The Role of Social Capital in the Formation of Collective Identities: The Case of European Identification

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Abstract

Identity has become an influential concept in politics for explaining the dynamics and problems of new world order. Despite its wide ranging usage in social sciences, we are still far away from a common understanding of identity. Different theoretical approaches developed by different academic disciplines extend the content of identity and increase the contention on it. In this paper, I try to explain the dynamic nature of identity, in particular of collective identity, using social capital concept as an explanatory factor. Instead of ascribing stable identities to individuals, social capital components like generalized trust, social networks and associational memberships can help us to show how one’s identification is affected by social practices. Toward this goal European identity has been selected as a case of analysis. The complex relationship between highly politicized national identities and a still-developing European identity presents an interesting area of study and social capital – which can be defined broadly as values created via social relationships and social groups, seems to be promising for its applicability to the operation of national and European identification. European level surveys were used to confirm this relationship empirically. This bottom-up perspective has expanded the knowledge on collective identity formation, which can be summarized as identities, at least at the collective level, are not fixed but constantly fluctuate and change by the nature of social dynamics.
Introduction

The European Union (EU) has entered a crucial phase in its deepening and widening process. Along with the dynamics of globalization, the change in the scope of European integration has led European people to gain more visibility in the European arena. The increasing role of individuals in EU's future inevitably brings the concept of identity and particularly European identity to the forefront. The formation of European identity and the extent of its internalization by individuals will impact EU's future to a great extent. Therein, the exploration of the factors that contribute to the emergence of the European identity becomes more crucial than ever.

There is a growing literature on the individual determinants of European identification (Pichler, 2008; Green, 2007) and existing research usually uses social identity theory (SIT) as a theoretical background. SIT provides a well-developed theoretical basis for understanding how individuals identify with certain social categories, however it is also criticised because of its shortcomings in explaining certain key features of the political identities. (Huddy, 2002; Howard, 2000) Moreover, there are also criticisms on the misunderstanding and misuse of SIT in the European identity literature. (Mols & Weber, 2012) Since European identity is a “work in progress”, it is important to understand the dynamics of identification with Europe from a processual perspective. This study helps to fill this gap by examining the role of social capital in the formation of European identity. Based on social networks, trust and reciprocity, social capital establishes the necessary platform for the interaction and cooperation of people and may lead to various societal externalities. Therefore this paper will also contribute to the social identity literature by assessing whether social capital has any role the construction of social identities.

The remaining of the paper is organized as follows. First, I review leading approaches in social capital and European identity literature. Then I discuss the possible relationships between three components of social capital and identity. Next, I tested a social capital based model of European identification using secondary data from the Eurobarometer survey. Finally, I discussed the results of this model and provide its implications for future research.
Social Capital

Social capital literature has become voluminous and diverse in terms of its conceptualization. Since its emergence in social sciences, social capital has been approached in a multidisciplinary perspective. The concept has been mostly studied by three disciplines, namely economics, political science and sociology. Svendsen & Svendsen, (2009) argue that while economists and political scientists mainly focus on the outcomes of social capital, sociologists give their attention to the aspects of the concept. This situation also leads to a common criticism that each researcher stretches the concept in line with his research. Although there is an on-going dispute over social capital conceptualizations, it is possible to catch some common aspects in the literature. One of them is that social capital mainly resides in the connections / relations between individuals. Individuals’ personal networks, which emerge from relations with the family members and friends or group memberships, create an invisible asset for them to benefit. Therefore, members in a social network can use these relations as a resource. (Field, 2008) In other words, physical capital and human capital that we possess, the people that we know and the quality of the relations with them are the factors that will influence our lives. (Ostrom & Ahn, 2008)

The social context will also influence the patterns of connections between individuals who share the similar social environment and thus it will eventually create a set of values and norms shared by individuals. This idea leads us to the second common aspect of social capital, which envisages the values, especially norms of reciprocity and trust developed in a group as a kind of social capital which can be utilized by its members. Hence, social capital is constructed on two dimensions: one is “structural” which is usually defined as social networks; and the other is “cultural”, in which norms such as trust and reciprocity specify the quality of the social networks. (Van Deth, 2008) Social capital literature embodied and differed on these two premises. In other words, it can be argued that there are two dominant approaches in social capital theory. On the one hand it is the “so-called” Coleman-Putnam tradition mostly focusing on the second premise and conceptualizing social capital as public good in form of trust and social norms (Coleman 1988, Putnam, 1993; 2000). On the other hand, the network based approach interests in the connections among individuals and how social capital operates at the individual level. (Lin 2001; Burt, 2004) However it
is important to underline that the distinction between these two strands isn’t controversial but rather complimentary.

**European Identity**

Like social capital, identity is also one of the most disputed topics in social sciences. Without entering into profound debates of identity conceptualizations, we will discuss in this paper merely European identity and its link to social identity literature. As mentioned by Bruter (2005), European identity is influenced by two conceptions of mass identities: “top-down” and “bottom-up” perspectives. In top-down approach the focus is on the political, historical and cultural roots of Europe and the questions like “who should be considered European” is answered from normative perspective. On the other hand bottom-up approach deals with the individual level factors that determine European identification. Therefore the main questions are: “who ‘feels’ European? Why do some citizens identify with Europe while others do not?”

The common starting point of most bottom-up approaches in European identity studies (Cinnirella, 1997; Medrano & Gutirrez, 2001; Mlicki & Ellemers 1996) is the social identity theory. Developed by Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner in the late 1970s, SIT was later improved by social categorization theory (Hogg & Abrams 1998). The main purpose of these theories is to understand how individuals relate themselves to different group settings and also how inter-group conflicts emerge. The main proposition of social identity theory is that individuals take the characteristics of the groups / categories through some cognitive and motivational factors in order to construct their self-concept.

In top-down approach, we mostly see that European identity is conceptualized as political identity, which leads to another dispute among the scholars about this issue. While some scholars take political identity as a subcategory of social identity (Hermann & Brewer, 2004; Risse 2010), the others argue that it is a separate identity category in itself. For instance, Bruter (2005) emphasizes the ‘affective’ dimension of political identity, which differentiates it from social identity. Moreover Huddy (2000) criticizes social identity theory because of its limited view on the historical and cultural contexts, which are very influential in the development of political identities.

While agreeing that political identities emerge and evolve within historical and social settings, in this paper I don’t think it is contradictory to take political identities as a
subcategory social identity. As Hermann & Brewer (2004) argued, political identities can be considered as social identities, which create political consequences and help people to think themselves as a part of political communities that they assign sovereignty and political power. Castiglione (2009) points out this aspect as the “functional element” of political identity, which provides a basic understanding to the functioning of political identities.

In this paper I follow bottom-down approach to the European identity. Thus, the primary interest is on how European identity is formed and developed at individual level. In other words, rather than asking and answering normative questions on European identity, I focus on the factors affecting “European identification” of individuals.

Social Networks and Its Effect on European Identification

In social identity literature it is difficult to find an explicit reference to social networks. This is probably caused by the fundamental assumptions of social identity theory, which presumes identity is developed mainly through cognitive processes. Although it is expanded by social categorization theory to include the impact of social and contextual factors, it is still widely accepted that identity formation starts at the cognitive level and becomes salient with motivational factors. (Spears, 2011)

Recently, Deaux and Martin (2003) proposed a model, which explains the role of social networks in the identity formation. In this model they propose to use networks as a bridge between large-scale categories and interpersonal relationships. So identity is defined as “interplay” at two levels, which one level is related to “broad social categories” and the other relies on “interpersonal relationships”.

More recently, in a special issue of International Sociology journal, social networks are discussed in-depth as a source of identity formation. De la Rua (2007) sketches two different theoretical strands in identity literature. The first one is based on “macro-social level” in which the focal point is historical and sociological “forces”. On the other hand, micro level theories conceptualize identity, which develops as a result of group processes and the interaction between individuals. Based on James Coleman’s views, De La Rua (2007) proposes an integrated model for identification. He defines “social relations in the form of social networks in which people are embedded” as “the interface of belonging to the broader imagined territorial
communities.” In the same issue, this approach is tested through empirical studies in Spain. In a research conducted within ethnic groups in Spain, Lubbers et al. (2007) found that the homogeneity and heterogeneity of social networks affects the degree of identity exclusiveness. The more heterogeneous is one’s social networks, the higher is the tendency of acceptance of others. In another study on immigrants and students, Maya-Jariego and Armitage (2007) conclude that the involvement in new groups or communities lessens the dependence of individuals to the strong identities.

Lynn-Smith-Lovin is one of the authors who provides theoretical insights on this subject. She argues that:

[...] society shapes self which then shapes social interaction. Society does shape selves. It also shapes interactions through the ecology of encounters. But in much of everyday life, selves do not dominate as the central mediators that they were in Stryker’s formulation. Instead, I propose below that the social environment (especially its network connections) shapes both the self and social interaction, and creates a somewhat spurious correlation between the two.

Following these previous studies, I claim that social networks especially its bridging form has a positive effect on European identity formation.

**Trust and Its Effect on European Identification**

Trust is a crucial element in human relationships and an effective tool for minimizing uncertainty. This link between trust and uncertainty is especially emphasized in social capital literature. (Ostrom, 2008) People trust each other to reduce chaotic information and to create a certain degree foreseeable future. Uslaner (2002) refers uncertainty as foundational principal in the formation of “strategic trust”. Furthermore, Putnam (2000) argues that trust, especially its generalized form, is helpful in uncertainty reduction. In a comparative study between USA and Japan, Yamagishi, Cook and Watabe (1998) generalized trust is developed usually to overcome social uncertainty.

On the other hand recent studies in social psychological literature also give importance to uncertainty. Grieve and Hogg (1999) argues that subjective uncertainty is an important motivator in social identification. In other words, it is thought that uncertainty has a decisive role in the internalisation of social categories as identities. Furthermore, based on Marilynn Brewer’s “depersonalized trust” conceptualization,
Kramer (2009) links group level trust development in collective actions to the group identification. In sum, we can say that in social identity theory the link goes from uncertainty to identification and then to trust, however in social capital theory the chain develops from uncertainty to trust and then to identification.

In order to resolve this controversy, Lewicki and friends’ model (2006) on interpersonal trust provides an insightful framework. After an extensive literature review, Lewicvki et al. modelled trust in 3 different levels. The first level is calculus-based trust (CBT), which begins “‘below zero’: that is, that the dominant concern at this early stage is to protect one’s vulnerability against the other.” When CBT developed over time through repetitive interactions between trustees, it turns into knowledge-based trust. As stated by authors, “KBT is grounded in getting to know the other, understanding what the other wants and prefers, and understanding how the other thinks and responds”. Third level of trust bases on identity, which is also called as identity-based trust. This is the highest level of trust in which parties of a relationship “appreciate each other’s desires, intentions, wants, and values”.

Based on these discussions, we can argue that increasing level of generalized trust may lead to higher level of internalization of European identity.

Reciprocity and Its Effect on European Identification

The relationship between identity and reciprocity is very similar to trust. Theoretical distinction occurs again on the causal relationship between reciprocity and identity and how it is related to in-group cooperation. While there are social identity theorists who argue that categorical identification is the decisive process of in-group favouritism, there are also different perspectives, in which reciprocity is believed to play a key role in collective action dilemmas.

Using micro-credit associations as a case study, Denise Anthony (2005) analyses group identity and reciprocal behaviours as the mechanisms of in-group cooperation. Although she found that both are positively associated with the production of group loans, she concluded that, “group identity may indeed generate cooperation initially, but if group members do not establish the interaction mechanisms necessary to maintain it, such as interdependent reciprocal relationships or social enforcement mechanisms, group cooperation will not be sustained.”
In a minimal-group experiment, Yamagashi and Kiyonari (2000) reached similar results. The result of simultaneous and sequential games shows that the expectations of generalized reciprocity towards group members is the main source of in-group-favouritism. Recently, Stroebe et al. (2005) attempted to integrate social identity theory with reciprocity. The results of the experiments show that there is strong a relationship between reciprocity and in-group reward allocation and the authors argue that contextual factors “determine whether reciprocity or social identification processes become salient.”

In line with this research, it is expected that generalized reciprocity will also be a predictive factor for individuals in the formation of European identity.

**Data and Research Design**

The data used to measure the effect of social capital on European identity is taken from Eurobarometer (EB) 73.4, which was conducted in 2010. This survey includes the variables to operationalize the social capital and European identity. The interviews were administered in 27 EU countries and Croatia, Turkey, Macedonia, Northern Cyprus and Iceland. Each country sample comprises approximately 1000 respondents, which were randomly selected in every survey. After excluding non-EU member states, the total number of respondents was 26,641.

**Operationalization of Variables**

**Dependent Variable**

The dependent variable in this research is European identity. The following question is used in Eurobarometer survey to measure European identity. ‘In the near future, do you see yourself as . . .?’ with answer categories ‘(1) Nationality only, (2) Nationality and European, (3) European and Nationality, and (4) European only’. Following Fligstein (2008), the respondents who would identify with “some European identity” coded as ‘1’, the others as ‘0’. ‘Don’t know’, ‘None’ and ‘Refusal’ answers were not included in the analysis.

**Independent Variables**

**Social Networks**

The measurement of social networks is twofold. The first set of questions was related to respondent’s participation in civil society organisations. There are different types
of organisations, which are listed to respondents if they are members of or do voluntary works in them. Following Paxton (2002), Coffé and Geys (2007; 2008) the civil society organisations are ranked according to their members’ multiple involvement in other organisations. Afterwards, a total score has been calculated for every participant according to proportional membership degree of organisations.

The second dimension is more direct and measures the sociability of respondents. In EB data, respondents are questioned if they have socialised with people from another EU country in the last 12 months. The options are 1 for ‘yes on several occasions’, 2 for ‘yes, once or twice’ and 3 for ‘no’. The variable is recoded conversely.

**Trust**

Drawing from previous literature, (Uslaner, 1998; 2008) the variables showing future outlook of participants are used as an indicator of trust. In EB data there are eight questions that enquire one’s expectations for the next twelve months about: ‘general life’, ‘economic situation in the country’, ‘financial situation in the household’, ‘employment situation in the country’, ‘personal job situation’, ‘economic situation in the EU’, ‘economic situation in the world’ and ‘situation of environment in the country’. From these eight questions, I created a scale, which refers to “generalized trust” (Cronbach’s α = .87). The choices are 1 for ‘better’, 2 for ‘same’ and 3 for ‘worse’. The variable is recoded conversely.

The second dimension used as an indicator is trust in certain institutions. (Van Oorschot et al., 2006). According to categorical principal analysis, fourteen institutions split into two dimensions. The first dimension is trust in national institutions that comprises political parties, national government, national parliament and regional/local authorities (Cronbach’s α = .65). The second dimension consists of nine European institutions; European Parliament, European Commission, Council of the European Union, European Central Bank, European Ombudsman, Committee of the Regions of the European Union, European Council, Court of Justice of the European Union and European Economic and Social Committee (Cronbach’s α = .94). I totalled the number of institutions that people tend to trust and in which a scale is constructed from low trust to high trust.
Reciprocity

Reciprocity is the third independent variable that is included in the model. Since reciprocity especially its generalized form is closely related to the altruism, (Warren, 2008: 139) to test the effect of reciprocal behaviours, two items are used to measure respondents’ altruistic attitudes to the following conditions:

Reforms that benefit future generations should be pursued even if that means some sacrifices for the present generation

You are ready to reduce your living standards now in order to guarantee the future of the next generation

A generalized reciprocity scale was developed and measured through mean values of these two items. The scale has an alpha reliability of 0.61 and ranges from low to high reciprocity.

Control Variables

Previous studies have shown that social and demographical factors affect the Europeanness of individuals and the support they give for European integration (Fligstein, 2008; Pichler, 2008). For this purpose, respondents’ age, gender, education level, place of residence, and political stance are selected as control variables. In addition to these, country variable was coded as dummy to analyse the fixed effect of countries in the final model. Age variable was included as years. Gender was recoded ‘1’ for males and ‘0’ for females. In EB data, education is measured in years when respondents stopped full-time education. In line with previous research (Gabel, 1998; Carey, 2002) education are grouped into categories: ‘lower’ for those who continued up to 15 years of age, ‘middle’ between 15 and 19, ‘higher’ for 20 years old and above. The place of residence comprises three categories; ‘Rural area or village’, ‘small and middle sized town’ and ‘large town’. For political stance a recoded variable is used for the left-right preference on a 10-point Likert scale. Answers between 1 and 4 grouped as left, 5-6 as middle, and 7-10 as right. Lastly, country variables were recoded as dummy variable to control for country effects. Hence, Germany is selected as reference country, which was coded as ‘0’ and the rest were coded as ‘1’.
Results

Descriptive statistics of the dependent and independent variables are shown in Table 1. For all of the questions, “Don’t know” answers are defined as missing value and excluded from the analysis. Since social capital variables consist multiple items, most of the time, participants replied as “Don’t know” to different questions. There will be a huge data loss when the participants who give invalid answers for even one of the questions are taken out. Therefore, it is determined to remove the participants who didn’t answer all of the questions. For the participants who answered at least one question, it is given “0” value for the unanswered questions and then the variable score of the participant is calculated.

When each of the variables is analysed, the mean value of the generalised trust is 1.82, which corresponds to a value between “worse” and “same”. It is evident that the mean value of 1.35 for trust in local and national institutions is quite low. However the mean value of trust in EU institutions is (4.25), which is above the trust in national institutions. The mean value of the generalised reciprocity is 2.52, which shows that the participants have medium level generalised reciprocity. For the variable about participation in civil society organisations, the score range is between 0 and 9.82 and the mean value is very low (0.341). Accordingly, it can be said that a vast majority of the participants do not have a membership in CSOs. Due to the fact that the mean value is 1.80 for the socialising with the people from other EU countries, it is possible to argue that transnational sociability all across Europe is very low.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
<th>(%</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generalized Trust</td>
<td>26516</td>
<td>99.5</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1,842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing Values</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust in Local &amp; National Institutions</td>
<td>26365</td>
<td>99.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1,358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing Values</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Trust in EU Institutions</td>
<td>24253</td>
<td>91.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4,257</td>
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<td>2388</td>
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<tr>
<td>Generalized Reciprocity</td>
<td>25742</td>
<td>96.6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2,525</td>
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<tr>
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<td>899</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation to CSOs</td>
<td>25804</td>
<td>96.9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9.82</td>
<td>0.342</td>
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<tr>
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<td>837</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sociability</td>
<td>26539</td>
<td>99.6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1,800</td>
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<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>13379</td>
<td>90.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once/Twice</td>
<td>4860</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Several Times</td>
<td>8180</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Missing Values</td>
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<td>Identity Choice</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>European and National</td>
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</table>

Total Number of Respondents: 22332

a. Missing values listwise deleted
A distribution of identity preference among 4 categories is shown in the remaining part of the table. When we look at the distribution of the categories, almost half of the participants continue to see themselves only with their national identities. On the other hand, 40 per cent of the participants define themselves as first national then European, which can be seen as an important sign for that European identity is connected to national identities. The total rate of the participants who chose “First European then national” and “only European” is below %10. As far as this rate is considered, it can be concluded that European identity is not likely to be the dominant identity in the short term. However, these results also indicate that people can integrate their national identities with the European identity at varying degrees.

To analyse the impact of social capital on European identity, three alternative logistic regression models are formulated. The results of the analysis are shown in Table 1. Model 1 consists of country dummy variable in which Germany is defined as baseline category. Socio-demographic indicators are included in the second model with country fixed effects. Finally, third model includes social capital variables and the effects demographic variables and country dummies controlled for.

As shown in Model 1, there is a variation between countries for the level of European identity. The model fit is statistically significant and has 5% of R², which means that country dummies explain 5 per cent of variance of European identification. After inclusion of demographic control variables in the second step, total explained variance increased to 13%. The deviance of Model 2 is 1115.6 and statistically significant. This result shows us that socio-demographic variables have an important role in the formation European identity. When we analyse the variable coefficients, we see that, out of political orientation, all demographic variables have statistically significant effect in the model. The gender gap is once more confirmed by our results. Men are more likely to identify themselves European than women. Age has a strong effect on European identity. The identification with Europe is higher in younger generations as compared to the older age groups. A similar pattern was seen in education level. People with middle or higher education degrees are more likely to adopt European identity than those having lower education degrees. The place of residence is another significant predictor in the model. Compared to the people who are living in rural areas, city residents identify themselves more European.
When social capital variables are included in Model 3, model fit improved significantly. Nagelkerke’s R² has risen to 24 per cent, which indicates that social capital explains approximately 10% of the variation in European identification. This result also implies that social capital indicators have more explanatory power than socio-demographic variables selected in Model 2. When social capital components are examined in detail, it can be seen that sociability exerts a greater impact on European identity. In particular, participants who socialize several times with people from another EU country differ from others in terms of European identification.
Participation to more “bridging” CSOs leads members to feel more European. Trust has also significant positive effect on the formation of European identity. Generalized trust, which is a key component of social capital, affects the degree of identification in favour of Europe. A person who has a high level of trust in national and European institutions also thinks himself or herself more European. However from these coefficient estimates we can argue that trusting in European institutions has slightly more important effect on European identity. Generalized reciprocity is also a positive and statistically significant predictor in Model 3. This means that, the more people have reciprocal behaviours, the stronger the feeling of European identification is.

**Conclusion**

For scholars working on European Union, the last decades were marked with dramatic changes. Eastern enlargement, adoption of Euro as a common currency, failure of European constitution and recent financial crisis are some of the well-known developments that occupy the agenda. These developments exerted an important influence on public opinion, which in turn created highly politicized institutional and individual actors. Today, European people are more decisive in European politics. As Hooghe and Marks states (2008), elite driven integration, which pursued in a “permissive consensus” for several years is not sustainable anymore. So they argue that the period since 1990s is marked by “constraining dissensus”. Identity politics and a possible construction of European identity become more influential than before in this new era of European integration.

In this paper, I focused on European identity from a bottom-up perspective. Thus the main concern was the factors that affect individual level identification with Europe. Unlike existing literature based on social identity theory, I try to explain the dynamic nature of collective identity, particularly European identity, using social capital concept as an explanatory factor. The results show that all social capital components exert a significant influence on European identification. The quality of social capital plays a decisive role in the inclusiveness identities. To be more specific, when a social network is more bridging, a person who belongs to this social network seems to be more open to European identity. What is more important is the level of sociability within European countries. People who socialize several times or at least one time with other peoples from Europe identify themselves much more European than those who never socialized. The quality of the social networks also affects the development
of European identification. Generalized trust and generalized reciprocity seem to be to create an environment leading to the formation of European identity. Furthermore, trust in institutions, in particular European institutions plays a critical role in identification with Europe.

Apart from the findings on European identity, this paper also makes some contribution to social identity literature. It can be stated that the theoretical model that is developed has been empirically validated to a considerable extent. It is arguable that “inclusive” social capital (Putnam, 2000) has a positive correlation with collective identities and it significantly determines the inclusive aspect of the collective identity. Besides, results show that there may be a causal relationship from social capital to social identity. This also can be seen as a validation of the network-based identity theories developed recently. However, the lack of adequate indicators for “exclusive” social capital has restricted out study dramatically. Under these circumstances, for the future researches, our theoretical model is supposed to be retested in the way that it includes exclusive social capital and exclusive social identity.

References


