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# Investigating the Automatic In-group Bias toward EU and its Role for the Development of a European Identity

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## Abstract

The European Union (EU) is a relatively recent political institution which, in last years, is particularly crossed by centrifugal tensions, making difficult for European citizens to feel a full EU identity, and making their emergent attitudes and beliefs towards EU uncertain. In this vein, an important research issue may be the spontaneous evaluations of EU which, in line with the recent literature, may be considered as embryonic precursors of successive explicit/reflexive beliefs and attitudes.

The present study is aimed at investigating implicit attitudes towards EU administering an adaptation of the Implicit Association Test (EU-IAT) to a sample of 210 EU participants (147 males) aged average 38.7 (*SD*= 15.7), along with the PVQ-21, a scale designed to measure basic values. Results showed: 1) An adequate reliability for the EU-IAT; 2) A positive value for mean IAT scores which is significantly different from zero, indicating that participants associate more strongly EU with good attributes rather than with bad attributes (and Rest of the world with Bad attributes rather than with good attributes); and 3) A significant positive correlation of the EU-IAT with conservation values (in particular with conformity) and a significant negative correlation with openness to change values (in particular with self-direction) with a moderate/high effect size. These results provide first evidence for reliability and criterion validity of the EU-IAT, and suggest that EU citizens showed an automatic and emergent bias in favour of EU that is related to conservation values.

*Key words*: implicit association test, automatic preference, european identity, implicit attitudes.

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### Novelty and Significance

*What is already known about the topic?*

- The Implicit Association Test measures attitudes and beliefs that people may be unwilling or unable to report.
- Positive bias in favour of one's own nation has been reported for several studies.

*What this paper adds?*

- Application of the Implicit Association Test to measure attitudes towards European Union.
- The role of automatic preference towards European Union as precursor of European identity.

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The European Union (EU) is a historically recent organization that regulates the common economic, social and security policies of 28 countries. The first treaty between member states regulated the economic activity of six countries belonging to the so-called Western Europe. Member states shared an economy based substantially on market. Only at the beginning of the 21st century the EU started a strong expansion in Central and Eastern Europe, aggregating countries characterized by an economic and political

system quite different with respect to the original members. If the common market has been enough to bring together several heterogeneous countries on an economic point of view, it cannot permit to develop a collective culture and a sense of common identity by alone (Gabel, 1998a, 1998b). In this vein, even if exchange and sharing projects, such as Erasmus, twinning programs between far communities, work mobility, deletion of frontiers, and the creation of a single currency, have been surely contributed to create a sense of emergent membership for EU citizens, these initiatives did not permit yet the development of a full EU identity.

As Bruter (2005) clarified, the process of EU unification depends critically on the identification of European citizens with a new super-national entity. However, several factors make difficult to find unifying policies and communication strategies to promote EU sense of identity (McLaren, 2006; Bradshaw, 1997). Among these factors we can remind the presence of many historical traditions and languages, religious differences, and an increasing perception of threat towards national resources on both a material and symbolic point of view. It is also important to remember the role played by the firms of each country in building the economic and social reference systems, as outlined in the approach proposed by the Varieties of capitalisms (Hall, 2001). In this vein, EU proposed a system of economic governance based on liberalization and deregulation, with an overshadowing of social interests. As a consequence, several citizens do not perceive EU policies as in accordance with their interests (Copeland, 2015). These problems led to a recrudescence of nationalism in many countries, especially where relevant unresolved social questions (e.g., out of control immigration or high level of public debt) appear to decrease strongly the quality of citizen's life (McLaren, 2006).

Overall, all these factors prevent many European people to develop a full identification with EU, especially when the unification process has taken on the meaning of a deletion of traditional cultural differences among European nations (Böttger & VanLoozen, 2012). In this vein, the construction of the EU seems to depend on a two paradoxical tendencies: the first leads towards a collective super-national entity whereas the second leads to conserve each national cultural history with their own consolidated traditions (Lehning, 2001). In line with this paradox, the feeling to be a European citizen and the development of a European identity seem rather far to be achieved, as showed by the results of anti-Euro/anti-EU parties at the last elections for the UE Parliament in the 2014, as well as in the more recent national and local elections in various EU countries.

However, the development of a European identity should be a key element in order to overcome cultural, economic, social, political, linguistic, and religious barriers between EU nations that historically have determined conflicts and wars. To overcome this paradoxical tendencies Habermas (1998) invoked "unity in diversity," so that the citizens need only be socialised into a common political culture based upon standard liberal constitutional principles. The unique variety European countries may allow to support the EU identity, focusing on their common elements with respect to other countries, but respecting national history and traditions (Habermas, 1998).

For all these reasons EU identity appears to be prone to fragmentation and not markedly defined compared to other political identities. In this view, similarly with what occurs when attitudes towards specific objects are weak (e.g., Holland, Verplanken & Van Knippenberg, 2002), several EU citizens may show uncertainty in assessing their sense of belonging to EU. In other terms, due to European cultural fragmentation, several individuals may consider themselves undecided when it is asked to them if they feel to

be part of EU. So, one of the most interesting research challenge on this issue is the identification of possible precursors for the development of a full identification with EU.

On the basis of Social Identity Theory (SIT) a positive attitude towards EU with respect to other countries may be considered a typical correlate for the development of a European identity (Feather, 1994). Social identity derived from those dimensions of self-concept related to social groups' memberships. In particular, from a SIT perspective, it has been hypothesized that individuals promote their positive self-views not only through their own personal experiences, but also through their group memberships. Individuals' self-image depends partially on intergroup comparisons, which lead them to favourable or unfavourable self-evaluations. On the basis of these social comparisons emerged the tendency to in-group biases that permit individuals to maintain their own self-esteem. Several studies confirmed this expectation of SIT, demonstrating that group members tend to evaluate better characteristics of their own group rather than those of other groups. In accordance with SIT, this kind of in-group bias is typically found among nations with high levels of patriotism and in individuals highly identified with their national membership. In particular, when a high status is ascribed to a specific country along with a high degree of national identification, it is more likely to observe significant in-group biases in members' evaluations (e.g., Feather, 1994). Roccas, Schwartz, and Amit (2010) investigated the relationship between personal values and the degree of national identification. More specifically, national identification, were found to be positively correlated with conservation values and negatively related to openness to change values in different nationalities (e.g., Americans and Israelis). Moreover, levels of national identification were influenced when the salience of conservation and openness to change values was experimentally manipulated.

Attitudes and preferences towards groups, institutions and nations are usually evaluated through self-report scales. However, some criticisms have been raised about the exclusive use of these instruments, which are characterized by different limitations such as impression management (e.g., Paulhus, 2002) and introspective difficulties (e.g, Hofmann, Gawronski, Gschwendner, & Schmitt, 2005) concerns. In particular, several studies demonstrated that weak (e.g., Holland, Verplanken, & Van Knippenberg, 2002) and uncertain (e.g., Galdi, Arcuri, & Gawronski, 2008) preferences are less able to predict behaviours with respect to strong and certain attitudes. This may be due to the subjective difficulty to capture the corresponding weak representations in memory using introspection (Hofmann et alii, 2005). In this vein, since EU identity is a fragmented and unstable portion of the self-concept for a lot of citizens, self-report scales may be inadequate to capture emergent attitudes toward European Union.

In the last decades, a series of social cognition models, which separate between implicit and explicit representations, were developed (for a review see Payne &, Gawronski 2010). These models represent a theoretical framework to investigate the factors that threaten the validity of self-report measures, such as impression management responding and introspective limits. In this vein, social attitudes, stereotypes (and many others psychological constructs) have been reformulated in a dual models perspective (e.g., Payne &, Gawronski, 2010). More specifically, implicit attitudes are based on a lack of intentionality, lack of awareness, spontaneity and low levels of cognitive strength, while explicit attitudes are described as intentional, aware, deliberative, requiring low cognitive strength processes. It is important to clarify that implicit attitudes are based on simple mnemonic associations between the target objects and attributes potentially ascribed to them. These mental associations can be automatically activated by specific stimulation

patterns (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006), and induced spontaneous evaluations that are not object of 'true' or 'false' values attribution. On the contrary, explicit attitudes give rise to the emergence of reflexive propositional judgments (Strack & Deutsch, 2004), which can be subjectively considered 'true' or 'false'. Regarding the relevance of implicit cognitions in social domain, several studies (see Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009 for a meta-analysis) demonstrated that implicit attitudes are able to predict significantly various behavioural criteria.

Importantly for the present study, automatic associations towards politicians were found to give a unique contribution in the prediction of political choice in undecided people, while reflexive judgments permit to predict vote only in decided individuals (Galdi, Arcuri, & Gawronski, 2008). In order to explain this effect, it was demonstrated that implicit preferences could influence the selective exposure to public information during political campaign of participants. The selective exposure leads, in its turn, to form explicit attitudes, which are in accordance with the initial implicit preference, and conducts finally undecided people to vote consistently with such views (Galdi, Gawronski, Arcuri, & Friese, 2012). In order to generalize these results, it may be possible to conclude that in case of uncertain or weak attitudes, implicit preference biases permit to provide a unique contribution in the subsequent consolidation of these automatic associations in the form of reflexive judgments, and above all permit to give a prediction of successive political choice. Therefore, considering that attitudes towards European community are expected to be weak and uncertain for several people, automatic associations should represent significant precursors of future reflexive judgments towards EU and of future possible political choice, as they work as a bias determining a confirmative selective exposure and new beliefs in undecided people (Galdi *et alii*, 2012).

The present study is aimed at investigating the validity of a new implicit measure of attitude towards EU, testing the presence of a significant EU implicit preference bias in European citizens. Moreover, to test the criterion validity of this new measure, and in accordance with studies mentioned before (Roccas, Schwartz, & Amit, 2010), the relationship between EU implicit bias and conservative vs. openness to change basic values was investigated.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

Sample consists of the set of participants involved in the survey from November 3rd, 2015 to June 6th, 2016 in the Re.Cri.Re Project, which is a three-year study aimed at analysing the cultural impact of the socio-economic crisis of the last decade in European societies and its implications for policy making (Salvatore *et alii*, 2018). This project investigated what kind of changes have occurred in European social identity in time of crisis, analysing the different cultures of European societies through several instruments widely used in various contexts of research and intervention. Among these instruments, an IAT designed to measure attitudes towards EU was administered to 210 subjects that are part of the whole Re.Cri.Re Project. The sample was composed by 147 men and 63 women with a mean age of 38.7 (*SD* 15.7), and with a high percentage of students (24.7%). Participants originated from different European countries: Italy (38.1%), Greece (29.5), Estonia (18.6) and France (5.7%), and the rest from other six European countries (8.1%). A high educational level was found for 44.4% of the sample (more than 17 years of education), while 32% of the remaining had an upper secondary

and post secondary education (from 14 to 17 years of schools). On a subsample of 40 subjects also an instrument (i.e., the Portrait Value Questionnaire 21 items version; PVQ-21) designed to measure basic values was administered.

### Instruments

*EU Implicit Association Test* (EU-IAT, Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998). As in the original IAT, participants were instructed to categorize a sequence of stimuli-words into two different target-categories "European Union" vs. "Rest of the World", and two different target-attributes "Good" vs. "Bad". Five stimuli-images have been included for each target-category (e.g., a symbol of EU for the 'European Union' target-category and a symbol of the united nation for the 'Rest of the World' target-category) and five words for each attribute-category (e.g., well-being for the "Good" attribute-category and poverty for the "Bad" attribute-category -for a complete list of stimuli please contact the correspondence author), with a random presentation for each block of trials. Seven blocks of trials were set: two initial training-blocks of 20 trials [blocks 1 (European Union vs. Rest of the World) and 2 (Good vs. Bad)] with a single-categorization task, a further training-block (block 5) of 40 trials (Rest of the World vs. European Union) with switched single target-categories location, four test-blocks of 40 trials [3-4 and 6-7 (European Union or Good vs. Rest of the World or Bad; European Union or Bad vs. Rest of the World or Good)] with double-combined categorization tasks. Subjects were instructed to perform all categorization tasks as fast and accurately as possible. To compute EU-IAT scores *D2* algorithm (Built-in error penalty procedure) was applied (Greenwald, Nosek, & Banaji, 2003). Higher *D2* scores represent higher preference for EU. Two test-halves were calculated applying the *D2* algorithm to blocks 3-6 and 4-7 separately.

*Portrait Value Questionnaire* (PVQ-21, Schwartz, 2006). Is a short version of the Portrait Value Questionnaire (PVQ), an instrument designed to measure values. This scale permits to measure both first order values (i.e., self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, traditionalism, benevolence, universalism) and second-order values (i.e., Openness to Change, Self-Enhancement, Conservation and Self-Transcendence) as defined in accordance with Schwartz Theory. In particular Openness to change concerns self-direction and stimulation values, emphasizing independent action, thought and feeling and readiness for new experience. Self-enhancement concerns achievement and power values, emphasizing self-interest and hedonism. Self-Transcendence concerns benevolence and universalism values, emphasizing the welfare and interests towards others. Conservation scale concerns security, conformity and tradition, emphasizing self-restriction, order and resistance to change. In order to measure each first order value two items were used (three only for universalism). The mean alpha coefficient for these values scales was .56 (ranging from .36 to .70). Composite measures for both first and second order values was computed, summing up items' scores for each value dimension.

## RESULTS

As shown in Table 1 neither mean latencies nor error percentages are correlated with the EU-IAT, indicating that cognitive factors related to these factors did not influence *D* scores. As illustrated in the method section, two parallel halves of the EU-IAT were computed applying the D scoring algorithm to blocks 3-6 and 4-7 separately. To assess the reliability of the EU-IAT, a split-half estimation was computed with Spearman-Brown correction using these two parallel D measures. Results showed an adequate level of reliability ($r_{tt}$= .67), consistent with estimations found in several others IAT attitude measures.

*Table 1*. Correlations between IAT measures.

|          | IAT_LAT | IAT_ERR | EU-IAT1 | EU-IAT2 | EU-IAT |
|----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------|
| IAT_LAT  | 1       |         |         |         |        |
| IAT_ERR  | -.02    | 1       |         |         |        |
| EU-IAT1  | .00     | .08     | 1       |         |        |
| EU-IAT2  | .05     | .10     | .50**   | 1       |        |
| EU-IAT   | .03     | .10     | .84**   | .89**   | 1      |

*Note*: **= $p <.01$.

EU-IAT D scores showed a positive mean score (*D* Mean= .47) that is significantly different from zero [$t(259)$= 22.80, $p <.001$], suggesting that most of participants were faster when "European Union" was associated with good characteristics and slower when "European Union" was associated with bad characteristics. No significant differences on EU-IAT mean scores emerged among the main countries involved in the project (i.e., Italy, Greece, and Estonia).

In order to avoid order effects on mean scores of the EU-IAT, the order of blocks was randomized between subjects. Half of participants followed this order: compatible block (EU-Good vs. RW-Bad) as the first session and not compatible (EU-Bad vs. RW-Good) as the second one. The other half followed the opposite order. No significant order effects were found on the EU-IAT *D* scores [$t(258)$= -.22, $p=$ .82].

In order to test the criterion validity, the correlations between EU-IAT and conservation vs. openness to change values were tested on a subsample of 40 subjects. As shown in the Table 2, EU-IAT was significantly and moderately correlated in a positive direction with conservative values, whereas was significantly and moderately correlated in a negative direction with openness to change values. These results are consistent with our expectations and support the criterion validity of the new measure. No significant correlations emerged with self-transcendence and self-enhancement values.

More specifically, considering all ten values proposed in Schwartz's model, the EU-IAT was positively correlated with conformity and negatively correlated with self-direction with a moderate effect size (see Table 3). All the other correlations between EU-IAT and basic values were not significant.

*Table 2*. Correlations between EU-IAT and general value orientations.

|                    | EU-IAT |
|--------------------|--------|
| Self-Transcendence | .06    |
| Self-Enhancement   | .17    |
| Conservation       | .43**  |
| Openness to Change | -.32*  |

*Notes*: **= $p <.05$ level; **= $p <.01$.

*Table 3*. Correlations of the EU-IAT with human basic values.

|                | EU-IAT |
|----------------|--------|
| Benevolence    | -.08   |
| Universalism   | -.04   |
| Self-direction | -.39*  |
| Stimulation    | -.21   |
| Hedonism       | -.18   |
| Achievement    | -.15   |
| Power          | -.10   |
| Security       | .25    |
| Conformity     | .39*   |
| Tradition      | .29    |

*Note*: **= $p <.05$ level.

## Discussion

The present study was aimed at investigating the psychometric properties and criterion validity of a new implicit measure designed to assess automatic associations towards European Union. In particular, an IAT was applied to measure implicit attitudes towards EU, demonstrating an adequate level of reliability and a certain degree of independence from potential cognitive confounds (e.g., no significant correlations with error percentage, mean latency and also no significant block order effects). Moreover, EU-IAT mean score was positive and significantly different from zero, indicating that participants were faster to categorize stimuli when the associative pattern was "EU-Good vs. RW-Bad" rather than "RW-Good vs. EU-bad". In other terms, results showed a significant positive bias towards EU with respect to the Rest of the World. Finally, as theoretically expected, results showed that the EU-IAT was positively and significantly correlated with conservation values, and negatively and significantly correlated with openness to change values. In particular, the EU implicit bias was positively correlated with conformity and negatively correlated with self-direction.

The present results provide first evidence for the reliability and criterion validity of the EU-IAT. Moreover, of great interest is the emergence of an implicit positive attitudes towards EU that, in line with Galdi *et alii* studies (2008, 2012), may be considered a sort of embryonic and automatic bias able to orient individuals' selective exposure of information about European policies. This automatic bias may direct subsequent formation of more consolidated reflexive judgments and may influence the identification with EU. In this vein, the additional value of the new measure is its potential predictive power on future political choices about European Union, especially if we consider that several people have uncertain attitudes and beliefs towards EU (Galdi *et alii*, 2008, 2012).

Moreover, the automatic bias towards EU was found to be significantly correlated in the expected direction with conservation and openness to change values (Roccas, Schwartz, & Amit, 2010), suggesting that it is founded on a conservative motivational pattern. These results may indicate that at the moment EU identity is based on conservative tendencies probably linked to the status quo of European Union and not on innovation tendencies.

A first limitation of the present study is the small sample recruited that is also not representative of all European countries. Future studies will be conducted including a higher number of participants, representative of all EU countries.

A second limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the design that does not permit to test some of the more interesting hypothesis linked to the interpretation of implicit EU bias as a precursor of EU identity. In particular, similarly to Galdi *et alii* (2008, 2012), in future studies it may be possible to verify that implicit bias can have a predictive power on successive information selective exposure about EU policies, and also on the development of a consolidated identification with EU.

A third limitation is the use of a 21 items version of the PVQ that, due to the scarce number of items, show some psychometric weaknesses above all in terms of reliability.

Finally, in future studies, using a sufficient number of subjects on longitudinal data, it may be possible to use a SEM approach with an improvement of results in terms of statistical parameters estimation (e.g., RI-CLPM; Hamaker, Kuiper, & Grasman, 2015).

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