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## **What Do National Flags Stand for? An Exploration of Associations Across 11 Countries**

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What do National Flags Stand For? An Exploration of Associations across 11 Countries

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### Abstract

We examined the concepts and emotions people associate with their national flag, and how these associations are related to nationalism and patriotism across 11 countries. Factor analyses indicated that the structures of associations differed across countries in ways that reflect their idiosyncratic historical developments. Positive emotions and egalitarian concepts were associated with national flags across countries. However, notable differences between countries were found due to historical politics. In societies known for being peaceful and open-minded (e.g., Canada, Scotland), egalitarianism was separable from honor-related concepts and associated with the flag; in countries that were currently involved in struggles for independence (e.g., Scotland) and countries with an imperialist past (United Kingdom), the flag was strongly associated with power-related concepts; in countries with a negative past (e.g., Germany), the primary association was sports; in countries with disruption due to separatist or extremist movements (e.g., Northern Ireland, Turkey), aggression-related concepts were not disassociated; in collectivist societies (India, Singapore), obedience was linked to positive associations and strongly associated with the flag. In addition, the more strongly individuals endorsed nationalism and patriotism, the more they associated positive emotions and egalitarian concepts with their flag. Implications of these findings are discussed.

Key words: National flags, egalitarianism, power, emotions, nationalism, patriotism

## What do National Flags Stand For? An Exploration of Associations across 11 Countries

National flags are assumed to be imbued with psychological meaning, paramount in conceptually representing the nation's core values, condensing the history and memories associated with one's nation, and embodying what the nation stands for (e.g., Butz, 2009; Schatz & Lavine, 2007). Some even say that the flag represents the soul of a society in terms of symbolic representation of national consciousness. This can incentivize people to want to sacrifice their life for it (Sibley, Hovard, & Duckitt, 2011). Thus, national flags represent group memberships and strong emotional attachments felt for one's nation (Butz, 2009).

National symbols (e.g., flags) can evoke specific national values, because they are frequently paired with core values and ideological concepts espoused by the nation (Becker, Enders-Comberg, Wagner, Christ, & Schmidt, 2012; Butz, Plant, & Doerr, 2007; Sibley et al., 2011). Likewise, flags are often appropriated to achieve the aim of one's group, or as a collective nationalistic response to outgroups (Butz, 2009). For example, in a campaign to ban minarets in Switzerland, the campaign poster depicted a Swiss flag sprouting black, missile-shaped minarets alongside a person shrouded in a niqab (Cumming-Bruce & Erlanger, 2009). Moreover, after threatening events like the terrorist attacks of 9/11 or the Gulf War of 1991, an increase in U.S. flag display was observed (Schatz & Lavine, 2007; Skitka, 2005).

Yet, despite the crucial meaning embodied by national flags, the psychology of national symbols remains largely unexplored (Geisler, 2005; Schatz & Lavine, 2007). The scarce research that has been conducted in this area has examined consequences of flag exposure. In line with the reasoning that flags represent markers of ingroups and outgroups, it has been shown that exposure to the U.S. flag increased national identification among Americans (Kimmelmeier & Winter, 2008; but see Butz et al., 2007) and the activation of aggressive concepts among people who frequently watch the news (Ferguson & Hassin, 2007). In addition, exposure to the Israeli flag increased unity among Israelis (Hassin, Ferguson, Shidlovski, & Gross, 2007). Exposure to the German flag increased outgroup

prejudice among nationalists (Becker et al., 2012). In direct contradiction to this, research in the U.S. and New Zealand revealed that subliminal exposure to the flags of the U.S. and New Zealand activated egalitarian concepts (Butz et al., 2007; Sibley et al., 2011), and exposure to the U.S. flag *decreased* outgroup prejudice among nationalistic Americans (Butz et al., 2007). Hence, there is conflicting evidence regarding the implications of exposure to national flags; consequences can be both negative (as shown by Becker et al., 2012; Ferguson & Hassin, 2007; Kemmelmeier & Winter, 2008) and positive (as shown by Butz et al., 2007; Sibley et al., 2011). It is unclear, however, what national flags stand for in different countries at a more general level. This important baseline information is needed in order to understand the subtle differences in the priming effects of flags in different countries. Despite several important insights of prior studies, four major shortcomings can be identified in the literature. First, it seems that exposure to different national flags activates different concepts and associations depending on the unique history of a given country. Second, prior work was mainly conducted with the U.S. flag (for exceptions see Becker et al., 2012; Hassin et al., 2007; Sibley et al., 2011). Third, when flag associations have been examined, each study has focused on one or two aspects only, for instance, on egalitarianism and dominance (in Butz et al., 2007; Sibley et al., 2012), or on aggression (in Ferguson & Hassin, 2007). Fourth, it is unclear whether indicators of intergroup relations such as nationalism and patriotism are related to specific flag associations. The present research aims to fill these gaps by examining the concepts and emotions individuals in 11 countries associate with their national flag and the relation between these associations and nationalism and patriotism.

### **What Do National Flags Stand For?**

All group identities are the product of human social activity and their meanings are contestable (Reicher & Hopkins, 2000). Thus, what national flags stand for should vary – not only between countries – but also depending on time and circumstances. If a nation has won a sporting competition, pride associated with the flag should be high. If a country is involved in

military conflicts, violence, war, and aggression could be associated with the flag. If a country fights for its independence, the flag should be associated with freedom. However, although the content of the flag is hardly fixed, the flag's meaning should not be arbitrary. If anything, it is likely that historical processes have formed relatively stable meaning profiles that are, in turn, affected by the situational context. In the following, we describe which associations might be linked with the national flags examined in this project. We selected 11 countries (Australia, Canada, Germany, India, New Zealand, Northern Ireland Irish sample, Northern Ireland British sample, Scotland, Singapore, Turkey, and the U.S.). We aimed to include “Western” and “Eastern” countries, and characteristics reflecting historical and current political issues that we identify as paramount in the context of national flags<sup>1</sup>.

### **Predictions Based on Schwartz's Framework**

One caveat must be conceded at the outset: Given that there is very little research on concepts associated with national flags, some aspects of the present work are exploratory. In this sense, our study aims to provide the first comprehensive body of information on the concepts that people in different countries associate with their national flag. Documenting this information is in itself important, given the use of flags for mobilizing groups and swaying public opinion, as history has repeatedly shown. That said, whenever possible, we derive hypotheses based on theory and prior work. First, we first develop broad hypotheses based on Schwartz (1999, 2009) work on individual value endorsement. Although Schwartz asked individuals to rate values in terms of their personal importance, we are interested in the evaluation of the national flag with respect to these values. While we recognize that this is a different judgment, we believe that Schwartz' model can be a useful organizing framework to describe commonalities and differences in flag associations across diverse countries.

Schwartz (2009) found that individuals in *English speaking nations* (e.g., Australia; Canada, New Zealand; U.K; U.S., New Zealand) emphasize egalitarianism, affective autonomy (e.g., pleasure, exciting life), and mastery values (e.g., ambition, success), at the

expense of embeddedness (e.g., social order, obedience). Therefore, it is likely that the above-mentioned countries associate egalitarian values with their flag but not aggression and obedience. *South-East-Asian nations* (e.g., *India, Singapore*), in contrast, tend to emphasize embeddedness and hierarchy values (e.g., authority) at the expense of affective and intellectual autonomy. Therefore, it is likely that obedience is an important flag association in South-East-Asian nations. Nations in *Western Europe* (e.g., Germany) tend to emphasize egalitarianism and intellectual autonomy at the expense of conservatism and hierarchy values. Thus, egalitarianism should be an important concept associated with the German flag. Moreover, *the Middle-East region* (e.g., Turkey) is characterized by high levels of embeddedness, mastery, relatively high levels of hierarchy, and low levels of autonomy, suggesting that tradition and obedience are important as well as authority and ambition.

Furthermore, based on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), we make the prediction that individuals associate positive emotions and egalitarian concepts with their flag in order to maintain a positive social identity. In addition to these broad predictions, it is important to consider the country's idiosyncratic historical developments (e.g., whether the country struggled for independence, is an immigration country, or is involved in armed conflicts), which contribute to the development of relatively stable associations.

### **Specific Hypotheses Regarding the 11 Flags Examined in this Study**

*Australia.* The Australian flag is flown on government buildings and schools. Each year on Australia day, people display and wear flags. The flag is also shown in events memorializing WWI and WWII soldiers (ANZAC Day, Australian War Memorial, 2016). ANZAC day is an important day in Australia, and there are many "Returned and Services League" (RSL) clubs, which focus on remembering soldiers. However, the flag is also displayed at sporting events (e.g., Australian Government, 2015). Therefore, we expect that the Australian flag is associated with multiple concepts, including egalitarian values (based on Schwartz 2009), honor-related concepts and tradition (based on ANZAC day), and also sports.



**Canada.** We selected Canada as the prototype of an open-minded immigration country where multiculturalism is valued (Soroka & Robertson, 2010). Thus, we predict that Canadians should associate egalitarian attributes (e.g., equality, justice) with the flag, but not negative attributes (e.g., aggression), power-related concepts or negative emotions. We therefore expect that egalitarian and power-related concepts can be empirically distinguished. Moreover, it is possible that those who associate sports with the flag might also think about honor-related concepts because Canadians associate hockey with a sense of national honor.

**Germany.** We selected Germany as a nation with a very negative past. In light of the cruelties committed by German Nazis, Germans are still less proud of their country compared to people in other nations (e.g., Smith & Kim, 2006). We therefore predict that the flag is not associated with positive emotions. It is important to note that before 2006, the German flag was only rarely displayed. However, since the hosting of the 2006 Football World Championship, Germans have started to enthusiastically display their flag during sporting events (Bernstein, 2006). Thus, the German flag should be primarily associated with sports.

**India.** The colors of the Indian flag have specific meanings: the saffron represents courage, sacrifice, and religious traditions. White represents peace and truth and green represents faith and chivalry (Virmani, 2008). Thus, the Indian flag should elicit multiple positive associations. Obedience in India is usually perceived positively and considered in the context of obedience to parents, elders or laws and the expectation for obedience is high (e.g., Schwartz, 2009). Therefore, obedience should be linked to positive concepts.

**New Zealand.** Prior research has indicated that the New Zealand flag activates egalitarian concepts (Sibley et al., 2011) and that New Zealanders support tolerance and equality (Sibley et al., 2011; Sibley & Liu, 2007). Thus, we predict that New Zealanders associate egalitarian values (e.g., justice, equality) with the flag, whereas aggression-related concepts are not associated with the flag. This prediction is in line with Schwartz's (2009) framework. Importantly at the time of data collection in 2011, there had been continued

discussion about one day changing the New Zealand Flag. Two referendums in 2015 and 2016 resulted in the retention of the New Zealand flag. However, 43% voted in favor of an alternative featuring the Silver Fern (New Zealand Elections, 2016), suggesting that many New Zealanders might not have particularly strong associations with the New Zealand flag.

***Northern Ireland.*** Studying the meaning of national flags in the Northern Irish context is particularly intriguing because two main ethno-political communities hold conflicting aspirations concerning national sovereignty, and therefore no national flag enjoys general consensual support. The Irish Tricolor is the official flag of the Republic of Ireland but has no official status in Northern Ireland. The Union Flag, or Union Jack, is the flag of the United Kingdom, and therefore does have official status in Northern Ireland. Elements of both flags are often incorporated into the emblems of paramilitary groups and of mainstream political parties. Controversies surrounding the display of flags have played a key role in the conflict from the 1960s right up to the present (Bryan, Stevenson, Gillespie, & Bell, 2010; Nolan, Bryan, Dwyer, Hayward, Radford, & Shirlow, 2014). Catholic Republicans perceive the Union flag as a symbol of British domination, whereas Protestant Unionists regard the Irish Tricolor as a symbol of a violent threat (Bryan et al., 2010). For many Irish nationalists, it symbolizes the collective struggle against discrimination. Thus, we expect that the *Irish Tricolor* is associated with egalitarian, freedom and power-related concepts, but also with aggression (because of the conflict). In contrast, the *British flag* still has associations with a sense of past imperial greatness. Thus, we expect that the British Union flag is primarily associated with power and strength, but also with egalitarian values.

***Scotland.*** The flag of Scotland is a symbol of the Scottish nationalism and the independence movement. In light of the ongoing struggle for independence from the British, which was salient during the time of data collection, we expect that the Scottish flag is strongly associated with power-related (e.g., strength, power), and egalitarian concepts (e.g., freedom, equality, justice). Moreover, Scots define their culture in relation to their English

counterpart, which they characterize as being aggressive, whilst they consider themselves relatively peaceful people (e.g., Reicher & Hopkins, 2000). Therefore, we predict that aggression- and obedience-related concepts should not be associated with the flag of Scotland.

*Singapore.* The five stars displayed in the flag stand for democracy, peace, progress, justice, and equality (Victoria school, 2014). Thus, we predict that the Singaporean flag is likely to be associated with these egalitarian concepts. However, Singaporeans also endorse conservative and hierarchical principles (Schwartz, 1999; 2009) and Singaporean politics is commonly regarded as representing 'benevolent authoritarianism'. Conformity and obedience are essential for harmonious group-relations (e.g., Leung, Koch, & Lu, 2002). Therefore, we expect that power-related associations go along with conformity and obedience.

*Turkey.* The flag symbolizes Kemalism, nationalism, and the distinction of Turks from other minorities (e.g., the Kurds) living in Turkey (Smith, 2005). A picture of Atatürk (the founder of the Republic of Turkey) accompanies the display of the Turkish flag. The elevation of Turks as being distinct from minorities represents dominance. Therefore, in line with Schwartz's framework (2009), the Turkish flag is likely to be associated with power and dominance. Secondly, given the political struggles with minorities within Turkey and the violent approach of the police against disobedient protestors (e.g., Amnesty International, 2015), the Turkish flag should also be associated with aggression and obedience.

*U.S.* Katz and Hass (1998) argued that there are two conflicting core value orientations in American society: humanitarianism/egalitarianism as pro-social values and individualism/the Protestant work ethic as an emphasis on discipline, devotion to work, and achievement. We predict that associations with the flag mirror these two conflicting value orientations: egalitarian concepts (e.g., Butz et al., 2007) and power/achievement-related concepts should be frequent associations. Moreover, those who associate power and dominance with the flag should also think of aggression, obedience and conformity, because flag displays are particularly frequent when the U.S. is engaged in military operations or war.

## **Relations of Flag Associations with Nationalism and Patriotism**

Nationalism is based on national pride (i.e., patriotism) accompanied by ideologies of national dominance and superiority (Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989; Schatz & Lavine, 2007). In light of the distinction between nationalism and patriotism, nationalists might associate power and dominance with their flag, because a feeling of superiority is a core element of nationalism (e.g., Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). In contrast, because the love of one's country is the core element of patriotism, it is likely that patriots associate positive emotions with their flag and reject negative associations like aggression. However, given that nationalism and patriotism share the element of a strong national identification (e.g., Wagner et al., 2012), there should also be similarities for nationalists and patriots. Both should associate egalitarian concepts with their flag, because both believe that equality has been realized in their country (see Cohrs et al., 2004). This might be counterintuitive, because several studies have indicated that nationalism is positively related to outgroup rejection, and presents the opposite of egalitarianism (e.g., Cohrs et al., 2004; Wagner et al., 2012). In the present research, we asked participants in 11 countries which concepts they associate with their flag and tested how these associations are related to nationalism and patriotism.

## **METHOD**

### **Procedure**

All participants completed an online survey, except Singaporeans, who completed a printed version. All participants completed the survey in English, except for Germans who completed the survey in German. First, participants saw an image of their national flag and rated the extent to which they associated the flag with different concepts. Then, participants completed measures of nationalism and patriotism. In the Northern Ireland sample, participants saw the Irish Tricolor as well as the British Union flag and were asked to select the flag they identify with. Subsequent questions then referred to the flag they had chosen. We refer to those who selected the Irish Tricolor as the "Irish sample" and to those who selected

the Union Flag as the “British sample”. Data collection started at the end of 2011 and continued into 2012 for some countries. Because of small sample sizes, we collected additional data in five countries (Australia, India, Northern Ireland – Irish and British, and Turkey) in 2015. Measurement models were invariant across time (see supplementary material). Mean levels of country-specific scales did not differ between the two times of data collection (all  $F$ s < 2.07, all  $p$ s > .09), except that in 2015 people were more likely to associate aggression with the British flag compared to 2011/12 ( $F(1,116) = 7.18, p = .01$ ).

### Participants

Data was collected from 2,230 university students who were inhabitants of 11 countries (Australia, Canada, Germany, India, New Zealand, Northern Ireland – an Irish and a British sample, Scotland, Singapore, Turkey, and the U.S.). We collected data from university students in order to have comparable samples. We excluded five participants with missing values in more than 10% of variables. Other missing values were estimated via expected maximization within countries. Moreover, we excluded 388 participants (17.4%) who were non-citizens (or did not consider themselves to be Scottish in the Scottish sample). Non-citizen proportions ranged from 51.4% in Scotland to 0% in India. We excluded these participants because prior work illustrated that national symbols do not activate the same concepts in citizens and non-citizens (Sibley et al., 2011). The final sample size was  $n = 1,820$  (71.1 % female, 24.2% male, 4.3% unspecified gender). Participant ages ranged from 18 to 78 ( $M = 22.3, SD = 6.54$ ), with country means ranging from 19.8 (U.S.) to 31.9 (Australia). Sample sizes ranged from 101 (India) to 375 (Canada) with a mean sample size of 165.<sup>2</sup>

### Measures

**General concepts<sup>3</sup>.** We used 26 general concepts based on Butz and Kunstman (2012) that have been used in the context of national flags. These items contained one-word attributes (e.g., justice, freedom, equality, aggression, violence; all concepts are presented in the result section). The instruction for all items was “Please describe what you think of when you see

the xxx flag” (xxx stands for the 11 countries, e.g., Scottish/Canadian/German). All items were answered on a 9-point rating scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*very much*).

**Emotions.** Thirteen emotions were assessed on the same 9-point rating scale described above. Eleven country-specific principal axis analyses with promax rotation revealed two-factor solutions separating the nine negative emotions (shame, fear, disgust, contempt, anger, guilt, anxiety, hate, fury) from the four positive emotions (hope, pride, joy, happiness). Contempt loaded with the positive emotions in the U.S. and had the weakest loading on negative emotions most countries. Thus, we deleted contempt. Reliabilities were good (negative emotions ranging from  $\alpha = .83$  in India to  $\alpha = .93$  in the U.S.; positive emotions ranging from  $\alpha = .82$  in India to  $\alpha = .94$  in Northern Ireland - British sample and Australia).

**Patriotism.** Four items were taken from Kosterman and Feshbach (1989, e.g., “I love my country”) and assessed on a 7-point rating scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).<sup>4</sup> Reliabilities ranged from  $\alpha = .87$  in Germany to  $\alpha = .94$  in Singapore/U.S.

**Nationalism.** Four items were taken from Kosterman and Feshbach (1989, “Generally, the more influence xxx has on other nations, the better off they are”), one item was deleted (see supplementary material). Two items were adapted from Becker et al. (2012): “xxx is better than most other nations” (reliabilities ranged from  $\alpha = .78$  in New Zealand to  $\alpha = .90$  in the U.S.). The same response scale as above was used.

**Acquiescence factor.** It is likely that individuals in different countries show a different acquiescence bias, which would lead to inflated correlations in some countries. To address this issue, we used an additional variable measured in this study (prejudice towards immigrants) to create an acquiescence factor. We used five positively and three negatively phrased items to measure prejudice. We created three pairs of positively and negatively phrased items (e.g., pair 1: “I would not mind it at all if an immigrant family moved in next door” and “I would rather not have immigrants live in the same apartment building/neighborhood I live in”). As it is not possible to agree with both items without

showing acquiescence, our acquiescence factor consisted of the average score of these three pairs of items and is used in the correlational analyses.

## RESULTS

We conducted 11 country-specific principal axis analyses with promax-rotation in order to detect different factor structures that reflect cultural representations of flags in terms of salient concepts<sup>5</sup>. As an extraction method, we used the revised Velicer's minimum average partial (MAP) test as recommended by O'Connor (2000). All factor loadings, items comprising the scales and details in terms of scale construction are provided in the supplementary material. Based on the factor analyses, we created country-specific scales and tested within countries whether the country-specific scales differed significantly from each other using repeated measures ANOVAs with Bonferroni correction. Second, we analyzed how the reported associations and emotions are related to nationalism and patriotism.<sup>6</sup> Means of country-specific scales are provided in Table 1.

### Profiles of Flag Associations for each Country

**Australia.** The MAP test suggested a four-factor solution: *egalitarian/honor-related concepts* ( $\alpha = .97$ ), *aggression-related concepts* ( $\alpha = .81$ ), *sports-related concepts* ( $\alpha = .77$ ), and *obedience-related concepts* ( $\alpha = .86$ ). As illustrated in Table 1, Australians were most likely to associate sports with their flag and least likely to associate aggression with their flag. Egalitarian/honor-related and obedience-related concepts were located in between.

**Canada.** The MAP test suggested three factors: *egalitarian concepts* ( $\alpha = .88$ ), *power-related concepts* ( $\alpha = .82$ ), *aggression, and obedience-related concepts* ( $\alpha = .74$ ). As expected, Canadians were most likely to associate egalitarian concepts and less likely to associate aggression/obedience with their flag. Power was located in between.

**Germany.** The MAP test suggested a four-factor solution: *Egalitarian concepts* ( $\alpha = .93$ ), *power-related concepts* ( $\alpha = .89$ ), *aggression-related concepts* ( $\alpha = .79$ ), and *sports-related concepts* (football, sports,  $\alpha = .71$ ). As expected, Germans were most likely to

associate sports-related concepts with their flag and least likely to associate aggression-related concepts. Power-related and egalitarian concepts were located in between.

**India.** The MAP test suggested a two-factor solution: One factor representing positive concepts including *egalitarian and honor-related concepts*, power, obedience and sports ( $\alpha = .90$ ). A second factor representing negative concepts including *aggression-related concepts*, competitiveness, conformity, dominance, and weakness ( $\alpha = .73$ ). Positive concepts were more strongly associated with the flag compared to negative ones.

**New Zealand.** The MAP test suggested a two-factor solution: One factor representing positive concepts including *egalitarian and honor-related concepts*, competitiveness, sports, and concern ( $\alpha = .92$ ). A second factor representing negative concepts including *aggression-related concepts*, dominance, obedience, conformity, weakness and power ( $\alpha = .77$ ). Thus, as expected, and in direct contrast to India, obedience and power were linked to negative associations in New Zealand. Positive concepts were not very strongly associated with the flag, but still more strongly than negative concepts.

**Northern Ireland – Irish sample.** The MAP test suggested a four-factor solution: *Egalitarian/honor-related concepts* ( $\alpha = .90$ ), *aggression-related concepts* ( $\alpha = .85$ ), *sports-related concepts* ( $r = .69$ ), and *obedience-related concepts* ( $r = .77$ ). Comparisons revealed that the Irish Tricolor was equally likely associated with egalitarian/honor-related concepts and sports. Moreover, as expected, aggression-related concepts were associated around the scale mean point ( $M = 5.00$ ) indicating that they were not disassociated with the flag.

**Northern Ireland – British sample.** The MAP test suggested three factors: *Egalitarian/honor-related concepts* ( $\alpha = .93$ ), *power-related concepts* ( $\alpha = .85$ ), and *aggression-related concepts* ( $\alpha = .78$ ). As expected, power was the most important association, followed by egalitarian and honor-related concepts. Aggression was less strongly associated. Although aggression-related concepts had stronger associations with the British



flag in 2015 compared to 2011/12, the order of rankings and significance levels remained identical for both times of measurement suggesting the stability of the flag associations.

**Scotland.** The MAP test suggested a four-factor solution: *egalitarian concepts* ( $\alpha = .88$ ), *power-related concepts* and freedom ( $\alpha = .88$ ), *aggression-related concepts* combined with *obedience-related concepts* ( $\alpha = .76$ ), and *sports* ( $r = .52$ ). Power-related concepts were most strongly and aggression-obedience-related concepts least strongly associated with the flag. Egalitarian concepts and sports were located in between.

**Singapore.** The MAP test suggested a three-factor solution: *egalitarian and honor-related concepts* ( $\alpha = .88$ ), *power-related concepts*, obedience, conformity, and peace ( $\alpha = .84$ ), and *aggression-related concepts*, and weakness ( $\alpha = .69$ ). Power-related concepts were most strongly associated, followed by egalitarian and honor-related concepts and aggression.

**Turkey.** The MAP test suggested three factors: *egalitarian and power-related concepts* and conformity ( $\alpha = .93$ ), *aggression-related concepts* and obedience ( $\alpha = .69$ ) and *sports* ( $r = .53$ ). As predicted, aggression-related concepts presented a strong association – they were equally strongly associated with the flag as the egalitarian/power factor.

**USA.** The MAP test suggested a two-factor solution: one factor representing positive associations such as *egalitarian and honor-related concepts* ( $\alpha = .93$ ) that were more strongly endorsed than the second factor representing negative associations such as *aggression-related concepts*, *obedience-related concepts*, *power-related concepts*, concern, weakness ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

### **Emotional Associations with National Flags**

We tested whether the emotions differed significantly from the scale midpoint (5 on the 1-9 rating scale, see supplementary material). As expected, negative emotions were not associated with the flag in any country, whereas positive emotions were associated in all countries except Germany, where the mean was below the scale midpoint (all  $ps < .05$ ).

### **Relations between Flag Associations, Nationalism, and Patriotism**

Table 1 shows mean levels of nationalism and patriotism across countries. As expected, comparisons from the neutral scale midpoint (4) within countries (using a conservative  $p < .001$  level of significance) revealed that individuals were patriotic in all countries except Germany (in Germany, the mean did not differ from the neutral scale midpoint). Next, we calculated correlational analyses controlling for acquiescence. Replicating prior work, nationalism and patriotism were significantly positively correlated in all countries (ranging from  $r = .32$  in New Zealand to  $r = .74$  in Turkey, all  $ps < .05$ ). Moreover, as expected, the more individuals endorsed nationalism and patriotism, the more they associated positive emotions with their flag in all countries (all  $ps < .01$ , for patriotism ranging from  $r = .48$  in New Zealand to  $r = .79$  in the U.S., and for nationalism ranging from  $r = .39$  in New Zealand to  $r = .59$  in Australia.). Moreover, the more individuals associated egalitarian (or egalitarian/honor-related) concepts with the flag, the more they endorsed nationalism and patriotism. Finally, patriotism was unrelated to aggression, (or aggression/obedience-) related concepts in seven countries or negatively related in four countries. Nationalism was positively related to aggression (aggression/obedience) in two countries, negatively related in one country and unrelated in the eight countries<sup>7</sup>.

## DISCUSSION

This research presents an important contribution to the literature on national symbols. So far, the meaning and content of national flags has been largely unexplored. Almost all research conducted on national symbolism refers to the U.S. flag. The present work provides a first indication of what people associate with their flag in 11 countries. We demonstrated that factor structures differ between countries in a way that reflects salient concepts in the national representations of flags. Moreover, we illustrated which concepts are most strongly associated with the 11 national flags. We also showed that specific associations with the flag are related to nationalism and patriotism. In the following, we first present the most important country-

specific findings. Then, we comment on patterns that were prevalent across groups of countries. Finally, we discuss the implications of the finding for intergroup relations.

### **Flag Associations within the 11 Countries**

The strongest association in **Australia** was sports reflecting that the Australian flag is frequently displayed at sporting events, and that Australians see themselves as a sporting nation (Phillips & Smith, 2000). Tradition and competition loaded on the sports-factor. This might suggest that sports is one of the most important “traditions” Australians have, and that those who think about tradition also think about sports. Egalitarianism was less strongly associated with the flag than expected. It is possible that the Australian flag is also linked to Whiteness and might imply discrimination of non-White people (Fozdar et al., 2014).

As expected, in **Canada**, egalitarian concepts were most important. This mirrors that Canada stands for tolerance, openness, and multiculturalism (Soroka & Roberton, 2010) and is also in line with the prediction made based on Schwartz (2009). Moreover, it is possible that the Canadian flag may also evoke a comparison to the U.S. flag and therefore activates a direct contrast to the Canadian image of the U.S. (Bow, 2008). Canadians have a strong interest in maintaining an image that is distinct from (and where possible superior to) their more powerful southern neighbor. Thus, because many Canadians might strongly associate the U.S. flag with (especially military) power, this may have contributed to the finding that egalitarianism was more strongly associated with the Canadian flag than power.

In **Germany**, as expected, sports was by far the most important concept associated with the German flag. One could argue that this result reflects that Germany has a successful football team. However, when taking additional findings into account, namely that positive emotions were not associated with the flag and that Germans were less patriotic compared to individuals in other countries, we believe that it is more likely that our findings support the assumption that the German history of the Holocaust is still prominently on people’s minds. However, since the hosting of the Football World Championship in Germany in 2006, it is

acceptable for Germans to show the flag at football games. Therefore, the first association that comes to mind when seeing the flag is sports – an apolitical and value-free association. Nevertheless, in line with predictions based on Schwartz (2009), egalitarian concepts and power-related concepts were distinguishable – and both associated with the flag.

The *Indian* flag was associated with many positive aspects that loaded together. The joint association of egalitarian and honor-related concepts was most important. In line with Schwartz's (2009) framework, obedience loaded together with positive concepts suggesting that obedience is considered positively. In contrast to obedience, conformity was associated with power and dominance, indicating that obedience and conformity have a different meaning in India than in individualistic countries (where they often load together).

In *New Zealand*, positive concepts were more strongly associated with the flag than negative ones, but the associations were not particularly strong. This confirms the idea that the symbolic power of the current flag is waning. Indeed, although a referendum on changing the New Zealand flag resulted in the retention of the flag, many New Zealanders (43%) preferred an alternative flag based on the Silver Fern. Future work is needed to compare associations with the Silver Fern and the current flag. If the Silver Fern represents the “true” flag, it should elicit more positive emotions and associations than the flag of New Zealand.

In *Northern Ireland (Irish Tricolor)*, dominance and power load together with justice and freedom. This makes sense in the Northern Irish context, because for supporters of the Tricolor, power and dominance are essential to reach justice and freedom. In line with this, aggression was not disassociated as in almost all other countries. Finally, the sports association mirrors that the flag is widely displayed at sporting competitions. In contrast, purely power-related concepts were most strongly associated with the *British flag* (more than egalitarian concepts), supporting the argument that the British flag still has some associations with a sense of past imperial greatness.

In *Scotland*, power-related concepts were the most important associations, whereas aggression and obedience were not associated. This is in line with research suggesting that Scots evaluate themselves as peaceful (at least compared to the English), but not obedient (e.g., Reicher & Hopkins, 2000). The importance of power is linked to the Scottish independence movement, which was already prominent in 2011/12: in order to become independent, a country must be powerful. In line with this, freedom was associated with power (and not with egalitarianism as in most other countries). Finally, the strong association of sports mirrors that the flag is widely displayed at sporting competitions.

In *Singapore*, as expected, power and dominance loaded with conformity and obedience representing elements of *benevolent authoritarianism* – which were most strongly associated with the flag. Honor and tradition loaded together with egalitarian concepts and were also associated with the flag. These findings support that although Singaporeans emphasize conservatism, they also endorse benevolence (Schwartz, 1999; 2009). In line with Schwartz (2009), aggression was not associated with the flag.

*Turkey* was the only country in which aggression-related concepts (and egalitarian/honor-related concepts) were most strongly associated with the flag. This is in line with Turks' presentations of their flag in association with Atatürk, who symbolizes the empowerment and aggressive approach of the Turkish ethnic group against other ethnic groups (e.g., Kurds). Sports was less strongly associated with the flag, illustrating that sports is more important on a regional level where flags of football clubs are used. Against our expectations, no separate factor representing power emerged.

In the *U.S.*, as expected, individuals associated egalitarian and honor-related concepts with the flag which mirrors the idea that the U.S. stands for freedom and democracy. We also found a second factor that was associated with the flag, representing more negative aspects such as power, dominance, aggression, obedience and conformity. This reflects that the U.S. is perceived as the most powerful nation in the world, and supports the observation that the

U.S. flag displays are particularly frequent when the U.S. is engaged in military operations—as was the case 2011/12 (e.g., the war against terrorism; Operation Odyssey Dawn in Libya).

### **Similarities within Groups of Countries**

Several similarities across countries can be identified. In line with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), positive emotions were associated with all flags, except in Germany, and negative emotions were not. Moreover, almost all countries significantly associated egalitarian concepts (or a combination of egalitarian and honor-related concepts) with their flag. Therefore, most people are likely to be generally supportive and positive about their flag. A closer look, however, reveals that some countries show a more similar pattern compared to others. In the following, we describe these profiles.

First, we found that in three countries (Canada, Germany, Scotland) egalitarian concepts were distinguished from honor-, and power-related concepts. Canada and Scotland are known for their peacefulness and sense of equality (e.g., Reicher & Hopkins, Soroka & Robertson, 2010). Germany was grouped as an egalitarian country based on Schwartz (2009). This implies that in these countries, individuals have a nuanced understanding of their national flag and do not mix egalitarian associations with honor and power-related concepts.

Secondly, we found that power was the central concept associated with the Scottish and British flag – presumably, however, for very different reasons. Scotland is involved in a struggle for independence and the Scottish flag is a symbol of Scottish Nationalism. Therefore, we expected that the flag is strongly linked to power. In contrast, in Northern Ireland, we expected the flag to be associated with power because the United Kingdom had established the powerful “British empire”. This sense of past imperial greatness resonates particularly strongly in the Northern Irish context.

Third, in terms of aggression, factor analyses revealed that in four countries (Canada, New Zealand, Scotland and the U.S.) obedience loaded on the aggression factor indicating that obedience is perceived negatively (which contrasts the findings of the two collectivist

samples). Moreover, aggression was not disassociated as a flag association in countries where there is a disruption due to separatist or extremist movements (e.g., Northern Ireland, Turkey) and in countries that are usually involved in military conflicts (e.g., the U.S.). However, although nationalism was unrelated to aggression in most countries, there were positive correlations in Canada and Scotland. This indicates that nationalistic individuals in these countries seem to appreciate when their national identity is aggressively defended.

Fourth, in countries with an admitted negative past (Germany) or in countries where the flag might be linked to Whiteness (and thus signals exclusion), sports – as an apolitical and value-free association – was the primary concept people associated with their flag. Obviously, there are important differences between Germany and Australia. For instance, positive emotions were associated with the Australian but not the German flag. Thus, at least in Germany, it seems that the association with sports, and particularly the prominent display of flags during football games, reflects a neutral substitute for a difficult national identity and the associated troubled relationship with the national flag.

Fifth, in collectivist countries that emphasize hierarchies (India, Singapore), obedience loaded together with positive concepts and was strongly associated with the flag. This finding is in line with the results obtained by Schwartz (1999). At least in Singapore, the power-obedience factor points to the importance of internalized obedience and hierarchy for the achievement of individual and national economic prosperity (e.g., Ortmann, 2011).

### **Flag Associations, Nationalism and Patriotism**

It is a striking finding that we found stable correlations between nationalism, patriotism and positive flag associations across all countries. The more nationalistic and patriotic people felt about their country, the more they associated egalitarianism (or a combination of egalitarianism and honor-related concepts) and positive emotions with their flag. This is important because several studies have indicated that nationalism is positively related to outgroup rejection, and thus is rather non-egalitarian (e.g., Wagner et al., 2012). In

fact, it has been argued that nationalism turns into outgroup rejection under conditions of intergroup threat (Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999). Therefore, in times of political instability and threat, it seems particularly problematic to uncritically associate concepts like democracy, equality, freedom, and justice with one's national flag, when it is possible that these associations are interwoven with beliefs of national superiority and could turn into outgroup derogation. In fact, the joint loading of egalitarian and honor-related concepts in many countries on a single factor illustrates that egalitarianism is interwoven with honor and/or power in the context of national flags in many countries. Against our expectations, patriotism and aggression-related concepts were not always negatively correlated but rather uncorrelated in most nations.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Our work has some limitations. First, the situational context and temporal stability of associations needs to be considered. The meaning of every national flag is contestable and can be manipulated for different political and ideological purposes in any given country. However, although we believe that the situational context is important and that the meaning of flags is not fixed, we argue that historical developments formed relatively stable cultural profiles. We base our assumption on theoretical and empirical arguments. In terms of theory, we predicted and found that obedience is an important association in collectivist societies and linked to positive attributes, whereas obedience is seen more negatively and is linked to aggression in several individualistic societies. There is no reason why these associations should change in the next decades. Similarly, it is very likely that the Scottish and British flag will always be associated with power irrespective of whether or not Scotland becomes independent. Although there was an important event in Germany in 2006 leading Germans to associate sports with their flag, it is unlikely that this association will change in the next decades because German history remains very salient in people's minds.



Our findings provide the first empirical support for stability of associations. We collected additional data in 2015 in five countries. In four countries we found comparable between 2011/12 and 2015, suggesting a strong temporal stability of flag associations. Only in Northern Ireland was aggression more strongly associated with the British flag in 2015, compared to 2011/12. This was likely due to many demonstrations by Loyalists in 2013 against a city council decision in terms of flag display (Q&A: Northern Ireland flag protests, 2014). During that period it is likely that associations of the flag with aggressive political persuasions became particularly salient. However, the ranking of associations did not differ between the two points of measurement. Thus, our results support that the strength of associations is relatively stable across a period of four years. Second, we acknowledge that researchers need to be careful not to overgeneralize our findings because it is based on student samples. It is possible that younger individuals are more likely to make associations that are currently discussed in the media, whereas older individuals might have a more complex representation of the flag. For instance, the finding that egalitarian and honor-related concepts load together in many countries might not occur for older individuals because they might separate equality from honor/strength/achievement. Thus, it would be important that future work includes more heterogeneous samples in terms of age, education and social class. Third, all surveys were conducted in English, except in Germany. Although students in Turkey, Singapore and India had excellent English language skills, results might be somewhat different when they complete the survey in their first language.

In sum, this research presents the first empirical attempt to map flag associations across a range of diverse countries. We demonstrated that flag associations differed across countries in ways that reflect their idiosyncratic historical developments. Moreover, we demonstrated that the more strongly individuals endorsed nationalism and patriotism the more they associated positive emotions and egalitarian concepts with their flag.

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**Table 1: Mean differences (and standard deviations) in country-specific factor scores**

	Australia	Canada	Germany	India	NZ	NI Irish	NI Brit	Scotland	Singap.	Turkey	U.S.
1 Egalitarianism or <i>Egalitarianism/honor</i>	5.04 <sup>b</sup> (2.20)	6.92 <sup>a</sup> (1.35)	5.25 <sup>b</sup> (1.77)	6.78 <sup>a</sup> (1.31)	5.58 <sup>a</sup> (1.44)	6.34 <sup>a</sup> (1.29)	6.03 <sup>b</sup> (1.65)	5.69 <sup>b</sup> (1.51)	5.78 <sup>a</sup> (1.25)	5.68 <sup>a</sup> (1.68)	6.68 <sup>a</sup> (1.45)
2 Power-related concepts		5.64 <sup>b</sup> (1.52)	5.30 <sup>b</sup> (1.68)				7.22 <sup>a</sup> (1.54)	6.60 <sup>a</sup> (1.37)	6.35 <sup>b</sup> (1.24)		
3 Obedience	5.20 <sup>b</sup> (2.25)					4.49 <sup>b</sup> (1.98)					
4 Aggression or <i>Aggression/obedience</i>	3.97 <sup>c</sup> (1.83)	3.64 <sup>c</sup> (1.23)	4.41 <sup>c</sup> (1.77)	4.65 <sup>b</sup> (1.49)	4.04 <sup>b</sup> (1.37)	5.00 <sup>b</sup> (1.99)	4.63 <sup>c</sup> (1.90)	4.15 <sup>c</sup> (1.55)	2.87 <sup>c</sup> (1.35)	5.51 <sup>a</sup> (1.75)	5.26 <sup>b</sup> (1.34)
5 Sports-related concepts	5.95 <sup>a</sup> (1.96)		7.56 <sup>a</sup> (1.63)			6.21 <sup>a</sup> (2.41)		5.60 <sup>b</sup> (2.33)		4.71 <sup>b</sup> (2.40)	
Patriotism	5.90 (1.20)	6.01 (1.18)	3.77 (1.54)	6.35(1.07)	6.04(.99)	6.01(1.33)	5.20 (1.37)	6.02 (1.05)	5.50(1.20)	4.93 (1.69)	5.86 (1.34)
Nationalism	3.57 (1.41)	4.15 (1.44)	2.42 (1.10)	4.45(1.32)	3.88(1.05)	3.28(1.42)	3.37 (1.36)	3.17(1.14)	4.50(1.16)	3.20(1.55)	3.87 (1.54)

*Note:* Although all country-specific scales represent the general concept, the number and content of items constituting the scales differ between countries (see supplementary material). Numbers within columns not sharing superscripts differ at  $p < .01$ . Numbers in italics refer to the concepts in italics.

**Table 2: Partial correlations of country-specific flag associations, patriotism (before the slash), and nationalism (after the slash)**

	Australia	Canada	Germany	India	NZ	NI Irish	NI Brit	Scotland	Singap.	Turkey	U.S.
1 Egalitarianism or <i>Egalitarianism/honor</i>	.50**/.57**	.54**/.37**	.62**/.48**	.53**/.64**	.22**/.30**	.43**/.49**	.50**/.54**	.33**/.43**	.45**/.46**	.66**/.69**	.71**/.55**
2 Power-related concepts		.49**/.47**	.45**/.42**				.45**/.37**	.44**/.35**	.29**/.23**		
3 Obedience	.00/.03					.02/-.14					
4 Aggression or <i>Aggression/obedience</i>	-.13/-.13	-.08/.16**	-.20**/-.09	.03/.15	-.17/.11	-.16**/-.35**	-.26*/-.13	-.23**/.18*	-.08/-.05	-.10/-.12	-.02/.12
5 Sports-related concepts	.34**/.32**		.07/.05			.29**/.19*		.02/.23**		.12/-.04	

*Note:* We used country-specific scales controlling for acquiescence. Although all country-specific scales represent the general concept, the number and contents of items constituting the scales differ between countries. Blank cells indicate that a scale was not created. \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ . Numbers in italics refer to the concepts in italics.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> We acknowledged that the Scottish flag and Irish Tricolor cannot be considered as “national” flags. However, they are more than regional flags, because many individuals in Scotland and Northern Ireland would like to see the flag they identify with as a national flag. Therefore, when we refer to national flags, we also refer to the flag of Scotland and Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> In Northern Ireland, not all participants who selected the Irish flag were Catholics (instead, the Irish sample consisted of 144 Catholics, 5 Protestants and 11 participants who selected no religion). Likewise, not all participants who selected the Union flag were Protestants (instead, the British sample consisted of 82 Protestants, 10 Catholics and 26 participants who selected no religion). However, because they identified with their respective flag, we did not drop any participants from the Northern Ireland samples.

<sup>3</sup> In addition, we used a shortened version of the Schwartz value scale. All items loaded on one factor in most countries. Given that it is not very informative to create a single scale based on different values, we do not consider this measure further.

<sup>4</sup> Two additional items were deleted to improve reliability (“I am proud of xxx's democracy”, “I feel great pride in xxx's development over time“).

<sup>5</sup> In Germany, a principal axis analysis was not possible to conduct and therefore, we conducted a principal component analysis.

<sup>6</sup> We control for acquiescence in the correlational analyses only. We do not use within-subject standardization for the factor analyses, because ipsatized scores are not suitable for factor analyses (e.g., Fischer, 2004). Moreover, we do not use ipsatized scores for the mean comparison, because we make mean comparisons only within nations, meaning that the same level of acquiescence within nations should affect all scales.

<sup>7</sup> We also created identical scales assessing egalitarianism (without honor) across countries, which were also positively correlated with nationalism across all countries.