National Identity and Intercultural Conflict

Cynthia Grguric, PhD, LMHC

(646) 236-9627
cynthia@internationalpsychologyandhealing.com
www.InternationalPsychologyAndHealing.com

New York City office
353 Lexington Avenue Street 311
NY, NY 10016

Abstract

This article attempts to address the critical aspect of not just the individual identity but explore the perceptual implications of one's national identity within and without in intercultural conflicts such as in Syria.   In a multicultural pluralistic society, interpersonal relationships carry preconceived views of the political, religious, and historical roles this national represents. A psychologist's assessment is enriched to look beyond individual identities in their assessments to account for the components of national identities that contribute to hostile and or congenial international working relationships between nations and individuals. As Syrians flood into Turkey, the nations are challenged to cohabitate. These two national identities with their perceptual constructs of politics, historical role in international affairs, and economics influence interactions. A particular individual can represent a negative perceptional interpretation of that nation depending on the nation of the interpreter. The purpose of this exploration is to examine interventions in complicated situations of intercultural cohabitation such as the Syrian immigrants in Turkey that effect peace, nation building, and resolution.

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cynthia@internationalpsychologyandhealing.com
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353 Lexington Avenue Street 311
NY, NY 10016

National Identity and Mental Health

In the call for a more international focus in psychology that embraces cultural norms and subculture ecological systems, it is imperative as psychologists to be aware of the national as well as individual identity in our clinical work. Western psychology has typically explored the individual development of identity. However in our modern world of multiculturalism that pushes to interactions with other cultural norms perceived a nation's identity is important to be aware of the implications of this identity.

Evaluating mental health by ethnicity, migration status, and race is essential in making psychosocial and health assessments (Bhopol, 2014, p. 29). Bhopol notes the importance of identifying the race, ethnic, and migration status in the growing multicultural world and its impact on their mental and physical health. Being cognizant of its impacts to overall wellness and thriving for migrants and host cultures is imperative.

Perceived national identifiers such as political motivations, intelligence, social customs, and religious views between a host country and immigrant impact intercultural cohesiveness and cohabitation. How these perceptual cues become established and engrained is of interest to understanding how to bridge the divides. Erickson (2001) asserts in his article on Ethnic Identity, National Identity and Intergroup conflict that it is not so much ethnicity but shared experience that binds a group identity. He notes that ethnicity is relational and situational. It is not a property of a group that establishes it but

it is extinguished through its association of difference from others. It is not within but in the relational dynamic that sets it apart. There is also an aspect of an external threat that bonds a group against it.

Hence an emerging analysis of political identity has evolved from a cultural cause to a subconscious building their reputation on aspects of national chauvinism, ethnic hostility, enemy images (Eriksen, 2001, p. 47). This can be seen in using religion as a means to access power or control. These identity clashes can have long lasting and engrained historical impact as we see in the complicated dynamics engrained into the conflicts in the Middle East, Serbia-Bosnia, and Albania-Turkey.

As this article focuses on the Syrian refugee's reception or any refugee's reception into another country these national identity cues are key to thriving or decompensation. A decompensation burdens the host country if the immigrant does not thrive hence unable to work, become aggressive, or drain the social, economic, and health resources. This can be seen in Turkish government investment of approximately $1.5 billion since May 2013 on Syrian refugees draining them to the point of seeking international support (http://syrianrefugees.eu/?page_id=80).

If the immigrant thrives by being able to fit into and be accepted into the host country culture they can help strengthen the host nation. The views of ethnicity and nationality which encompass the political and social identifying implications have huge

impacts on the immigrant and the host country. It is not just the host nation's view of the immigrant but the immigrant's view of their own nation in light of the conflict that in this case (Syria) caused them to flee. One's self perceived view of their nationally along with the immigrating group reputation to the world will interplay into thriving and surviving. Immigrants coming to the U.S. in the late 1800s and early 1900s rejected their country of origin identity in order to identify with the U.S. identity. Immigrants who are not accepted by a host country can become less involved politically or identity as "American" (Wiley, Lawrence, Figueroa, & Percontino, 2013; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009).

Violence and Cohabitation

Barnett (Barnett, 1999, p. 10) identifies two conditions for conflict to occur. One is when there are two different perceptions calling for a different kind of action. This is evident in Israel-Palestinian conflict over who has possession of the Gaza Strip and West Bank. Second is when there is a change on a national or international level that changes the definition of the 'collective self'. This can be seen as Russia and Greece economic, political positions changed their national identities. Understanding culture within its history, perception in the world arena, motives, and role in international relationships impact conflict.

Individual, group, and national identity are important as it pertains to cultural history, victim-perpetrator roles, and group harm. In a study done in Walungu region of

the Democratic Republic of Congo on collective shame and war rape, the lack of central

support or national identity and strong feelings of victimhood indicate vulnerability to the

victim-perpetrator cycle (Grguric, 2015). This is significant as a cultural group's cycles

from victim-perpetrator to perpetrator victim patterns.   These patterns are known by

social learning theorists to be attributed to the cycle of violence. Helping societies recover

from oppression and shame towards empowerment without the use of oppressing

another would eliminate this pattern. An emphasis on localized community and

intercommunity identity and support in the absence of a strong national identity could be

an empowering tool building community collaboration, resources, and security.

Historical cultural violence can be unpacked to look at these perpetrator – victim

cycles. How it affects national identities perspectives fighting for redemption from defeat,

powerlessness, or shame may seek to overpower of oppress another to compensate. How

the world sees a nation as an oppressor or oppressed- victim or perpetrator influences

interpersonal actions and foreign policy. These national identity roles carry forth an

ongoing perception of threat or safety for self and others. Understanding cultural history

of perpetrator-victim roles and national (collective) identity becomes important in

developing interventions.

With the modern impact of real time of media access into intercultural violence

these national identities can be formed more readily.   Much of a country, nation's image

is formed through historical events and the media. Collective shame can develop by a group or nation that has been part of violence in the past or present.   This image shame—how the world sees one's group or nation's behavior—can affect intercultural relations. Since image shame positively influences behavior, media coverage may positively affect image shame through international knowledge which can influence increased efforts for reparation with harmed groups (Gielen, 2007).

National Identity vs Individual Identity

There is a fine dance between a stable national and individual identity. A healthy national identity can strengthen a national empowerment (decrease victim feelings) and security making it less threatening to acknowledge wrongdoing and able to take meaningful steps toward reparation with harmed groups. However, becoming so nationalistic that such an attitude becomes prideful superiority can threaten being able to recognize humanity and the ability to empathize with the outside groups (Cehajic-Clancy et al., 2011; Gausel et al., 2012). Moderate nationalism, according to studies, can help to overcome moral shame and lead to confidence in reparation between groups (Gausel et al., 2012; Zagefka, Pehrson, Mole, & Chan, 2010).

Research indicates that too high of a national identity can prevent acknowledging harmful behavior, while having a lower collective identity can lead to a more open attitude to reunification with the harmed group (Páez, Marques, Valencia, & Vincze, 2006,

p. 75).   When a superior attitude exists there is defensiveness to acknowledging harm.

This dynamic is seen in individual and national identity. Research confirms that the threat

to self-perception is positively influenced in a highly collective identity when

acknowledging group harm. Secure national and individual identity rests on a delicate

balance of secure sense of self and group identity that can acknowledge the value of

others and the corrective action of self.   This appears to translate to a healthy humility

and esteem of self, group, and other.

Understanding identity it is not only defined by personal, psychological attributes

but relational and social attributes as well (Barnett, 1999). It is the relational piece and

the comparison of our actions to others that form the concept of identity. Hence this is

the case with a nation's identity as well. Barnett explains national identity to be formed

by both the nation's relationship with another nation and the relationship between the

political figures of each nation. We see how these national relationship changes with

leadership changes i.e. United States President's Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, Barak

O'Bama and Eygpt's Anwar Sabat, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah

Khomeini, and Menachem Begin, Israel's Prime Minister.

This understanding brings into discussion state identity vs national identity. State

identity can affect the state leverage and political power while national identity

encompasses more the peoples who create a history, homeland, or shared experience. It

is constantly evolving and changing on the international and national level.   As one nation reacts it affects others such as Russia, Israel, U.S. Hence it is the relational aspect that makes the identity fluid and changing to perceptions of relational, historical, and political actions. Foreign policy, state identity, and national ideology (believe system, ideals) appear to be interdependent molding national identity.

Syrian National Identity

Syria was established as nation in 1943 after achieving independence from France but struggled to obtain cohesion with its many sects.   Prior to its statehood, Syria was divided into six zones which had its own sects and religions (Kaplan, 1993).   These zones covered parts of northern Turkey, Lebanon, Syrian dessert, and Palestine.   Although its territory has been cut, these regions retained diverse groups of Kurds, Arab Christians, Armenians, Circassians, and Jews with Damascus as the center with the Arab Sunni majority (Haj-Saleh, 2006).

After several leadership coups, it was Ba'athism that helped smooth over religious differences and lead Syria to see itself as the center of modern civilization and creating a strong unified Arab nation (Kaplan, 1993; Evers, 2012).   Syria still thrives on identifying itself as the Arabian center which causes friction of the various other religions it represents- Kurds, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish. Haj-Saleh asserts in his article *Political Reform and the Reconfiguration of National Identity of Syria,* that Syria sought to

overpower the different tribes, sects, and religions through its identifying itself as Arabian

instead of enhancing on them to define itself through them not over them(Haj-Saleh,

2006).

It was the coup of 1970 that brought Syrian solidarity through President Hafez al-

Assad.

Through his reign Syrian identity became established the 1980s and 1990s (Evers, 2012).

It was Assad who built Syria's economic and political identity. Since gaining power though

a coup in the 1970s he defined Syria as a nation and international player.   After being

crushed by Israel's taking of the Golan Heights in 1967, Assad was set on being a strong

military power to secure itself in the Arab world. Syria continues to spend most of its GNP

on military power to ensure this. Since all foreign and state decisions are made by Assad,

he has been the controller of Syrian state and national identity.

Syrian national identity is largely formed by its foreign policy influenced by

economic motives and the balance of power in the Arab region (Evers, 2012) which are all

controlled through Assad. Assad has been set to show itself a strong nation in the Arab

world. He is knowledgeable of its vulnerability to surrounding Lebanon, Israel, and Iraq.

Syrian hate to the Israelis is important part of their national identity. Assad has tried to

engage in peace talks with Israel only for the ability to reclaim the Golan Heights he felt so

stripped of. It is the Syrian foreign policy led by Assad pragmatic approach which

designates their identity. Since all political power resides with Assad it is fair to say it is he who sets Syrian national identity. He sets the state identity and national identity so they appear inseparable from him (Evers, 2012, p. 28).

Looking more at the characteristics of the Syrian profile, according to Hofstede Cultural is a hierarchal, collective, and uncertainty avoidance society (http://geert-hofstede.com/syria.html). This means Syria accepts a hierarchical order, emphasizes commitment to a group opposed to individual, and does not sit well with ambiguity. Instead Syrians are more comfortable with rigid rules and guidelines. They also showed a great respect for tradition and an absolute truth. This helps to understand their perspectives and adjustments to countercultural ideas.

Given these attributes, the fact that the majority of the country's life span has been ruled and dominated by one man, and the complex constellation of religions, sects and tribes Syria's struggles make sense. Syria is more ethnically diverse than Egypt, Saudi Arabia, The United Arab Emirates, Yemen or Libya(Haj-Saleh, 2006, p. 2). The need for rigid rules, structure, guidelines and identify collectively appear to clash as the various groups attempt solidarity that extinguishes from a national security. Haj-Saleh (2006) makes some excellent points about forming a Syrian identity that does not threaten any of its various groups but helps all of them to be recognized and embraced into a unique Syrian national identity.

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Bridging Group/National Identity

Means of helping to eliminate the threat of others and build on shared experience as Ericksen (Eriksen, 2001) could help lessen the insecurity of the "other". One interesting attempt at embracing two cultures (Syria and Turkey) came through two Syrian and Turkish book lovers. They decided to help the Arab cultures residing in Istanbul understand each other better by opening a bookshop as a "cultural oasis". (http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/06/18/415002688/istanbul-bookstore-caters-to-syrian-refugees-in-need-of-a-good-read).

Educational groups integrated into school curriculums can humanize outside groups and build national pride that help circumvent a perpetrator-victim cycle of violence. Helping children begin to empathize with other groups and appreciate the differences of others could have long lasting effects into adulthood tolerance. Integrated respect for other outside groups while building healthy national pride can help increase the ability to empathize and decrease threat to national identity. Ericksen also notes that the kind of group that emerges depends on the perceived pressures come from (Eriksen, 2001, p. 63)

When forming new governmental systems after conflict attempts to integrate the various groups which represent the nation in order to equate power dynamics between groups have been made. Examples included are Afghanistan incorporating women in

politics, Iraq attempting to involve Shiite and Sunnis into the Council of Representatives of Iraqi, and the African National Congress. Continued multiparty involvement in developing solutions and overseeing their development would be essential to community pride (countering a victimized group) and empowerment. Resiliency building through proactive systems of community self-defense, justice systems for crimes, and collaboration when threatened could be developed. Increased conflicts can be seen in countries throughout Africa and the Middle East where of smaller local tribal communities based on kindship group identity opposed to a larger national identity can facilitate more complicated conflicts. Several isolated smaller groups formulate their own national identities. However their small number sets up vulnerabilities are threatened due to lack of shared experience as previously noted to be the most distinguishing group bonding. Fusion of these groups around shared need or experience would lessen this threat.

Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, and Manstead, (2006) concluded that too much nationalism can build pride or arrogance of being better or superior to another, especially when combined with a low self-identity or confidence. In fact, the lower the national identity and stronger the individual identity, the greater ability to repatriate and acknowledge guilt and forgiveness in cases of past colonial group harm. There is less defensiveness to acknowledging group harm as it appears to threatening to the core identity. Organizationally, factions thrive on localized tribal groups and broken infractions

of militia power, which causes a decentralizing effect, making it more challenging to form a more solidified identity strengthened by a holistic nation and government. This was seen in pre- Ba'athists party Syria where solidarity and common shared experience as noted earlier was missing to create unification. With the breakdown of national identity, power and control is sought through other means. After all, a nation's ability to acknowledge wrong-doing, humanness of the other, ability to empathize all appeared to relate to national and cultural history of gender, national and personal identity, and power would put it in a better position to help its people.

Conclusion

National identity or group solidarity appears to be developed through a relational context. It is the differences that are noted through relational experience that bring its definition. As Erickson (2001) noted it is through shared experience and bonding over the external threat that creates groups. The aim is to embrace and acknowledge the unique aspects of a group without having to make it threatening to another group. Empathizing, education, and interexchange are noted means to bridge group divides.

The current war terrorizing Syria since 2011 appears to exemplify this crisis of national identity for Syria. The assentation of Assad's leadership for an Arab nation and domination over its foreign, state, and national policies leave little room for the diverse groups that it attempts to control.   As Syrian flood into other refugee countries,

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understanding their collective and national identity as it pertains to themselves and to the world watching the media unfold could create further clashes.   It appears important as Syrians or any immigrant or as one immigrates to become aware of where their own sense of national identity lies but how these national identities play a part in preconceived conceptions of self and others. the show those

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NY, NY 10016

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