Can Affirming National Identity Increase International Trust?
Experimental Evidence from South Korean, Chinese, and Japanese Nationals

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How can states with a history of conflict promote trust with one another? Distrust between South Korea-Japan and China-Japan aggravates security fears and limits institutional cooperation in the region. Existing studies support the promotion of a common, overarching identity (e.g. “Asian-ness”) over a strong sense of national belonging. Are salient national identities harmful or helpful for increasing trust between countries? Applying the psychological theory of group-affirmation to an international context and integrating experimental methods from behavioral economics, I aim to examine whether affirming national identities can increase trust of another country. In a novel experiment with South Korean, Chinese, and Japanese participants, I find that group-affirmed individuals reported higher levels of trust, measured by payments in a trust game.

Keywords: Trust, National Identity, Group-Affirmation, South Korea, Japan, China, Experiments, Trust Game, Political Psychology

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I. INTRODUCTION

How can countries with a history of conflict overcome distrust? Past interactions of war and colonization often create negative images between states, adding a layer of suspicion to the uncertainty in others’ intentions in international relations (Herrmann and Fischerkeller 1995, 415). Relations between South Korea-Japan and China-Japan are prime examples. Experts on Northeast Asia highlight distrust as “the critical driver in the region, with historical animosity constituting the initial negative template that informs behavior” (Cha 2003, 37, 39). Fraught with chronic distrust originating from a troubled past, time and again the countries have experienced disruptions in institutional cooperation and aggravated security fears (Chung 2015b).

As a way to reconcile groups, numerous studies have advocated an overarching sense of commonness, homogenization, or universalism that submerges existing group identities and downplays group differences (Adler and Barnett 1998, 3; Allport 1954, 24, 281; Gaertner and Dovidio 1993, 1; Haas 1958; Rosamond 2000; Nussbaum 1994; Ohmae 1995; Waldron 2002, 3; Barry 2002, 152; Lind 2008, 86; He 2008). Observers of international tension in Northeast Asia in particular tend to emphasize the negative effects of strong nationalisms in the region, regarding high attachment to the nation and national belongingness to be the undesirable culprits of conflict (French 2014; Lehmann 2013).

In contrast, I suggest a counter-intuitive way of increasing trust between groups through a reaffirmation of existing group identities. I share the assumption from social psychological studies that attachment to one’s group does not necessarily entail hostility toward other groups (Brewer 1999, 429; Herrmann et al. 2009, 751), and combine this insight with ideas from group-affirmation (Sherman, Kinias, Major, Kim, and Prenovost 2007, 1101-1103), a variant of self-affirmation theory (Steele 1988, 262). Focusing on trust in the public, this study assumes that psychological mechanisms in the public can affect foreign policy attitudes. I utilize data from a pilot study conducted for a larger project on group-affirmation. Notwithstanding limitations from the sample and data, as a preliminary test the findings highlight numerous possibilities for future extensions of the study, such as experiments in the field and/or with representative samples, and potential connections to policy implications as well.

Ultimately, I argue that group-affirmation enhances trust between people from countries that struggle from historical animosity. In an original experiment integrating methods from psychology and behavioral economics, I examine whether affirmation of national identity can increase trust between people from South Korea, Japan, and China. I find that group-affirmed individuals reported higher levels of trust toward their foreign opponents in trust games. These findings suggest important implications for relations between South Korea, Japan, and China.