Children’s Sense of National Belonging: The Development of Knowledge and Feelings about Nations and National Groups

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Invited keynote address presented at the British Psychological Society
London Lectures, London, 6th December 2004
A conversation with 10-year-old Hilary
(from Carrington & Short, 1996)

*Interviewer:* What are the best things about being British?

*Hilary:* Well sometimes, I think it’s good to be British because they won the war. And it’s quite good – we’re quite important for that; we never lost. I wouldn’t like to be German either.

*Interviewer:* What’s wrong with being German?

*Hilary:* Well, they’re awfully cruel and they’re not very nice and I wouldn’t like to go and live out there now.

*Interviewer:* Have you met any German people?

*Hilary:* No.
*Interviewer:* So when you say that German people are cruel, what gives you that view?

*Hilary:* Well, we’ve just been doing a project on World War II and I’ve heard about them killing lots of people and torturing them and things like that.

*Interviewer:* Are all German people cruel do you think?

*Hilary:* Well, I’d say most of them are – but maybe, some of them are – OK?

*Interviewer:* What are the worst things about being British?

*Hilary:* Well there isn’t anything really bad about being British. Our country hasn’t done anything wrong.
Hilary exhibits two phenomena which often characterise children’s attitudes to national groups:

- **national ingroup favouritism**
  - preferring your own national ingroup over other national groups
  - describing your own national group in much more positive terms than any other group

- **national prejudice**
  - disliking, and making negative comments about, national outgroups
  - national prejudice is usually exhibited in relationship to national outgroups which are the traditional historical enemies of the child’s own group
In this lecture, I am going to be talking about:

- children’s patterns of national preferences and prejudices
- children’s positive bias towards their own country and national group (i.e. the phenomenon of ingroup favouritism)
- how children develop a subjective sense of identification with their own country and national group
Previous studies in this area

- There are many previous studies in this field, for example:


- These previous studies have examined four main issues
- Children’s knowledge of the geographies of different countries, including their geographical knowledge of their own country
  - location of countries on maps; names of major cities, rivers, lakes, mountains, etc.; climates; typical flora and fauna; etc.
- Children’s knowledge of national emblems
  - flags; national costumes; national monuments and buildings; typical foods and drinks; famous people; etc.
- Children’s feelings towards national groups, including their feelings towards their own national group
  - levels of liking and disliking
- The contents of children’s national stereotypes, including their stereotype of their own national group
  - English: reserved, polite, sense of fair play, etc.
  - Americans: loud, talkative, assertive, etc.
Findings of these previous studies

- Children’s national knowledge, feelings and stereotypes begin to develop from about 5 years of age.

- By mid-adolescence, children have very detailed stereotypes of the people who live in many different countries, although their geographical knowledge of other countries is usually very poor.

- Children typically show a preference for their own national ingroup right from the outset, at the age of 5.

- However, many national outgroups are still positively liked by most children, just to a lesser extent than the ingroup.

- But national groups which are the traditional enemies of the child’s own nation are often strongly disliked.
Limitations of these previous studies

- Most of these previous studies have collected their data in just a single country.
- None of these previous studies have examined how children’s own national identifications, and their subjective sense of belonging to their own national group, develop.
Our studies

In our studies, we have collected data in many different countries, in order to find out:

- What remains constant in children’s development irrespective of the specific country in which they live? In other words: are there universals in children’s development?

- What varies in children’s development depending upon the specific country in which they live?

We have also examined how children’s national identifications, and their subjective sense of belonging to their own national group, develop.
1. The Western European study

- This study used a cross-sectional design to examine children aged 6, 9, 12 and 15 years old living in:
  - London (England)
  - Dundee (Scotland)
  - Girona (Catalonia, Spain)
  - San Sebastian (Basque Country, Spain)
  - Malaga (southern Spain)
  - Padua (northern Italy)
  - Rome (central Italy)

- Two capital cities (London, Rome), two provincial cities (Padua, Malaga), and three locations where there are prominent nationalist-separatist political movements (Scotland, Catalonia, Basque Country)

- The total sample size in this study was 1,946 children
2. The NIS study

- The NIS are the New Independent States of the former Soviet Union, which all became independent countries when the old Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991.

- The NIS include countries such as:
  - Russia
  - Ukraine
  - Georgia
  - Azerbaijan

- Because of their historical, political and economic circumstances, these countries provide a very different type of context from western European countries for children’s development in this domain.
The NIS study also used a cross-sectional design to examine children aged 6, 9, 12 and 15 years old living in:

- Moscow (Russia)
- Smolensk (Western Russia)
- Kharkov (Ukraine)
- Tbilisi (Georgia)
- Baku (Azerbaijan)

The total sample size in this study was 2,285 children
3. The British study

- This study used a cross-sectional design to examine children aged between 5 and 16 years old living in different parts of Great Britain.

- These children were all born in Britain but were of varying ethnicity, including:
  - White English
  - Black
  - Indian
  - Pakistani

- The total sample size in this study was 1,208 children.
Methods used for testing the children

- In all three studies, the children were either interviewed individually or completed individual questionnaires.
- The main types of methods used were:
  - Open-ended questions
  - Multiple-choice questions
  - Adjective selection tasks
  - Adjective sorting tasks
  - Adjective rank ordering tasks
  - Map interpretation tasks
  - Picture identification tasks
The variables which were measured

- The children’s strength of national identification
- The children’s sense of national pride
- The children’s geographical knowledge of countries
- The children’s knowledge of national emblems (including flags, currencies, traditions, foods, etc.)
- The children’s beliefs about the typical characteristics of specific national groups
- The children’s feelings about specific national groups
- Demographic information about the children and the children’s parents
An example: assessing children’s feelings about different national groups

- One of the methods used to assess children’s feelings about national groups consisted of a pair of linked questions.
- The first question asked: “Do you like or dislike X people?” (e.g. “Do you like or dislike French people?”)
- Depending upon what the child said, they were then asked: “Do you like/dislike them a lot or a little?”
- Answers were scored on a five point scale:
  1 = dislike a lot
  2 = dislike a little
  3 = neutral
  4 = like a little
  5 = like a lot
The findings

- Using these questions, ingroup favouritism was found:
  - at all ages
  - in all countries
  - in all subgroups of children tested

- Conclusion:
  
  Ingroup favouritism is a phenomenon which appears to be universally present amongst children, irrespective of the specific country in which they live
The findings (2)

- We also found evidence in *some* groups of children for outgroup prejudice towards traditional “enemy” nations.
- However, we did *not* find outgroup prejudice towards traditional “enemy” nations in *all* groups of children.
- Conclusion:
  Negative prejudice towards traditional “enemy” nations is *not* a universal pattern.
Example: Azeri children’s liking of different national groups

![Bar chart showing the liking of different national groups by Azeri children at ages 6, 9, 12, and 15 years. The chart includes data for Russians, Ukrainians, Georgians, and Azeris.]
Example: English children’s liking of different national groups
A second measure: assessing the strength of national identification

The child was given a large set of cards containing the names of possible age, gender, city, national, and supranational identities.

For example, in England, the children were given:

- 6 years old: boy, Londoner, English, French
- 9 years old: girl, European, Scottish, German
- 12 years old: British, Spanish
- 15 years old: Italian

The child was asked: “Have a look at these cards. All of these words can be used to describe people. Which ones do you think could be used to describe you? Which ones do you think you are? You can choose as many as you like.”
The cards chosen by the child were then laid out on the table.

The child was asked: “If you had to choose just one of these cards because it was the most important to you, which one would you choose?”

The card which the child chose was then removed from the set, and the question was repeated.

This process continued until all the cards had been chosen by the child.

The order in which the cards were chosen by the child was used as a measure of how important each individual identity was to that child.
The findings

- At 6 years of age, in the first part of the task, the children did usually select a correct national identity term in order to describe themselves.

- However, in the second part of the task, two different developmental patterns were found.
Pattern one

- In the first pattern, the 6 year olds did not attribute very high importance to their national identity.

- Instead, these children attributed much higher importance to their age, to their gender, and to their city identities.

- However, by 9 years of age, the importance attributed to the national identity by these groups of children had usually increased significantly.

- The importance attributed to national identity then continued to remain high, or even increased still further, at 12 and 15 years of age.
Pattern two

- However, in some countries (e.g. Spain and Italy), a different pattern occurred.
- In these countries, relatively high importance was attributed to national identity already at 6 years of age.

Conclusion:
There is cross-national variability in the importance which is attributed to national identity by children.
Example: Italian vs. Scottish children

Legend:
- Italian children
- Scottish children

Bar chart showing comparisons between Italian and Scottish children at different ages: 6 years, 9 years, 12 years, and 15 years.
Variability within countries

- However, we found that there is not only variability in development between different countries - there is also variability in development within individual countries.
- For example, we found differences in the development of children who were growing up in different places within the same country.
- Specifically, we found that children who were growing up in the capital city of a country attributed greater importance to their national identity than children who were growing up outside the capital city.
Example: Russian children living in Moscow vs. Smolensk
Why are there higher levels of national identification in capital cities?

There are at least three possibilities:

- Simply knowing that you live in the capital city of a country might serve to enhance your awareness of your own national identity.
- Living in the capital city might mean that you have more ready access to the most important emblems of your own nation (e.g. Big Ben, Tower of London, etc.), which then enhances your awareness of your own national group.
- Living in the capital city might mean that you are more likely to encounter tourists and people from other national groups in your everyday environment, which enhances your awareness of your own national identity.
Variability across different ethnic groups within a country

- We also found significant differences in levels of national identification within countries according to children’s ethnic group memberships.

- For example, in the British study, we found that amongst teenagers living in London, ethnic majority teenagers and ethnic minority teenagers exhibited different levels of identification with being British.

- This difference was exhibited on four identification measures which we used in this study.

- All four of these measures were of Britishness rather than Englishness (i.e. they involved the superordinate and supposedly inclusive national category).
The four measures

- Importance: “How important is it to you that you are British?”
  - very important, quite important, a little bit important, not at all important

- Degree of identification: “Which one of these do you think best describes you?”
  - very British, quite British, a little bit British, not at all British

- National pride “How do you feel about being British?”
  - very happy, quite happy, neutral, quite sad, very sad

- Internalisation “How would you feel if someone said something bad about British people?”
  - very sad, quite sad, neutral, quite happy, very happy
Levels of identification with being British amongst London teenagers

The bar chart shows the levels of identification with being British for different ethnic groups in London teenagers. The categories are 'import.', 'degree', 'pride', and 'internal.', with bars color-coded for White English, Black, Indian, and Pakistani groups.
Why do minority groups identify with Britishness less than the majority group?

One possible explanation is as follows:

- Hall (1999) and Parekh (2000) have argued that the concept of Britishness is embedded in a set of implicit beliefs and stories about the imperial and colonial past of Great Britain.
- In these stories, English people are the major players, and ethnic minority groups are relegated to a subordinate and minor role (along with the Scots, Welsh and Irish).
- Ethnic minority individuals may therefore find it harder to identify with the category of British because it relegates their own ethnic group to a subordinate and minor position in the story of what Britishness is all about.
The category of Britishness is defined, at least partially, in terms of race. In the words of Samir Shah (2000):

“The word ‘British’ – rather like ‘Chinese’ – conjures up many images. And just as I would be unlikely to imagine a black or brown face when thinking of the word ‘Chinese’, so the images brought to mind with the word ‘British’ are more likely to be of an Anglican church rather than a Sunni mosque, warm beer rather than a cold lassi, a white face rather than a black or brown one.”

In other words, people’s mental representations of Britishness contain a racial dimension

If this is the case, then it is not surprising that members of visible minority groups find it harder to identify as British
Ethnic minority children

- This pattern of differences in levels of national identification between minority and majority group children does not only occur in Britain.

- For example, in Georgia, we examined patterns of national identification in ethnic minority Armenian children.

- These Armenian children also showed very different patterns of national identification compared with majority group Georgian children who were attending the same schools.

- Conclusion:
  Patterns of national identification vary within countries according to children’s ethnic group memberships.
Variability in patterns of national identification within countries

- So we have found variability within individual countries depending upon whether the child lives in the capital city or elsewhere in the country.
- And we have found variability within individual countries depending upon the ethnic group membership of the child.
- In addition, we have found further variability in patterns of national identification according to children’s use of language, either at home or in the school.
Example: the case of the Basque Country

- The Basque Country is a region of Spain where many people speak two languages, Spanish and Basque.
- In families with children, parents often make a conscious decision when their first child is born whether to speak only Spanish in the home, only Basque in the home, or both languages in the home.
- We found dramatic differences in children’s patterns of national identification depending upon which languages were spoken in the family home.
Importance of being Spanish vs. importance of being Basque

Importance of being Spanish

Importance of being Basque

Basque at home
Both langs at home
Spanish at home
Another example: the case of Catalonia

- Catalonia is another region of Spain (which has Barcelona as its major city)
- In Catalonia, many people speak two languages, Spanish and Catalan
- So Catalan parents also have to make a similar decision about whether to speak only Catalan, both Catalan and Spanish, or only Spanish in the family home
- Once again, we found big differences in children’s patterns of national identification depending upon which languages were spoken in the family home
Importance of being Spanish vs. importance of being Catalan

- Catalan at home
- Both langs at home
- Spanish at home
Children in the NIS

- In Ukraine, Georgia and Azerbaijan, parents can choose to send their children either to schools which deliver all their teaching in the local language (Ukrainian, Georgian or Azeri) or to schools which deliver their teaching in Russian.

- In the NIS study, we assessed the national identifications of children who attended local language schools and children who attended Russian language schools.

- We found systematic differences in national identification according to the children’s language of schooling.
The importance of being Ukrainian in Ukrainian children

![Bar chart showing the importance of being Ukrainian in Ukrainian children at different ages for Ukrainian and Russian language schools.](chart.png)
The importance of being Georgian in Georgian children

- 6 years
- 9 years
- 12 years
- 15 years

Georgian lang schools
Russian lang schools
National identification and the use of language

- Conclusion:
  there is variability in children’s patterns of national identification according to their use of language, either at home or in the school
Summary of the main findings from the three projects

- Ingroup favouritism is a phenomenon which is universally present amongst children, irrespective of the specific country in which they live.
- However, outgroup prejudice against traditional enemy nations is *not* universal.
- There is also variability in the strength of national identification according to three main factors:
  - the child’s geographical location within the nation
  - the child’s ethnic group membership
  - the child’s use of language, either in the home or at school
So what does all this mean?

- It means that, contrary to the claims of many previous studies in this field, there is very considerable variability in children’s development in this domain, not only from country to country, but also within each individual country.
- And this conclusion has important implications for research in this field.
The theoretical implications

- Our findings imply that any theory which postulates that children’s national attitudes and sense of national identity develop in exactly the same way, irrespective of the specific country in which they are growing up, must be wrong.
- This kind of universalist theory does not provide a satisfactory explanation of why children’s development can vary so dramatically.
- So, for example, Piaget’s cognitive-developmental explanation, which postulates that children’s development in this domain is entirely a product of their underlying cognitive development, must be wrong.
Why single out Piaget?

- Because his cognitive-developmental account has been adapted by Frances Aboud (1988) to explain the development of both national and ethnic attitudes.

- Aboud’s theoretical position is now widely cited by both developmental and social psychologists as the definitive explanation.

- However, Aboud’s cognitive-developmental position is a universalist position: it posits that children’s development is the same irrespective of the specific country or culture in which they live.

- This theory therefore manifestly fails to do justice to the real complexities of the actual developmental data.
A further implication of our findings

- The finding that there is a great deal of variability in children’s development also means that we have to be extremely careful about extrapolating from findings which have been obtained in one national context to children who live in another context.
- All too often, researchers simply use children who happen to live in their own local vicinity for their research.
- The conclusions which they draw from these local children are then frequently universalised.
- However, our findings imply that we have to be very careful indeed about extrapolating findings which have been obtained in one particular context to children who live in another context.