

Being German: Examining national identity as a collective experience

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Abstract

National identity is a complex topic requiring multi-methodological research and close attention to everyday, banal nationalism. Our aim was to examine the lived experience of being German, combining the natural interaction of a group discussion with the experiential focus of phenomenology. Two focus groups with German participants were conducted in an industrial town in the west of Germany. One discussion involved a group of five friends, the other a group of four work colleagues. Both were moderated by a German national in the German language. Conversation topics included occasions where national identity was especially salient, the meaning of being German, and making sense of national history. The discussions were transcribed and analysed using a qualitative approach based on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Several important themes centred on the difficulty experienced by Germans in feeling or displaying national pride (with tentative exceptions for cultural and sporting achievements). A second superordinate theme was the value placed on stability in German culture, and how people understood this as historically determined. The study shows how our approach can add a unique and ecologically valid perspective to research on national identity, focusing on everyday shared experience rather than measurement or discourse.

Results

• National pride and the German burden

- There was an **affective reluctance** to express national pride, with the latter commonly considered misguided or meaningless. Rather than pride, participants experienced unease linked to oblique references to “history”, implying Nazism.

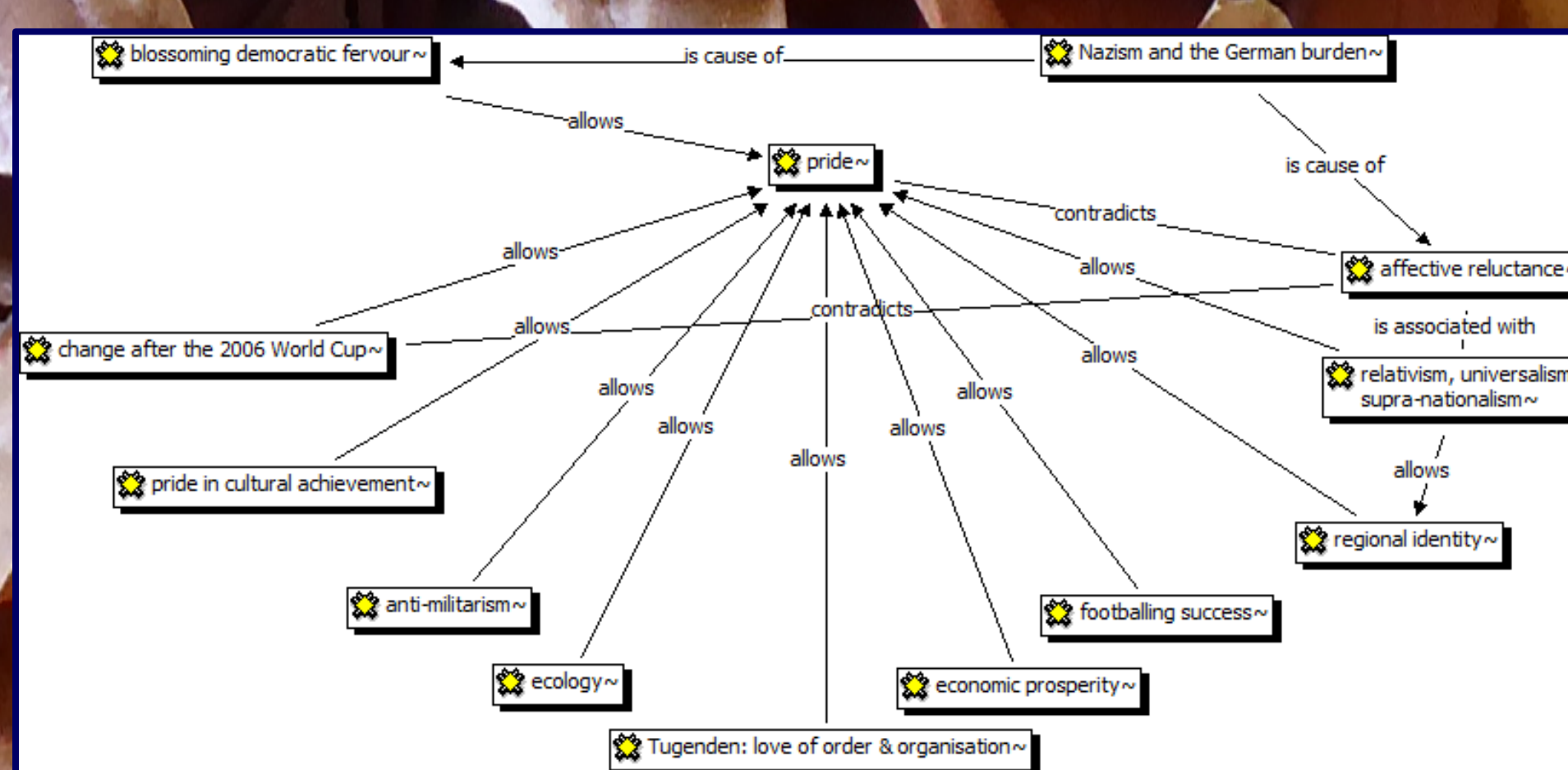
Andrea: We are still constrained. By history. When we stand there and say, I'm proud to be German, or to be a German, then it immediately still sounds ... in the, well, to third parties ... sounds wrong. It still isn't regarded as right to, er, people don't like to hear it. So in that sense it does have something to do with ... history.

Rainer: Well, I myself don't like hearing it from me either. So, when I myself say, er ... yes. Just because of history, right?

- The link with history was complex, with some participants feeling stigmatised by an inescapable past, others seeing it as a reason to play a better role in the world or reflecting on a more diffuse bad reputation.
- This critical attitude towards national pride was in itself understood as something to feel good about.

Lorenz: [...] really pleasant that, that, er ... well, again, when ... whatever, the USA with their national anthem ... I find that pleasant here that we ... treat the topic with a lot of reflection. Everyone, actually. And that it's considered even a bit abstruse when, when, when [...]

Reiner: In any case, this ... this self-critical perspective is surely unique. That's surely typically German, too, that you ... question yourself when it comes to national pride ... and examine it critically, because of history, because of current affairs, and ... yes.



- Unlike identity itself, **peaceful national achievement** was a source of pride or at least satisfaction. This included cultural, economic, civic, and sporting achievements as well as democracy and pacifism.

Norbert: After all, you can't imagine today that the military rules society ... and the reluctance of the Germans to go into some war assignment or another is still quite big after all, [...] if I compare with England, my school exchange with Newcastle at the time, some private school, and where they, practically the whole school, er, children, collectively went into some sort of military exercise ... as a child, or pupil at the time, I found that extremely irritating I must say.

Siegfried: I don't know if that's a thing I'm proud of, but I think sometimes, that's German, with us traffic follows the rules, or ... er ... no idea, the bin collectors are on time, or ... whatever. There I think, that's a ... German attribute, er ... reliability.

Erwin: And watching on the news what's happening in the world, and then of course you draw conclusions about your own country and your own life. And Italy, Spain isn't that far away after all. Or Greece ... yea. I think we're pretty well off here, and that's something to be proud of. And also the political culture, let's say, that predominates here. In large part, at least.

- The **World Cup 2006 flicked the switch**. Both groups mentioned this event spontaneously as a turning point in German identity.
 - It changed how the Germans feel and how they are perceived by others.
 - Opinions differed about how profound and meaningful these changes were.

Erwin: Since the 2006 World Cup a lot has changed there, people dared... Someone who has a German flag on their car now, on the way to the World Cup, isn't immediately ... a Nazi. Then, I think the identity re-emerged for many, or they ... they dared show it: Yes, I'm German, and you can somehow be proud of it, to be German. Without being ashamed now, or keep thinking about the past.

Roland: And then other countries were surprised that Germany can also celebrate, right? That people are cheerful, that they're all right.

Bernd: Also this motto, “A time to make friends” – I think it has, a little bit ... this motto has contributed to Germans approaching these guests more openly.

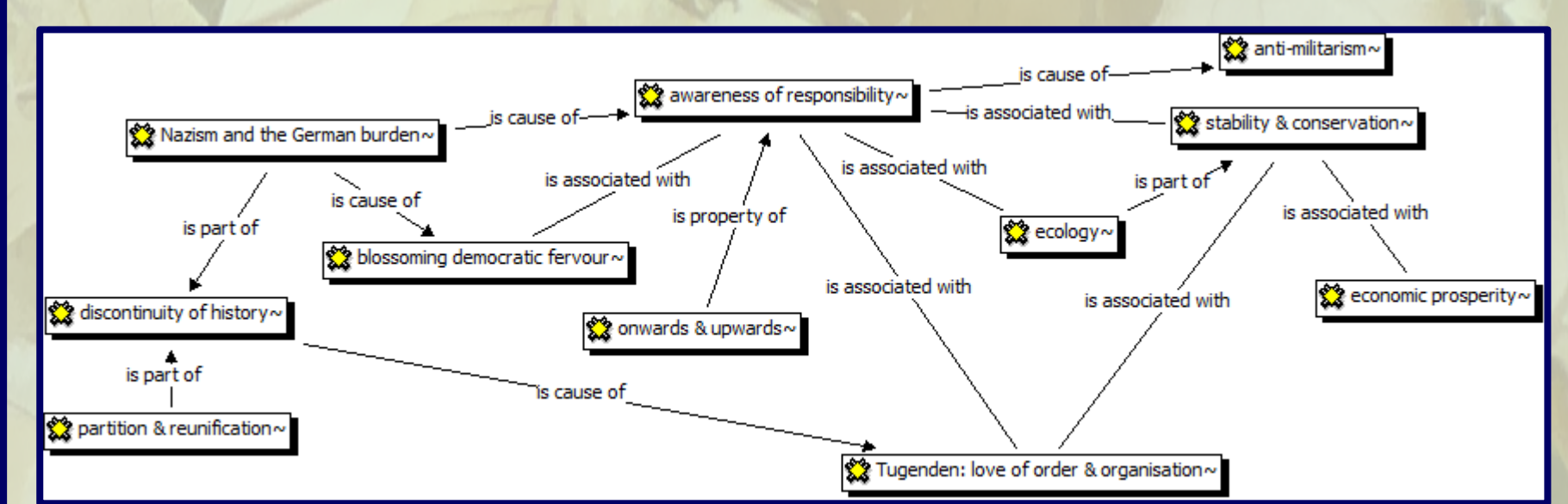
Lorenz: All right, but that's more of an event, right? That's waving a little flag and, er, has nothing to do with Germany or anything. That's an event, that's...

Andrea: IYes, but how ... we ... but aren't we then in the moment where we all stand there and, er ... that it is about Germanness?

Lorenz: No. I don't think so. Most are in it for the party. I don't think that it's about Germany.

• Stability and (re-)construction

- The value placed on stability and a love of order were experienced as crucial German traits.
 - Participants made sense of this as a lesson learnt from the past and the effort to build something sustainable after a chaotic past history.
 - This was linked to Germany's good reputation for economy and ecology.



Peter: Certainly also a bit on the back of history, right? I'd say that, when you had to rebuild a state from nothing, and then of course with regard to rules and discipline, the things that are attributed to the Germans, that was guaranteed to be caused by the rebuilding that had to happen. That you had to get stuck in with discipline, be hard-working, and that was adopted, I think, because these were seen as good traits as well.

Norbert: Inasmuch as people have learnt their lessons from it. That you, er, can't have wartime experiences like those in World War II again. [...] When I, at least, see the pictures of what Gelsenkirchen looked like after the war, you know it from the stories, no stone was left on top of another, er, every family had some dead to mourn ... er ... the whole of society was somehow implicated at least to have looked the other way if not done something as well ... er ... with the various atrocities ... and I think something like that just coins the collective memory of a ... whole nation. Er, to have responsibility for something like that not happening again, so you don't want it for yourself and don't want it for your children.

Siegfried: Maybe that's even where the ecological consciousness comes from. That your environment, your space, after the experience that everything was broken and destroyed and bombed, just altogether, you want to do everything to ... to have liveable surroundings or to ... for your offspring and, in whatever way, to preserve something or build something [...]

Conclusions

• Methodological contribution

- National identity involves both public discourses and profound or banal experiences and understandings. Our methods captured them.
 - not pure IPA, but hard to see how these findings could have been obtained with other methods
 - benefit of focus groups: mimicking the context in which everyday nationalism is reproduced and experienced

• German identity

- Germans do not claim “history” as a prized possession (cf. Condor, 1997). Instead, “history” is a burden that stigmatises but also motivates.
 - not easily proud, but glad to be German
 - stability, order, construction and conservation
- The 2006 World Cup may have been a turning point. Data were collected before the refugee crisis and its political aftermath. Would these also be experienced as turning points?

Method

• Data collection

- focus groups in the Ruhr area, conducted in German with German participants and facilitator
 - Group 1: 5 friends (4 men, 1 woman), all professional workers in their 30s and 40s
 - Group 2: 4 work colleagues (all men), all professional workers with a wide age range (20s – 60s)
- semi-structured with questions about feeling German, origins of German identity, etc.

• Data analysis

- elements of thematic analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2006) and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009)
 - focus on subjective lived experience and making sense of German identity (IPA element)
 - occasionally accounting for references to public discourses, other people's views, etc. (TA element)

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