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## The associations between national identity and adjustment: What can we learn from autobiographical narratives?☆

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the interplay between national identity, autobiographical narratives on national identity and the adjustment of immigrant and majority groups in Israel. Participants were 193 Jewish Israelis (63.68% female; mean age 29.54 years); 51.29% immigrated from the Former Soviet Union and 48.71% were from native-born families. Participants reported the centrality of and private regard for national identity and provided autobiographical narratives on peak and nadir experiences of national identity. Narratives' topics and themes of agency and communion were coded. Participants also reported positive adjustment (self-esteem, life satisfaction); negative adjustment (depression, anxiety symptoms); and civic engagement (voting, consumption of news about Israel). The immigrant group showed lower centrality of national identity, less positive adjustment, and lower civic engagement than the majority group. The groups significantly varied in narrative topics. Private regard for national identity was associated with better adjustment of both groups. Agency in peak narratives was associated with higher civic engagement of immigrants. Agency in nadir narratives was associated with more positive adjustment and less negative adjustment of immigrants and with higher civic engagement of both groups. The findings indicate that national identity is important in the adjustment of both immigrant and majority groups. It extends prior research by documenting the unique role of autobiographical experiences of national identity in adjustment.

## Introduction

The study described here addressed two gaps in the research on national identity. First, it examined the role of national identity in the adjustment of majority group members; such studies are both rare and inconsistent. Second, identity theory suggests that autobiographical narratives are the building blocks of identity (Singer, 2004) and, thus, may shed light on the subjective content of national identity. Yet little is known about autobiographical narratives on national identity and their associations with adjustment (Syed & Azmitia, 2008, 2010). The study began to fill both gaps by examining the interplay between national identity, autobiographical narratives on national identity, and the adjustment of immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) and majority group members in Israel.

☆ The article is based in part on master's thesis by Lior Gal. Part of this work was presented in July 2016 at the Cultural Diversity, Migration, and Education Conference, Potsdam, Germany.

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### *National identity and adjustment*

With increased global migration, the adjustment of migrants is becoming a concern of both policy makers and researchers. Acculturation theories suggest that immigrants' adjustment is shaped by their identification with their ethnic minority group and the majority group (Berry, 1980). Group affiliation provides a sense of belonging and is conceptualized as a psychological resource contributing to wellbeing and adjustment (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This sense of belonging, or social identification, contributes to adjustment by providing meaning in life (Kiang & Fuligni, 2017) and promoting feelings of social support (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009). Numerous studies document links between ethnic identity and ethnic minorities' adjustment (see Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). Studies also suggest that having a sense of national identity is related to ethnic minorities' adjustment. For example, adopting an American identity was found to be related to less alienation and distress and more satisfaction in life among FSU immigrants in the USA (Persky & Birman, 2005). Other studies show that in assimilative environments, adopting a national identity is especially important for immigrants even if they risk relinquishing ethnic identity (Birman, Trickett, & Vinokurov, 2002; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001; Shalom & Horenczyk, 2004).

Although research has mostly focused on immigrant and minority groups, there is growing interest in the relations between national identity and the adjustment of majority groups. Relatively few studies have examined this issue, and results are inconsistent. Some find no significant associations between the national identity, self-esteem and depressive symptomatology of European-Americans (Phinney, 1992; Walker, Wingate, Obasi, & Joiner Jr, 2008; Xu, Farver, & Pauker, 2015). Others report associations between national identity and higher self-esteem among European-Americans (Phinney & Alipuria, 1990), majority Dutch (2009, Verkuyten, 1995) and majority Israeli and German adolescents (Benish-Weisman, Daniel, Schiefer, Möllering, & Knafo-Noam, 2015), as well as higher civic engagement (Anglin, Johnson-Pynn, & Johnson, 2012) and more positive academic attitudes among European-American adolescents (Fuligni, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005). The first goal of this research, therefore, was to study the associations between national identity and the adjustment of members of both immigrant minority and host-country majority groups.

### *Autobiographical narratives on national identity and adjustment*

The study of ethnic and national identities uses close-ended scales (e.g., Birman & Trickett, 2001; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997). This type of measurement reveals little about the subjective meaning individuals attribute to group identity (McLean, Syed, Yoder, & Greenhoot, 2014) and whether this subjective meaning is related to adjustment. Autobiographical narratives are conceptualized as a window to the way individuals perceive and construct reality to create a sense of coherence and purpose in their lives (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Thus, our second goal was to explore the meaning of national identity for immigrant and majority groups as it is revealed in autobiographical narratives.

Narrative research in this context is rare. Syed and Azmitia (2008, 2010) asked participants from ethnic minority and majority groups to recall and narrate times they became particularly aware of their ethnicity when in the company of a close friend. They documented associations between narrative content and ethnic identity status (Syed & Azmitia, 2008, 2010). We used a different approach and asked participants to narrate peak (positive) and nadir (negative) experiences associated with membership in the national group to enable them to freely choose events that were salient to them (see McAdams, 2006).

An autobiographical narrative reflects an event and the narrator's subjective meaning-making of it. Different events may be more frequent or more important in the daily life of immigrant minority and host-country majority groups and thus appear more frequently in their narratives. For example, immigrants may experience discrimination more often and emphasize it in their narratives. Furthermore, each group may have a different cultural background, values, norms, and history and experience nationality differently. For example, one group (immigrant or majority) that values family ties may tend to narrate family gatherings on national holidays more than the other. Hence, the second goal of this study was to compare the topics of the narratives of the two groups to see if each expressed a unique national identity content.

Narrative researchers emphasize that the subjective meaning-making of an autobiographical event may be more closely linked to adjustment than the event itself (Blagov & Singer, 2004). According to this view, the narrative is not an objective reflection of events but an interpretation of what happened. When narrating an autobiographical event, the narrator attributes subjective affective meaning, highlights certain aspects over others, and chooses how to present the self (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Arguably, these subjective interpretations correlate with adjustment. For example, how people construct their narratives tells us more about their coping abilities than the specific event they choose to narrate (Benish-Weisman, 2009). Assessing the subjective meaning-making of events related to national identity may contribute to our understanding of how and why national identity relates to adjustment (Adler, Lodi-Smith, Philippe, & Houle, 2016).

In this study we focused on two subjective meaning-making themes, agency and communion. These themes reflect two basic modalities of human existence and have been studied extensively in relation to adjustment (Bakan, 1966; McAdams et al., 2006). Agency refers to expressions of autonomy, achievement, and competence. Agency during positive or negative autobiographical events associated with majority group membership may suggest the individual resolved the event and reconstructed her/his memory while emphasizing her/his personal strengths. Feeling able and active may lead to better coping, relating, in turn, to higher self-esteem, more satisfaction with life, and lower psychological distress. A subjective sense of agency may also be reflected in increased involvement in society, expressed, for example, in higher civic engagement.

Communion reflects the experience of a caring, supportive social environment, of belongingness and solidarity. Communion in the context of negative autobiographical events could be expressed in memories of receiving support or comfort from family, friends, or the larger community. Reconstruction of memories emphasizing being loved, appreciated, and supported may be associated with

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