychology perspective, perceived disparities led to this disidentification, because individuals interpreted disparities as signs of Europe losing fundamental values and of losing (Spanish or Greek) national sovereignty. It is not far-fetched to think that disidentification from Europe might have occurred when individuals perceived Europe to abandon its characteristic values of egalitarianism and commitment to others, and when it was perceived to threaten a unique sense of national self in favour of culturally decontextualized European economic interests (see Vignoles et al., 2018).

European culture is also defined by what is perceived as *not* European. This is the theme of another contribution that focuses on the exclusionary/inclusionary nature of European national identities. Who we are is always contrasted with who we are not: the outgroups (Brewer, 1999). In their contribution, Fleischmann and Phalet (2018) suggest that European identity is largely seen as White and of Christian heritage, and that all those who do not meet these criteria do not recognise themselves as part of it. In a cross-national European study of youth, Fleischmann and Phalet (2018) find that British, German, Swedish, Dutch, and Belgian national identities are generally less strongly endorsed by minority as opposed to majority youth, and that Muslim youth show the lowest levels of identification. Religious ancestry thus appears to be an important constituent of European identity, with the consequence that European citizens who do not share a Christian heritage are less identified with their national culture than their counterparts with Christian ancestry. Fleischmann and Phalet (2018) also find some cross-national variations in minority identification, which suggest that some national identities (e.g., British, Dutch) are more inclusive of Muslims than others (e.g., Belgian, German). The study also shows that differences in religious commitment and majority culture friendships play a major role in explaining these cross-national variations in national identification. Overall, this article supports the notion that European national identities are defined in terms of ethnic and religious ancestry, and that cultural aspects such as having a Christian heritage also matter for national belonging.

In all, the first three contributions to this Special Issue suggest that European culture exists, despite many cross-national variations. At its core, European culture values a unique and decontextualized individual who is egalitarian and committed to the welfare of others. These European values appear to play a role at the individual as well as the national level, so that threats to the value of egalitarianism reduce identification with Europe. Finally, European culture tends to be characterised by a White and Christian ancestry and heritage. It is against the background of these common characteristics that minorities and immigrants negotiate their entry and adherence to European culture. The second section of this Special Issue describes this match/mismatch of minority groups, as well as the different trajectories of minority groups' acculturation in light of the diverse historical and political contexts within Europe.

How does European Culture fit Newcomers? Lessons from European Acculturation Research

Global migration has increased 49% since the year 2000, and 22 million of these immigrants came to Europe (United Nations, 2017). As a result, the political salience of immigration and its consequences have become an important topic of public and political discourse in Europe. This is reflected in the rise of extreme right-wing, anti-immigrant and anti-Islam parties (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2013).

It is increasingly clear that societal cohesiveness and inclusion depend as much on the immigrant minorities themselves as on the majority societies. For Europe, this means that acculturation and inclusion of large groups of immigrant minorities, many of which from Muslim countries, can be understood from the perspective of how similar/distant these immigrant group cultures are to/from majority European cultures. Several contributions to this Special Issue shed light on the conditions and processes of progressive belonging of immigrant minorities.

Going beyond existing research on the link between national identification and immigration attitudes, Visitin, Green, and Sarrasin (2018) examine the role of European identification amongst majority members of European nation states when predicting anti-immigrant prejudice using data from the International Social Survey Programme. They find across 22 European countries that majority individuals report identification with Europe. This is another way in which European culture can be said to exist: a European identity is recognised by the majority of cultural members as a relevant social identity.

In past research, European identification has been found to buffer feelings of threat (e.g., Datler, 2016). Visitin and colleagues (2018) replicate this link: Identification with Europe is, across nations, related to lower prejudice toward immigrants, possibly because of the liberal and egalitarian values generally associated with Europe (see Vignoles et al., 2018). Yet, they also find that the national moral context affects what European identification means. Individuals from countries with more tolerant and inclusive integration policies (assessed using the 2014 Migrant Integration Policy Index) expressed lower prejudice toward immigrants. Moreover, national integration policies significantly moderated the relationship between identification with Europe and anti-immigrant prejudice, such that the negative association between European identification and anti-immigrant prejudice was stronger in countries with more inclusive integration policies than in countries with less inclusive integration policies. An important conclusion from this research is that the role of European identification and its relationship to national identification are a fruitful topic for further research on majority context of acculturation.

Repke and Benet-Martinez's (2018) article also provides a window into the majority context of acculturation, but in this case through the perspective of immigrants residing in a unique bicultural and bilingual European setting: Catalonia. This article showcases the importance of examining immigrants' personal social networks to understand their psychological and sociocultural adjustment. Focusing on four large immigrant groups in Barcelona (Moroccan, Ecuadorian, Pakistani and Romanian),¹ Repke and Benet-Martinez (2018) examine the acculturating immigrant, the people with whom the immigrant has habitual contacts and also whether these contacts have relations with each other. The goal in this study is to understand how these interactions play a role in the immigrants' psychological and sociocultural adjustment and their ability to integrate the dominant and ethnic cultures into their self-concept (i.e., Bicultural Identity Integration, BII). They employ an understudied method in acculturation research—social network analysis—to emphasise the importance of meso-level processes represented by social communities and habitual relationships in immigrants' acculturation. The authors find that the content and structure of immigrants' personal social networks have unique associations with both psychological and socio-cultural adjustment and with Catalan-Ethnic Bicultural Identity Integration, such that the overall degree of cultural diversity in the network, and in particular, the number of Catalan acquaintances, colleagues and neighbours positively predict these outcomes. Importantly, the existence of relational ties between Catalan/Spanish and ethnic contacts in the immigrant's network also predicts her or his sociocultural adjustment and level of BII. Finally, against a "culture and language similarity hypothesis" that predicts that immigrants belonging to cultural groups with lower cultural and linguistic distance toward the host society will have better integrated networks, Moroccan and Pakistani participants have social networks that are more culturally well-integrated, relative to Ecuadorians and Romanians. Overall, this article suggests that immigrant acculturation processes, including those related to negotiating multiple cultural selves and identities, are negotiated at the level of everyday relationships between minority individuals and their social environment.

Above all, it seems that having positive relationships with majority culture members plays a significant role in positive outcomes of minority individuals (see also results by Fleischmann and Phalet [2018] mentioned in the previous section). In short, against the background of different national cultures, individuals from both minority and majority groups in all nations negotiate minority identification throughout their recurrent interactions.

Is a Multicultural Europe possible? The Role of Cultural Distance and Religion

As noted earlier, much of the research on attitudes toward diversity comes from North American contexts, and it is clear that Europe differs in many ways from these contexts. Mahfud, Badea, Verkuyten, and Reynolds (2018) try to replicate previous research from the United States on multiculturalism attitudes in two European countries, the Netherlands and France. Their focus is on majority group members' attitudes toward Moroccan immigrants. Mahfud and colleagues (2018) replicate for France the previous finding that thinking abstractly about multiculturalism (*why* it would be good) reduces perceived outgroup threat. In the Netherlands, this finding is not replicated, which the authors explain by the fact that multiculturalism there has been largely abandoned in the last 15 years. Thinking concretely about multiculturalism (*how* it should be accomplished) evokes feelings of threat and leads to prejudice across both countries, thus replicating the North American findings. The study makes clear that North American findings related to attitudes toward diversity and multiculturalism do not always generalise to the contexts in Europe and that much might depend on historical circumstances.

The last article, by van der Noll, Rohmann, and Saroglou (2018), sheds light on one of the fiercest debates about acculturation in Europe: wearing headscarves in public spaces (Helbling, 2014). Relying on survey data from the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey, they test the assumption that the societal level of religiosity contributes to the acceptance of religious identity expression. Their findings support the following assumption: a stronger societal religiosity—measured as the percentage of people in society who profess to believe in God—is associated with greater acceptance of visible religious symbols. Importantly, this relationship holds when controlling for a host of societal variables such as religious denominational tradition and religious diversity, including the size of the Muslim minority.

In addition to providing evidence on the link between societal level of religiosity and religious identity expression in the European context, this article also contributes to our understanding of variations in acceptance of religious expression across European societies. Individuals in secularised parts of Europe, including France, Germany, Belgium and Denmark, were more likely to oppose the wearing of visible religious symbols than individuals in countries where religion occupies a more important place in society, including Italy, Spain and Portugal. This finding suggests that, when it comes to religious issues, Europe is unlikely to constitute a homogeneous group of societies. As van der Noll and colleagues (2018) suggest, the variability of attitudes toward the public expression of religious symbols and acts may exemplify the broader variability across European societies in terms of what it means to have a European identity and how religious identities fit within the national and the European identities.

What are the Key Contributions of the Current Special Issue?

One of the take-home messages from this Special Issue is that some form of European Cultural Psychology can be identified, although perhaps not recognised as such yet. This Special Issue describes a European culture that is neither stable nor the product of a homogeneous group or pattern of intergroup relations. Instead, European culture is dynamic, changing and in constant demand to adapt to novel challenges. Currently, we are witnessing how European culture and the future of the continent in the 21st century are being negotiated. European culture is embedded in a unique socio-historical context where diverse cultures have shared a very limited geographical space resulting in prolonged episodes of coalition-building as well as wide-spread antagonism. It is in light of this history that one of the major outcomes of this Special Issue is the finding of a unique European culture (and European identity) that balances individualism and concern for others, beliefs in economic prosperity and solidarity.

In sum, this Special Issue makes a series of important contributions. First, it demonstrates the critical role that European culture plays in providing its citizens with a socially shared and distinctly European sense of selfhood (Vignoles et al., 2018; Visitin et al., 2018). Second, it provides examples of what aspects of European culture are challenged and perhaps worth preserving. For example, economic equality and solidarity seem to be cornerstones of the European culture, and when these are lost people disidentify with it (Petkanopoulou et al., 2018). Third, it discusses the cultural environment in reference to different levels of analysis, including individual (e.g., endorsement of certain values), interpersonal (e.g., habitual contacts with members of different groups), societal (e.g., societal level of religiosity) and structural (e.g., integration policies) levels. Finally, most of the contributions to this Special Issue highlight how Europe is not a homogeneous ensemble of member states but rather a heterogeneous federation. Threatening this diversity (with policies that challenge national sovereignty) might undermine the very essence of European identity (e.g., Petkanopoulou et al., 2018). They also shed light onto different aspects of identities (e.g., religious, European, national identities) as major drivers of important social outcomes (e.g., use of headscarves in public spaces; see van der Noll et al., 2018).

Different contributions to this Special Issue illustrate the difficulties that newcomers face while trying to penetrate an old and historically derived cultural system, such as the “European culture” (Fleischmann & Phalet, 2018; Mahfud et al., 2018; Repke & Benet-Martinez, 2018). In light of the demographic changes the European continent faces, this remains one of its key challenges. Contributions to this Special Issue also illustrate what factors might facilitate the acculturation to European culture. For example, regularly interacting with majority group members, while also weaving these relationships with those with ethnic peers (Fleischmann & Phalet, 2018; Repke & Benet-Martinez, 2018), seems one important stepping stone for successful acculturation. In turn, policies that undermine multiculturalism seem counterproductive (Mahfud et al., 2018; Visitin et al., 2018). Therein, this Special Issue informs policy makers and the general public alike as to how they can facilitate the integration of newcomers into Europe.

In addition, this Special Issue shows that understanding European culture is achieved by applying a multimethod approach that comprises multilevel analysis of big data, surveys, social psychological experimentation, and social network analysis. It is the scope and depth of its topics, methods and findings that stand out and make a significant contribution to the (cross-)cultural psychology literature and beyond.

What is Missing from the Current Discussion on Europe’s Culture?

The findings reported in this Special Issue suggest a number of areas for future research further decorticating Europe’s culture and its implication for human psychology and behaviour. For example, while the articles herein make significant steps toward a better understanding of what constitutes one form of shared European culture and identity, linking individuals and nations across borders, little is known about the cultural differences between different European regions. According to previous research, it seems reasonable to assert that Northern, Eastern, Southern and Western European cultures differ in their values and belief systems (e.g., House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Schwartz & Sagiv, 1995). Yet, systematic investigations of European national and regional cultures are still outstanding.

Furthermore, a timely issue to investigate involves the values and beliefs governing Eastern European cultures, which have recently joined the European Union. Relatedly, it is timely to ask why there is a re-emergence of national isolation and protectionism in these post-communist cultures. Are these increasing expressions of nationalism the same or different from those in other parts of Europe, such as in Italy, France or Germany? Similarly, little is known about the cultures of the Balkans, which have experienced strong influences of both the Ottoman and the Habsburg empires, and still face the ramifications of a recent war. Finally, little is known about

the psychosocial factors that drive the resurgence of widespread regional independence movements throughout Europe, from Catalonia and Corsica in the South to Scotland in the North.

Another understudied topic is the perception of Europe by individuals who are multicultural by virtue of migration (e.g., Moroccan Germans) or through living in multilingual and multinational states (e.g., Scottish in the United Kingdom, or Flemish in Belgium). These individuals' unique experiences of cultural juxtaposition might lend themselves to develop schemas about what it means to be European that are more complex (Benet-Martínez, Lee, & Leu, 2006), and in some instances, also reflect national disidentification (Agirdag, Phalet, & van Houtte, 2016). We think that (cross-)cultural psychologists can provide critical insights into these questions examining how European culture is multifaceted, diverse and inherently linked to its demographic diversity, regional roots and economic structure.

Moreover, egalitarian values and commitment to others are central European values (Vignoles et al., 2018), and yet economic inequality is increasing across Europe, with significant implications for subjective well-being and mental health (Delhey & Dragolov, 2014; Pickett & Wilkinson, 2015; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2017). Although economic inequality is an emerging topic in European social psychology (e.g., Croizet, Goudeau, Marot, & Millet, 2017; Rodriguez-Bailon et al., 2017), very little research is conducted on this topic from a cultural perspective in the European context. This is surprising given the clear differences in attitudes towards inequality across Europe (Pew Research Center, 2014). For example, is economic inequality perceived the same way in cultures that adhere to more meritocratic principles, such as the United Kingdom, and cultures in which familial social class background is more important, such as France (e.g., Gobel, Maddux, & Kim, 2018)? Moreover, while first efforts have been made to explore the psychological processes that explain the link between economic inequality and life satisfaction (Cheung, 2016; Sands, 2017), how national culture intersects with social and economic inequality remains a topic for future research.

Finally, the study of intergroup relations in Europe (as elsewhere) has rarely used a cultural psychological perspective. Although the intergroup relations literature proposes important theory as to what happens when members of different groups—or cultures—interact, cultural psychological research can provide important content and meaning that describe these intergroup processes for specific cultures. For example, how do Mainland-Europeans with their emphasis on egalitarianism and solidarity perceive Anglo-Europeans who hold perhaps stronger beliefs in meritocratic principles? Can these cultural differences, at least in part, explain differences in perceptions of what fair outcomes of economic support for less advantaged European regions are?

Concluding Remarks

European national states and their cultures have a long history. Although the idea of a European culture, with its distinct languages, philosophical, social and legal ideas, can be traced back to Antiquity, the idea of a unified European economic and political space is a post-Second World War construct. The findings of this Special Issue can only be the starting point for future psychological research that accompanies Europe along its journey into the 21st century.

Authors' Note

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Note

1. Legally speaking, Romanians are not immigrants; however, they share many elements of the immigrant experience and minority status (e.g., experience of prejudice and discrimination).

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