

Historical representations of national identity and intergroup relations

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Introduction

The past is crucial to our sense of identity. Without the ability to recall our own past we are not able to understand who we are in the present. In the case of my personal past and the development of my academic identity, Maykel Verkuyten, to whom this book is dedicated, played a crucial role. We first met each other in 2008, when I was a Bachelor student at University College Utrecht and followed his course on 'Ethnic Relations'. It was one of my favorite courses and therefore Maykel recommended the Research Master Migration, Ethnic Relations and Multiculturalism (MERM) to me, which I completed in 2009 with a Master thesis supervised by Maykel. In this Master thesis we set the first steps for what would become a joint research line on historical representations of national identity and intergroup relations, which we further developed during my PhD and Postdoc at ERCOMER. I was lucky to have Maykel Verkuyten as a true mentor who taught me a great deal and supported me in all the different steps of my academic career. In this chapter, I will give an overview of our research in the Dutch context on historical representations of national identity and intergroup relations.

In our research we propose that the past is not only important for our sense of personal identity, but also for the sense of identity that we derive from our memberships in social groups; in particular national identity. Awareness of collective history helps people to understand where 'we' come from and hence what constitutes 'our' shared cultural heritage. Scholars stress the importance

of history particularly in relation to national identity, because a common history is necessary for the emergence of nations (Smith, 1998) and a belief in origin and common descent is what underlies the notion of being ‘a people’ (DeVos, 1995; Weber, 1968). The historical basis of national citizenship has also become an important topic in Western European debates on immigration and cultural diversity. Politicians have argued that, as a result of the increasing diversity of cultures and religions in Western European societies, people are less aware of their shared national culture and heritage, and therefore lack a sense of collective belonging (Duyvendak, 2011; Miller & Ali, 2013). This so called ‘crisis of national identity’ has contributed to a political and public discourse that strongly focuses on the national past as a means to define who ‘we’ are as a national community, and what it means to be a national citizen.

Similar to other Western European countries, the Netherlands has witnessed a strong focus on the historical roots of national identity in public and political debates during the last decades (Grever & Ribbens, 2007). The development of a historical and cultural canon of the Netherlands for Dutch schools and the expansion of national history museums are visible manifestations of this focus on national heritage. Dutch politicians and opinion makers have nourished this focus on the national past by claiming that greater knowledge of national history and heritage would strengthen the cohesiveness of Dutch society, because familiarity with national history and traditions would help both natives and immigrants to feel more at home in a society that is becoming increasingly culturally diverse (WRR, 2007). However, the public discourse on the historical basis of national identity and immigration has become quite nostalgic and exclusionary. Politicians across the spectrum have argued that native majority members have lost their national home to newcomers and therefore increasingly long for those good old days when it was ‘just us’ (Duyvendak, 2011). In their view, a stronger focus on cultural heritage would not only foster immigrants’ assimilation, but also help natives to feel less displaced and nostalgic. Although the focus on historical roots and cultural heritage may foster feelings of national belonging among native majority members, it can form a problem for the inclusion and acceptance of immigrants. The reason is that immigrants have no roots in the host country and are thus not part of this shared national history. As such, the historical roots paradigm that is evoked in public discourses on national identity and immigration runs the risk of favoring those ‘who have always been here’, hereby marginalizing the position of immigrants.

These public debates raise new questions for social scientific research on the consequences of historical representations of national citizenship for current group dynamics in culturally diverse societies. Which historical representations

of national identity are dominant in political discourses on immigration and cultural diversity? How and when do such historical representations impact intergroup relations in culturally diverse societies? Against the background of these broad questions, Maykel and I developed a research line that investigated how and when a Christian and religious tolerant representation of national identity affect attitudes towards Muslims among native Dutch majority members in the Netherlands.

Specifically, in our research we focused on how such historical representations can explain differences in attitudes of native Dutch towards *expressive rights for Muslims*. In most Western European countries, including the Netherlands, the debate about national identity and cultural diversity is mainly focused on the presence of immigrants with Muslim backgrounds, who form the majority of the immigrant population in Western Europe. Muslims are often portrayed and perceived as having ways of life that are irreconcilable with those of native populations and as forming a threat to national identity (Brubaker, 2017; Duyvendak, 2011). The changes that accompany the increasing religious and cultural diversification of Dutch society are particularly visible in the public environment. Therefore, the strongly debated questions evolve around concrete rights and expressions of Islamic religion in the public domain, such as the building of mosques and Islamic schools, and the use of religious symbols, such as the headscarf.

The chapter will be structured as follows. In the first section, I will present a theoretical framework for understanding why history is important for national identity and intergroup relations and discuss the scientific relevance of our approach. Subsequently, I will present our empirical research on the relationship between a Christian and religious tolerant representation of national identity, perceptions of continuity threat and attitudes towards Muslims. In the last section, I will focus on our empirical research that looked at the mobilizing potential of these two historical representations.

Why is history important for national identity and intergroup relations?

According to the social identity perspective (Turner & Reynolds, 2001), incorporating both Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT; Turner et al., 1987), individual's self-concept can be defined along a continuum that ranges from self-definition in terms of personal identity to self-definition in terms of social identity. Personal identity refers to self-understandings which are unique to the individual. Social identity concerns the sense of self that one derives from memberships in social groups.

Moreover, there is a corresponding behavioral continuum, where personal identity is seen to motivate interpersonal behavior, while social identity is seen to underlie (inter)group behavior. It is furthermore proposed that individuals strive for a positive self-concept. As part of the sense of self is derived from group membership, individuals seek to belong to groups that satisfy this need. One way to achieve a positive social identity is by positively differentiating one's own social group (the in-group) from other groups (out-groups). That is, through intergroup comparisons individuals seek to positively distinguish their in-group from relevant out-groups, because this helps them to achieve or maintain a positive social identity. Scholars have argued that historical understandings of national identity are particularly well-suited to provide native majority members with a positive national identity (Jetten & Hutchison, 2011). The reason is that in reflecting on national history the unique heritage of the national in-group becomes salient, and this underscores how the in-group is different and positively distinct from out-groups and can hence boost a sense of collective self-esteem.

However, later theories provided motivational extensions of the social identity perspective and proposed that group membership fulfills more needs than self-esteem. One prominent integrative theoretical model is Motivated Identity Construction Theory (MICT; Vignoles, 2011), which proposes that people are not only motivated to maintain a sense of self-esteem (the self-esteem motive), but also to perceive themselves as continuous over time (the continuity motive), as being different from other people (the distinctiveness motive), as being competent and capable (efficacy motive), as included and accepted within their social contexts (belonging motive), and as having a meaningful life (the meaning motive). The central idea of MICT is that, next to physiological needs (e.g., food, water), people also have psychological needs related to their identity, called identity motives. These identity motives apply to both our personal and social identities and guide processes of identity construction and maintenance.

Historical understandings of national identity are particularly well-suited to satisfy people's need for self-continuity – a sense of connection between one's past, present and future self. The reason is that nations are mainly defined and understood as communities that live and move together through time (Anderson, 1983; Bhabha, 1990), and are often perceived as sharing a culture and identity that is passed on from generation to generation (David & Bar-Tal, 2009; Sani, 2008). Moreover, research indicates that people tend to perceive their national and ethnic groups in essentialist terms with possessing immutable and fixed cultural characteristics (Condor, 1996a, 1996b; Hutchinson & Smith, 1996). In our research (for an overview see Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2015), we have shown that perceiving one's national group as having cultural endurance over time

affords majority members with a sense of collective self-continuity – that is, the feeling that being a national group member ensures continuity between one’s past, present and future self. In addition, we demonstrated that this sense of collective self-continuity (next to self-esteem and belonging) forms an important and unique reason for why majority members identify with their national group. Specifically, we found that when national identification was regressed on national identity motives of continuity, self-esteem, belonging, distinctiveness and efficacy simultaneously, only continuity, belonging, and self-esteem were unique significant predictors, whereas distinctiveness and efficacy had no significant effects. Taken together, this means that majority members want to identify with national groups that are perceived as having a shared cultural heritage that persists through time, because this satisfies their basic psychological needs for self-esteem, continuity and belonging.

Since people find comfort in the belief that their national in-group has historical endurance, they are also strongly affected when the continuity of this group is threatened (Jetten & Wohl, 2012; Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2015). In the context of national identity, politicians often describe developments such as immigration and globalization as threatening the continuity of national culture. However, this historical cultural content of national identity is not self-evident and can be defined in different ways. In the Western European context, there are ongoing debates about the customs, symbols and traditions that constitute ‘our’ shared national heritage. This means that people do not merely understand their national identity as a collective historical entity that moves together through time, but also have ideas about the historical contents of their national identity. This latter aspect is relevant for the study of intergroup relations, because depending on the particular historical content that is seen to provide the roots of national identity, native majority members may perceive continuity threats from immigrant out-groups, and hence position themselves favorably or unfavorably towards the presence of such out-groups in society.

The idea that the content and meaning that people ascribe to their group membership is crucial for understanding intergroup dynamics is another key premise of the social identity perspective. The perspective argues that people have an understanding of what defines their group (i.e., the contents and meanings of their group identity), such as a shared ideology, and group norms, and that these specific meanings influence the particular ways in which group members behave. During the last two decades, empirical work within the social identity perspective started to examine how particular contents of national identity guide intergroup dynamics. Specifically, there has been a large body of research that has looked at the difference between ethnic and civic understandings of national

identity in predicting attitudes towards immigrants (e.g., Meeus et al., 2010; Pehrson et al., 2009; Wakefield et al., 2011). The ethnic understanding defines national identity in terms of ancestry and descent, and has been shown to predict prejudice towards immigrants. The civic understanding, on the other hand, refers to a definition of national identity in terms of citizenship, participation and commitment, and this understanding is found to be related to more positive attitudes towards immigrants (e.g., Reijerse et al., 2013).

While these findings indicate that out-group attitudes depend on the content that people ascribe to national group membership, the ethnic versus civic dichotomy is limited in capturing the different meanings of national identity that exist within societies (Billig, 1995; Brown, 1999). That is, the meanings of national identity may be specific for different countries as they depend on the situated historical and cultural context. By reducing these specific meanings of national identity to an ethnic versus civic dichotomy the particular cultural and historical context is not taken into account (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). In our research, we sought to bridge this gap by considering how specific historical representations of national identity that are salient in the Dutch context predict attitudes towards Muslim expressive rights among Dutch natives.

Christian and religious tolerant representations and attitudes towards Muslims

We focused on two different historical representations of national identity that figure prominently in Dutch debates on cultural diversity and national identity; namely that of being a nation that is rooted in Christianity versus being a country that has its roots in a long tradition of religious tolerance. Both historical representations of national identity are invoked in public debates in order to argue whether the increasing presence and visibility of Islam poses a threat to the continuation of national culture and identity.

On the one hand, politicians and scholars have described European national identities as being deeply rooted in Christian heritage (Foner & Alba, 2008; Zolberg & Woon, 1999). Even though the Netherlands is considered to be one of the most secular countries in Europe (Becker & De Hart, 2006), Christian heritage has become a so called 'cultural religion' that is more about belonging than believing (Demerath, 2000). That is, while there is a small number of people who subscribe to Christian religious beliefs or go to church, there is a large part of the population who considers Christian norms, values and traditions as an important part of their national culture and identity (Brubaker, 2017). Research indicates that people who identify as Christian but report low levels

of religiosity – so called ‘nominal Christians’ – have more a more exclusionary ethnic understanding of national identity compared to religious Christians and non-Christians (Storm, 2011). This means that, even though these nominal Christians are hardly religious, they feel that people can only truly belong to the nation when they adhere to Christian values and traditions. In this way, Christianity has acquired ethnocultural significance that is often used to mark boundaries between national majority members and immigrant out-groups with a different religious background, particularly Muslims. In increasingly secular Western societies where Christianity is still the dominant cultural religion, Muslims are often portrayed as the most visible ‘others’. For example, Geert Wilders, leader of the Dutch populist-radical right ‘Party for Freedom’, has often stated that the Judeo-Christian roots of Dutch society are threatened because of the increasing presence of Islam. A similar rhetoric is used by populist radical-right parties in other Western European countries, such as Jean-Marie Le Pen in France (Hafez, 2014).

On the other hand, tolerance of different worldviews and religions is often described as a self-defining element of Dutch history and identity. Tolerance means that one is putting up with something that one disapproves of. It means that one accepts beliefs or practices that one considers dissenting (Verkuyten & Yogeeswaran, 2017) can therefore be considered an ideological dilemma. This is also visible in debates about national identity and immigration, where a historical narrative of tolerance is used to promote the inclusion as well as exclusion of immigrant out-groups. In the latter narrative, it is proposed that the continuity of ‘our’ national culture of tolerance is threatened by the intolerance of newcomers, in particular Muslims (Bowskill et al., 2007; Verkuyten, 2013). In the former inclusionary narrative, it is emphasized that the presence and visibility of Muslims in Dutch society is in line with national histories of religious diversity and tolerance. For example, in response to the release of an anti-Islam movie by the populist radical-right Party for Freedom, former Dutch prime minister Jan-Peter Balkenende said during a press conference in 2008: “The Netherlands is characterized by a tradition of religious tolerance, respect and responsibility. The needless offending of certain convictions and communities does not belong to this. . . . The Dutch government will honor this tradition and issues an appeal to everyone to do the same” (Dutch Government Archive, 2008).

Following the social identity perspective, we predicted that stronger endorsement of a Christian representation of national identity among Dutch native majority members would be associated with more opposition to Muslim expressive rights, because Muslims are more likely to be perceived as threatening the continuity of national identity. In contrast, we expected that stronger

endorsement of a religious tolerant representation of national identity would be related to lower opposition to Muslim expressive rights, via lower levels of perceived threat to the continuity of national identity. We tested these predictions in a survey (among a sample of native Dutch young adults) and an experimental study (among a representative sample of native Dutch adults), in which we respectively measured and manipulated the Christian and religious tolerant representation (Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2014; Studies 2 and 3). In line with these expectations, the results of the survey indicated that stronger endorsement of the Christian representation was associated with more opposition to Muslim expressive rights, via stronger perceptions of continuity threat, whereas the pattern of results was reversed for the religious tolerant representation. In the experimental study, we found that, in line with the results of the survey, the salience of the religious tolerant representation (vs. a control group) decreased opposition to Muslim expressive rights via lower perceived continuity threat. The salience of the Christian representation (vs. a control group), however, increased opposition to Muslim expressive rights via continuity threat, but only among the youngest age cohort (18-35) and not among older ones. These findings indicated that while the religious tolerant representation decreased opposition to Muslim expressive rights (via lower perceived continuity threat) across different age cohorts, the Christian representation increased opposition to Muslim expressive rights only for the youngest age cohort.

One possible explanation for this cohort effect is that the meaning ascribed to Christian national identity, particularly in relation to immigration and religious diversity, varies between different generations. Since Christian religiosity was very strong in the Netherlands until the beginning of the 1970s but sharply declined afterwards (Dekker, 2007), the oldest cohorts have more often been raised in a Christian fashion compared to the younger ones. Therefore the older cohorts are more likely to be religious Christians, who tend to be more accepting of religious out-groups (Storm, 2011), potentially because they share a common identity of being religious. On the other hand, the younger cohorts are more likely to be nominal Christians or non-Christians, who understand Christian national identity in more exclusionary ethnic terms in relation to which Muslims constitute a threatening 'other' (Storm, 2011). For these younger generations, the salience of a Christian national identity may therefore foster the perception that Muslims pose a threat to the continuity of this national identity and therefore result in stronger opposition towards Muslim expressive rights.

The mobilizing potential of historical representations of national identity

We demonstrated that historical representations of national identity can have positive and negative consequences for Dutch natives' evaluation of Muslims depending on what people perceive to be the particular historical content of this identity. It is likely that these historical representations interact with national identification in guiding intergroup attitudes and behaviors. Namely, research within the social identity tradition has shown that the level of *group identification* determines whether group members act and interpret the world according to the group's norms, values and ideological beliefs (e.g., Doosje et al., 1999; Haslam et al., 2010). The social identity perspective (Turner & Reynolds, 2001) proposes that particularly people who strongly identify with their in-group (higher identifiers) are likely to be concerned about their in-group and act in line with in-group norms, but there have also been studies showing that lower identifiers can be mobilized to protect their in-group against social forces and groups that potentially undermine it (e.g., Fosh, 1993; Sibley et al., 2008; Veenstra & Haslam, 2000).

On the one hand, this means that while lower (compared to higher) identifiers are generally less predisposed to hold negative attitudes towards immigrant out-groups (Wagner et al., 2010), they might become mobilized against such groups when they feel that the continued existence of their group identity is at stake. Lower identifiers have been found to psychologically distance themselves from their in-group in situations of intergroup conflict (Ellemers et al., 1997), but research has also demonstrated that lower identifiers can be 'brought on board' when existential threats to their group identity become salient (Veenstra & Haslam, 2000). Since identity continuity is a basic psychological need (Vignoles, 2011), and most national citizens care about their national identity and culture, we proposed that lower identifiers should be willing to respond to developments that undermine the continuity of national identity. The increasing presence of visible signs of Islam in Western Europe is often presented and perceived as undermining the continuity of Christian national identity (Brubaker, 2017). We therefore predicted that lower native Dutch identifiers would increase their opposition to Muslim expressive rights when a historical Christian representation of their national identity is salient. We tested this prediction in three experimental studies in which a historical Christian representation of national identity was manipulated and compared to a control condition (see Smeekes et al., 2011). All studies showed that lower identifiers increased their opposition to Muslim expressive rights to equal levels of higher identifiers when national identity was framed as rooted in a tradition of Christianity. For higher identifiers, the salience of this representation did not alter their level of opposition to Muslim rights. A possible reason for this finding is that the Christian representation is

in line with higher national identifiers' tendency endorse more exclusionary understandings of national identity and to be more prejudiced towards immigrant out-groups than lower identifiers (e.g., Wagner et al., 2010). Hence, the salience of the Christian representation may therefore not alter their attitudes towards immigrant out-groups.

On the other hand, according to the social identity perspective, higher identifiers are more likely to act in accordance with in-group norms than lower identifiers. This means that while higher (compared to lower) national identifiers are more predisposed to be negative towards immigrant out-groups, they could be mobilized to become more accepting of such out-groups when a shared group norm of openness and acceptance of out-groups is salient. This idea is in line with existing research showing that high nationalistic individuals can become more positive towards Muslims when egalitarian national values are salient (Butz et al., 2007). We predicted that when a historical tolerant representation of national identity is salient this would increase the acceptance of Muslim expressive rights among higher native Dutch identifiers, because this would result in lower perceptions of continuity threat from Muslims.¹ The reason is that when national identity is perceived as rooted in a tradition of religious tolerance, the presence of religious out-groups is in line with 'who we have always been' and should hence not be perceived as a threat to the continuity of national identity.

We tested this prediction in a survey and experimental study among samples of university and high school students (see Smeekes et al., 2012; Studies 2 and 3) by respectively measuring and manipulating a representation of historical religious tolerance. The results of both studies demonstrated that, for higher identifiers, the endorsement and salience of historical tolerance resulted in more acceptance of Muslim expressive rights via lower perceptions of continuity threat. Furthermore, we found that, compared to lower identifiers, higher identifiers were more negative about Muslims when the salience and endorsement of this historical tolerant representation was low. Yet, both groups of identifiers displayed comparable attitudes towards Muslims when the salience and endorsement of this tolerant historical representation was high.

Taken together, these studies indicated that historical representations of national identity can mobilize: (a) people who are not ordinarily concerned about their national identity (i.e., lower identifiers) to become more opposed to Muslims, as well as (b) people who are concerned about their national identity

¹ In this paper (Smeekes et al., 2012) we label this construct as 'perceived identity incompatibility between the Dutch and Muslim way of life' instead of 'perceptions of continuity threat from Muslims', but the measurement that we used for this is similar to the one we have used for perceived continuity threat in Smeekes and Verkuyten (2014).

(i.e., higher identifiers) to become more accepting of Muslims. More specifically, these results showed that rather than increasing the intensity of their initial position towards Muslims (i.e., galvanizing), historical representations of national identity were able to mobilize lower and higher identifiers respectively against or in favor of Muslims (Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007). This implies that bringing historical representations of national identity to the fore can spark a reaction among native majority members who are predisposed to be concerned about their national identity as well as among those who are not ordinarily concerned about it. However, whether this reaction is inclusionary or exclusionary towards Muslims depends on the particular contents of these historical representations.

Conclusion and future directions

The historicization of national identity has become a focal point in Western European debates on cultural diversity and immigration. In many countries, including the Netherlands, there has been an emphasis on national heritage and traditions in debates about the presence and influence of Muslims. Politicians have argued that people lack a sense of collective consciousness and belonging (see Duyvendak, 2011) and that greater knowledge of national history would strengthen the cohesiveness of Western European societies. In Dutch debates on national identity and cultural diversity the national past is put forward as a means to define who 'we' are as a national community, and what it means to be a national citizen.

These public debates formed an important basis for the research line that I developed with Maykel, on the historical basis of national citizenship for current group dynamics in culturally diverse settings. We took a social psychological perspective and analyzed how different historical representations of national identity affect attitudes towards Muslims among native majority members in the Netherlands. We focused on two historical representations of national identity that figure prominently in Dutch discourses on cultural diversity, namely that of being a nation rooted in Christian heritage, and being a nation rooted in a tradition of religious tolerance and openness. We found that the Christian representation is linked to more negative attitudes towards Muslim expressive rights, via stronger perceived threats from Muslims to the continuity of national identity. Moreover, we showed that the religious tolerant representation is linked to more acceptance of Muslim expressive rights, because this representation is related to lower perceptions of continuity threat from Muslims. In addition, we demonstrated that the Christian representation can mobilize lower identifiers and younger people to become more negative towards Muslim expressive rights. On

the other hand, we showed that the religious tolerant representation can mobilize higher identifiers to become more supportive of Muslim expressive rights.

These findings highlight the importance of historical representations for national identity and intergroup dynamics. Native majority members draw on the national past to understand ‘who we are’, and this subsequently informs their attitudes towards out-groups in the present. As such, our research demonstrated that a focus on perceptions of history is important for understanding national identity and group dynamics in contemporary multicultural Western European societies.

Future work could examine whether the Christian and religious tolerant historical representations of national identity hold relevance and have similar consequences for attitudes towards Muslims among native majority members in other Western countries. Recent research has highlighted how the Christian representation of national identity has been ‘hijacked’ by populist radical-right parties to mobilize their voters against Islam (Brubaker, 2017; Marzouki & McDonnel, 2016). Prospective research could examine whether and for whom the salience of a Christian representation of national identity results in more support for these parties. Another interesting avenue for future research is to investigate to what extent these two historical representations affect attitudes towards different out-groups. For example, opinion makers have recently noticed the more welcoming attitude of Western Europe towards Ukrainian refugees (of which a majority has a Christian background) compared to Syrian refugees (of which a majority has an Islamic background) (Buruma, 2022). Future studies could investigate whether the difference in attitudes towards, and perceived threats from, Ukrainian and Syrian refugee groups can be explained by a Christian understanding of national identity.

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