

Forever the reluctant Europeans?

MARCO CINNIRELLA *on British attitudes towards European integration.*

It is hard to deny that the British public (and especially the English) seem more reluctant to embrace the European integration ideal than their colleagues on the European mainland. The European Commission's large-scale ongoing 'Eurobarometer' surveys consistently show the British (along with the Danes) as the least enthusiastic about integration and the European Union (in contrast to enthusiasts such as the Italians and the Irish). This is about the only consistency in British public opinion about Europe, which is otherwise open to as yet unpredictable fluctuations and apparent contradictions.

Not surprisingly then, it often seems a commonplace to observe that the British are the reluctant Europeans. However, when it comes to understanding why this might be so, we enter murkier waters in which a whole host of theories, from a wide range of disciplines, compete for attention with lay observations from journalists and politicians.

In terms of our own discipline, it has been social psychologists who have taken up the challenge of attempting to unravel what lies behind attitudes to European integration, and the altogether broader question of whether there is any evidence for a European identity. Miles Hewstone (1986) was perhaps the first social psychologist to publish a detailed empirical investigation of attitudes towards the then European Economic Community. In his study he made use of an old distinction between utilitarian (or 'instrumental') and affective (or 'sentimental') support – the former is the kind of support that is contingent on a positively evaluated cost-benefit analysis, whereas the latter represents a more emotional and powerful attitude. This distinction became useful later in studying attitudes towards the single currency (Burgoyne & Routh, 1999), and explorations of European identity. For example, I reported a survey study (Cinnirella, 1997) in which British university students manifested a more utilitarian sense of identification with Europe (based on perceived economic benefits) compared with a similar group of Italians who, in contrast, seemed to have a more affective sense of Euro-identity associated with the perception of common cultural and historical ties.

For Hewstone (1986), four key factors seemed to best explain British euroscepticism: distrust of the French (a problem as France is often perceived to be at the heart of moves towards European integration); the negativity of British politicians; the psychological remnants of the once powerful British empire; and the tendency of the British press to scapegoat the European Community. The 1990s saw a spurt of research activity within European social psychology, exploring all kinds of issues surrounding European integration

(see, for example, Breakwell & Lyons, 1996), and this has meant that we are now quite well placed to revisit these four factors, armed with additional empirical and theoretical insight.

From my own research with British and Italian participants I have come to think that, just as Hewstone had postulated, there is indeed evidence that the British are only lukewarm about European integration. This is partly because they often perceive such moves as somehow incompatible with their sense of British identity, especially in terms of Britain's past (and awareness of the empire and the Second World War in particular). In this sense, many Brits seem to perceive European integration and identity as a threat to British identity – this being the case, it is not surprising that European identity is not strongly endorsed. My research has found that Italians, in contrast to the English, do not seem to encounter any difficulties embracing a sense both of national and European identity. Studying these interactions between sub- (e.g. national) and super-ordinate (e.g. European) levels of social identity not only sheds light on the issue at hand, but also opens up fascinating possibilities for enhancing current understanding of intergroup relations,

especially in the realm of conflict and prejudice reduction.

Hewstone (1986), it turns out, was also wise to point a finger of blame at the British press. Content-analytic and discourse-analytic studies (e.g. Hardtmautner, 1995) have documented their consistent negativity towards integration and the EU, coupled with a tendency towards xenophobic stereotypical depictions of other European nationalities, such as the French and Germans. This lack of balance in the media is significant, as survey data indicate low levels of factual knowledge about the EU and a reliance on mass media to demystify the otherwise confusing issues surrounding integration. The tendency of the British press to echo anti-European discourse about 'loss' (e.g. loss of autonomy) and 'threat' (e.g. threats to the continuity of British culture and tradition) in this domain plugs directly into the almost ingrained defence processes that seem to kick into action when our social identities (in this case British identity) are threatened.

A further factor highlighted by Hewstone was distrust of the French. Empirical research (particularly Inglehart, 1991) has since indicated that the British on the whole trust Americans more than any European nationality (other than the British themselves), and that this might partly be due to perceived similarities in national character and memories of the Second World War. So there is some empirical evidence for a British distrust of most other European nationalities, including the French.

Informed by theorising in self-categorisation theory, Rutland and Cinnirella (2000) have also recently shown that perceptions of European identity can be made to vary as the salience of different stereotypes and national comparisons is manipulated experimentally. They found, for example, that Scottish participants manifested a weaker sense of European identity after first being given the task of contrasting the Scots national character with that of the English and the Germans, compared with a condition in which they rated just the Scots and the Australians. It is findings like this that suggest that stereotypes of other European nationalities may, when they are salient, stand as

a barrier to perceptions of European identity, presumably because they serve to remind us of perceived differences between our own national character and that of other European nations, something which is not conducive to promoting Euro-identity.

In conclusion, social psychology continues to unravel the intricacies of British public opinion about Europe and what lies behind these attitudes. In doing so, this line of research also feeds back productively into the wider social psychological research on identification, patriotism, self and intergroup relations. For the moment, the British seem to deserve the eurosceptic tag, and Hewstone's claim that the forging of a supranational European identity in the UK seems a 'Herculean task' appears broadly valid today. In the pre-election propaganda Prime Minister Tony Blair claimed that it is possible to be both patriotic and pro-European: the social psychological evidence available to date would agree that, in principle, this is indeed so, but in practice, the two are uncomfortable bedfellows in the minds of the British public.

However, there are indications that the

British may not remain eurosceptics forever: research in developmental social psychology, for example, has shown that British children find it less problematic to self-categorise themselves as European than adults do (e.g. Barrett, 1996). Trends in public opinion data also suggest that UK attitudes are slowly becoming more positive – perhaps this has something to do with the fact that, according to opinion polls, most Brits perceive a degree of inevitability about further European integration. To

this extent what we may be witnessing is a gradual mass exercise in cognitive dissonance reduction. Only time will tell whether the British children tested by Barrett and other developmental psychologists will grow up into adults who are happy to wave the Union Jack in one hand and the EU circle of stars in the other.

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Sharing perspectives

INGRID LUNT *on the VIIth European Congress of Psychology and the Society's international role.*

THE Society's centenary this year coincides with the 20th anniversary of the European Federation of Professional Psychologists Associations (see the interview with EFPPA's President, Tuomo Tikkanen, on p.354). EFPPA was founded at a time when the then European Economic Community was attempting to facilitate mobility across national boundaries. It seemed logical for national psychology associations to come together and form a federation to increase mutual understanding, to share procedures and practice, and to develop a more common approach where appropriate.

Since then EFPPA has 'come of age'. The VIIth European Congress of Psychology (to be held at the Barbican Centre, London, on 1–6 July) is organised under the auspices of EFPPA and also forms part of the Society's centenary celebrations. The congress provides 29 keynote addresses by leading psychologists from all over the world, about 65 symposia, a number of roundtables and workshops, and over 1000 individual poster presentations (for the full programme visit the congress website, via www.bps.org.uk). This year's Aristotle Prize has been awarded to Alan Baddeley, who will deliver the prize lecture entitled 'What's new in working memory?' Keynotes include Susan Greenfield on consciousness, Dorothy Bishop on language development, Robert Plomin on DNA and psychology, and a special lecture by Bob Burden entitled 'Memories, dreams and reflections: 20th-century cinema as the psychological meeting place of the masses'.

The congress provides the opportunity to share perspectives, to learn of latest developments and to discuss national, European and international aspects of our discipline. It also provides the opportunity for EFPPA to collaborate with the International Association of Applied Psychology and the International Union of Psychological Science, organisations that support the European Congress of Psychology. The European Forum will also meet during the congress, bringing together other specialist European organisations of psychologists (such as the European Association of Work and Organisational

Psychologists, the European Health Psychology Society, and the European Developmental Psychology Society).

Following the congress on 7–8 July is the General Assembly of EFPPA, which takes place every two years. It brings together delegates from all the 31 member associations of EFPPA to receive reports from the working groups and task forces, to consider the work of the Executive Council and the financial situation of the Federation, to elect officers and members of the Executive Council, to agree the work plan and budget for the following two-years, and to debate motions. If the Society's motion to change EFPPA's name to the European Federation of Psychologists Associations is passed, we believe the new EFPA will reflect a unity between scientists and practitioners, strengthening the position of psychological science at a European level. The General Assembly will also consider this aim in the context of a report from a scientific committee formed by EFPPA.

The International Committee of the BPS plays a co-ordinating role in fostering European and international activity. This committee has developed its own part of the Society website, and aspires to make links with the hundreds of national, European and international psychology associations which now exist. In addition the committee invites representatives of European and other national psychology associations to join us at the Annual Conference, and sends greetings and information packs annually to overseas associations in order to foster greater understanding and information exchange.

The challenge facing psychology in Europe is to present a unified discipline where appropriate, particularly in relation to funding opportunities and other strategic and policy matters at the EU level, while celebrating the diversity which has led to so many different European specialist associations. The BPS has a continued and important role in achieving this goal.

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