

## **Construction of European Identity among Intra-EU Mobile Young Academics**

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**Abstract.** The development of a European identity is often discussed in connection with spatial mobility. However, even though the relationships between both has been touched on in previous research, it is usually not the main focus of such studies. This paper will specifically look into the importance of spatial mobility for the construction of a European identity among intra-EU mobile young academics. Junior academics are a particularly interesting sample group because they represent the potential future (trans-)national educational elite and may provide an example to follow for the rest of society. The findings show that European mobility does not lead to a European identity in a straightforward way but the experience of mobility overall adds in various ways to the construction of a European identity and to alternative models of social identity.

**Keywords:** *Europe, European identity, young academics, social identity, spatial mobility*

### **Introduction**

Although (or because?) the European Union is currently under constant attack from many different political agents, it continues to hold on to its core principle—free movement of work within the union. This includes academics, whose movements are especially supported by the framework of the European Research Area (ERA) and European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The work of the EU and its initiatives in higher education are not only attempts to build and strengthen a common research area and better allocate resources but they also support and foster an European identity among researchers from different EU countries (Mendez and Bachtler 2017). Academics are in many ways part of the national elites (Bourdieu 1998) and their support for an European idea is therefore important to implement the idea into the wider European societies. Meanwhile, a lack of identification with Europe among academics could be seen as an indicator of the lagging process of European integration in general.

Based on 60 biographical interviews from the project ‘Mobile transitions: mobile lifestyles? Career choices and way of living at the transition to transnational scientific careers in the EU’, which focused on German doctoral candidates studying



in France and the Netherlands, **this paper asks how young academics with EU-mobility experience perceive and construct their social identity? And, to what extent does it include a European identity?**

Although these doctoral candidates are not yet part of the established academic workforce, their path will eventually lead them into positions of societal and political significance. Usually in their late-20s or early-30s, these PhD candidates have lived in the Schengen and Maastricht periods almost all their lives. Our sample has experienced at least one intra-EU migration and in most of the cases they have experienced more European mobilities. Their biographies are often intertwined, personally and professionally, with people from other European countries. Therefore, and because of their process of horizontal Europeanization (Schäfer forthcoming), it is reasonable to look closer into the development of their European identity as a construction ‘from below’ (Scalise 2015). The analysis uses the documentary method and it is theoretically embedded in Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel et al. 1979). It is important to note at this point that European identity should not be confused or set equal with EU-identity or support for the EU, or vice versa, because these two things can exist separately (Condor 2012; Duchesne 2008). Surveys on European citizenship and EU-identity have shown that ‘respondents in all socio-demographic categories feel more attached to Europe than to the European Union.’ (European Commission 2018, 16), and European identity is more accepted when it is not associated with political aspects (Cmeciu and Manolache 2018). Therefore, this paper leaves the power of definition of what European identity means to the carrier themselves, ergo the interview partners. However, the analysis will show (in line with the prior mentioned surveys) that European identity does not equal EU-identity.

### **European identity as a social identity**

European identity can be defined by various terms and means, including political, federal, supra-national or cultural-historical identities (Condor 2012; Walkenhorst 2009). The notion of construction of identity is central to the analysis of European identity because it accounts for human action and influence (Favell 2005). In the context of this paper, this is the intra-EU-mobility activities of young academics. Therefore, this paper will utilize SIT, which has its origins in social psychology (Tajfel 1974, 1978; Tajfel et al. 1979; Tajfel 1979, 1981), but is very much applicable in a political psychology context, as can be seen in the following quote:

In the early formulation of the theory, Tajfel drew heavily on sociological constructs to develop his ideas on how societal beliefs about the relationships between groups guide members of particular groups in pursuing a positive sense of distinctiveness for their own group and thus for themselves. According to Tajfel, the social frame provided by intergroup beliefs influences whether people seek social mobility between groups, competition between their own group and another, or creative efforts to redefine the social evaluation attached to their group. Such efforts, in turn, are affected by sociological factors such as intergroup permeability, status stability, and legitimacy. (Hogg and Ridgeway 2003, 97)

This approach to social identity can also be found in the works of Goffman on identity (Goffman 2009) as a result of the interaction with others, although in Goffman's understanding the construction of the social identity can be part of an unconscious process, whereas the SIT puts more emphasis on the conscious aspect of identity work.

Social identity is knowledge—some more contemporary research calls it 'awareness' (Condor 2012)—about the own membership of a social group 'with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership' (Tajfel 1981, 255). These two components are complemented with an evaluation of positive or negative value connotation of this membership (Tajfel 1978). This leads to the construction of a collective (social) identity, which is shaped by norms, values, and practices that are associated with the group (Brewer 2001). A social identity results in mutual obligations and loyalty among the group members (Tajfel 1981). In demarcation to the personal identity, social identity is shared with others who belong to the same group (Castano and Yzerbyt 1997) and the individual stakeholder can be part of multiple social identities, in comparison to only one personal identity (Tajfel 1981). The advantage of defining European identity as social identity (as opposed to an individual identity) is that it can possibly eliminate 'expected historical, ethnic, religious, linguistic, or simply modernist kinships/connections among Europeans, and, thus, the replacement with practical, contextual, and functional connections among them.' (Ongur 2010, 141). The group membership and the awareness of being a member (saliency) is contextual and varies over the social situations that the individual is either in or refers to (Bellucci, Sanders, and Serricchio 2012). Social identity has the benefit of providing the individual with an alternative if he/she is not satisfied with his/her individual identity and to maintain a positive self-image. In the context of this study, the saliency can be Europe or the respective national context,

which leads the individual to his/her identity building. This saliency can lead to a stronger in-group feeling among national lines, with an emphasis on differences or including other Europeans through a comprehension of commonalities. This means that social identity has the capacity to either integrate or divide people (Brigevidch 2016).

European identity is described in contemporary research as a work-in-progress rather than a fixed social category (Duchesne 2008). Which brings me to the general criticism of the term and construct 'identity', as was prominently voiced in Brubaker and Cooper's 'Beyond Identity' (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Following their description of identity and outline of alternative constructs, this paper's underlying concept can be described as their proposed 'self-understanding': one's sense of who one is, one's social location and how one is prepared to act based on the two previous factors. Brubaker and Cooper's argument against the use of 'identity' and for 'self-understanding' (as well as 'identification' and 'categorization') is that the latter are nouns derived from verbs, and are therefore active and processual words that capture the essence of identity better than the actual term identity. Although I follow their argument that the concept of identity has many facets and is lacking a single consistent definition (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 4ff.), I do not share their view of the need to impose new linguistic placements to specify the use of the construct if the research is clear enough in its objectives and in the context in which the construct will be used.

As with European identity, national identity as a social identity is relational to its contexts. Research of the relationship between national and European identity is diverse, to say the least. Some studies suggest that both identities are rivals and opposed to each other: national identity relies on the relationship and perception of the 'others' (as social identities do) and those others can be other European nationals. National identity will only be reduced by expanding identity to a European level, and vice versa (Farrell 2010). In this scenario, national and European identity are exclusive and compete against each other. In contrast, most studies on the issue tend to perceive them as not competing (Busse, Hashem-Wangler, and Tholen 2012; Castano and Yzerbyt 1997; Risse 2010), or differentiate the competition and exclusion between the specific national identity and what it is based on (Valchev and van de Vijver 2009). In these scenarios, identity is conceived as multi-level/layered and nested (Kohli 2000), especially when the European identity is (for example) defined as a civic identity (human rights, democracy, etc.) rather than an ethnic

identity. These considerations are also reflected in empirical research, where 40 to 50 percent of the participants of Eurobarometer surveys identify themselves as national and European (Risse 2010). The same has been stated about the student population in Europe (van Mol 2013).

### **Mobility and European identity**

Mobility gives the opportunity to develop or reshape European identity and refigure the relationship between national and European identity. Cross-border mobility can provoke a stronger sense and self-awareness of one's own national identity by giving a chance to compare oneself to other people and their habits. However, mobility can also foster a European identity (Mazzoni et al. 2018) by discovering similarities between European people, habits, and so on, in comparison to non-Europeans (Garib 2011). Many studies address the question of what is relevant for European identity and how the underlying patterns are unevenly accessible for some people. For example, a study on orientations towards European identity among young men and women (Jamieson et al. 2005) found that 'formal education, organized educational trips and informal connections, through friends and family, and leisure travel' (Jamieson et al. 2005, 24) are decisive for the building of an European identity. Among these, personal contacts and travelling, which are often connected to each other, are reported to be important impulses to raise the awareness of being European and, therefore, lead to a more European identity. Travelling leads to comparison of shared cultural characteristics within Europe, as well as contrasting differences outside of Europe. This relational character of identity-forming in Europe is also acknowledged in other studies (van Mol 2013), which also emphasize the personal experience-based character of this process. Being European is seen by young people as a personal project rather than a political project, or something that is aligned with the EU as a political project. Their own personal experiences enabled their European identity. It can be argued that these personal experiences are usually made possible, or at least made easier, through the framework of the EU. For example, (Busse, Hashem-Wangler, and Tholen 2012, 3) found that 'Accordingly, other groups, like young people who travel across borders, are also likely to be more European. It follows that people who lack these opportunities or the interest to interact with their counterparts across Europe do not display this kind of identification.' (ibid. p.3) The connection between mobility and

European identity has also been established in other research focused on high-skilled workers (Favell 2011), or specifically on the topic (Deutsch 2015; Rother and Nebe Tina 2009), for example:

A 'European identity' is not given at birth but developed by way of 'doing'. Project surveys measured the number of European languages spoken, experiences of travel across Europe, and willingness to travel beyond national borders in the future as indicators of 'doing Europe'. (Jamieson et al. 2005, 91)

This study also identified travel and relocation within Europe as decisive factors for the Europeanization process of the stakeholder. In contrast, Hanquinet and Savage (2018) came to a more ambiguous conclusion in which network and cultural consumption are more important than actual physical mobility in Europe.

The question of mobility and European identity is inevitably connected to social background, education, and mobility. This is reflected in contemporary research, which suggests that people with a European identity generally come from higher-ranked social classes, where jobs are more likely to include or even demand mobility (Fligstein 2008). The knowledge of English, as the dominant language in the EU, depends on age, education, mobility, and the size of the native language group (Gerhards 2010). Educated people with similar professions, social activities and common interests with their like-minded and educated European friends are more prone to travel within Europe and are also financially stable enough to do so on a more regular basis. Furthermore and 'most importantly, blue collar and service workers' jobs are less likely than managers, professionals, and other white collar workers to have their work take them to other countries.' (Fligstein, Polyakova, and Sandholtz 2012, 115).

The European identity of professionals and entrepreneurs' is above-average in strength because of transnational/intra-European business relationships and cross-border mutual interest (Fligstein, Polyakova, and Sandholtz 2012). In summary, Fligstein's contributions make an interactionist argument that is also consistent with social psychological theories of identity: people who interact transnationally across borders in Europe will be more likely to identify with Europe. Well-educated young people in managerial and white-collar professions are more likely to interact regularly across European borders than less-educated and blue-collar workers. In other words, transnational interaction is predicted to be the causal link between education, on the one hand, and the Europeanization of identities, on the other hand (Risse 2010). This line of argumentation fits very well with this paper's sample

because the interviewees are part of the higher-educated professional class, who have mobility experiences.

Several studies have examined undergraduate students' mobility and European identity thanks to the Erasmus program, which is an institutional opportunity and has its own dataset. The Eurobarometer has been used as another source, although the definition of identity in the Eurobarometer has been conceptually criticized, (see, for example, (King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003). Therefore, the link between student mobility and European identity has been well researched. While it has been claimed that student participation in the Erasmus program strengthens European identity (Farrell 2010; Jacobone and Moro 2015; Mitchell 2012), others question this connection (Sigalas 2010; van Mol 2018) or at least see it as ambiguous (Kuhn 2012). For example, Mitchell's study claims 'the Erasmus experience increases participants' interest in Europe and the EU and that, as a direct result of the sojourn, students feel more European. Finally, the data from the survey confirm that Erasmus students are more likely to identify as European' (Mitchell 2012, 511). The weak point of this conclusion is that it can lead to an over-representation of 'Europeans' in the Erasmus program. The very same point is addressed in a study on exchange programs and European identity. Erasmus has a limited effect on the development of a European identity, simply because programs such as Erasmus aim to attract students who are already pro-European and endorse such ideas:

In short, mobility programmes in higher education address 'winners' of European integration who are already likely to be convinced of its benefits and who are already prone to feeling European. Consequently, university students might already be so prone to feeling European that an exchange abroad cannot 'add' anything to their Europeanness. (Kuhn 2012, 999)

This does not mean that cross-border mobility per se is unable to promote European identity, but it does mean that these exchange programs tend to preach to the converted. This argument is confirmed by another study on the influence of the Erasmus program, which states that the participants are satisfied with the program but that participation does not help their European identity to grow, and can even be counter-productive (Sigalas 2010). This problem also reappears in the last section of the findings. The novelty of this contribution lies in the primary focus on PhD candidates, who are part of the (junior) academic workforce and who are usually already living and working in the host countries.

## **Methods and data**

The empirical data was collected through biographical interviews with graduates of the social sciences and humanities (SSH), who had previously studied at German universities and who were working as PhD candidates at Dutch or French universities at the time of the interviews. The data collection was part of the project 'Mobile transitions: mobile lifestyles? Career choices and way of living at the transition to transnational scientific careers in the European Union' (Schittenhelm, El Dali, and Schäfer 2017). France and the Netherlands have the highest numbers of PhDs from Germany (Schäfer and El Dali 2019) and the sampling was limited to the SSH subjects for better comparability of the interviewees because the STEM subjects have different requirements of mobility and migration. A total of 60 interviews were conducted, with the vast majority of interviewees being in their mid-20s to early-30s, of whom 40 were female and 20 were male.

The narrative-biographical interview format was used throughout the project because it can be used as an explorative instrument, which gives the interviewees the chance to emphasize relevant topics without imposing the researcher's ideas and notions on them (Corbin and Morse 2003). The interviews started with an open stimulus, which aimed to put the interviewees at ease and allow them to speak freely. This ensures good quality information because the interviewee is not forced to talk about a certain topic but is instead enabled to cover subjects that are important to them, which should enhance motivation and contribute to the quality of the responses (Juhász Liebermann 2012).

The documentary method was used in the analysis (Bohnsack 2014; Nohl 2010), which is rooted in the sociology of knowledge (Mannheim 2013). This form of data analysis not only takes into account the content but also how and under what circumstances something is said or addressed; for example, if the question of European identity came up as a topic from the interviewees themselves, or if the topic was addressed following a specific question<sup>1</sup>. This analytic approach is

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<sup>1</sup> The relevant questions for this paper were 'What is identity for you and how would you describe your own?' and 'Did your experienced mobility influence or change you?' These questions were only asked when the topics were not already addressed in earlier passages of the narration, which was very often the case for the former question but not so often for the latter. This means that people would talk themselves about how their mobility changed them (in different ways) but not about their identity or issues related to identity.



especially fruitful in combination with the explorative function of the interview design because it uncovers and reveals explicit and implicit motivation and orientation. All of our participants had experiences with mobility in their professional (and private) lives, to a varying degree in terms of quality and quantity.

### **Variations of European identity**

In line with the topical openness of qualitative research approaches, it is important to mention that the question of identity was not necessarily addressed as a social identity. Instead, identity was connected to more personal dimensions—such as friends, family, work, or lifestyle—, which focus on personal identity. Sometimes the categories of (supra-/inter-/trans-) nationality were simply not mentioned at all, while other times they were explicitly denounced as something that does not affect their identity construction. For reasons of length and complexity and the researcher's interest in social identity, these narrations and explanation on personal identity are not included in this paper. However, non-response is also a form of response and this point will be addressed in the conclusion, especially in regard to their process of horizontal Europeanization (Schäfer forthcoming).

The presentation of the findings is organized along the different modes of construction of identity. Each group will be presented with their self-explanation towards the construction of their identities and the significance of mobility within that construction.

### ***Bi-national identity***

Bi-national identity means the adoption of a sense of belonging to two nations, in this case either to Germany and France or to Germany and the Netherlands (which was observed far less often compared to the first case, which will be explained later on). These cases are characterized by long stays in the respective foreign country, very strong language skills in the respective language, and personal-romantic relationships in the country. The development of a bi-national identity was a process over time and it usually grew in intensity. It was only found among participants who had already spent a significant amount of time in the respective country (usually since their Bachelor's degree or school, sometimes with disruptions). The genuine interest and experience in the country, familiarity with



society and culture<sup>2</sup>, and very importantly near-native like language skills were the foundation of incorporating a bi-national identity. These premises also explain why this pattern was unequally distributed over the two countries: According to previous findings, the trajectories into the countries in question significantly differ for the doctoral candidates (Schäfer and El Dali 2019) and therefore also shape the process of identity building. The interviewees in France tended to be far more often genuinely interested in country and culture. In contrast, our interviewees in the Netherlands reported that their choice of researching a PhD in the Netherlands was more ‘random’, with no intention to stay in the country for a longer period of time after graduation. With no or rather limited interest in country, culture, and language, an alternation of identity is unlikely. Janine was one of the few examples in the Netherlands who showed a bi-national identity. Typical for this pattern, she had moved to the Netherlands to study her Bachelor’s degree. Although she returned to Germany after graduation for a period of work, she specifically studied a bi-national Master’s program and secured her PhD position at the same university. Her general narration was very much focused on the Netherlands and the country was rendered in a very positive light in all sorts of aspects (e.g., higher education, working conditions, life quality, culture, etc.). Having had an initial positive experience in the Netherlands during her first mobility, Janine became very attached to the country and culture. Language was very important to find access to a social life beyond the academy, which is generally highly internationalized and where the English-language is widespread. However, she emphasized that she has not yet become completely Dutch but still ‘remembered’ (she talks about it in the passive form) her German identity when confronted with the problems or obstacles of daily life, which she perceived as being less of a problem in German. She only remembers this other (German) side of her social identity in negative or disadvantageous situations, turning to a more positive alternative for her social identity.

Even more pronounced examples of bi-national identity can be found in Thomas and Vanessa, who are both doing their research in France. As described earlier, this is no coincidence. Vanessa explained her identity as bi-national but

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<sup>2</sup> To speak of a French culture or German culture can be highly problematic and is repeatedly criticized from a constructivist point of view as being too essentialistic. However, this analysis only takes into account the interviewee’s perception and their subjective notice of what is relevant for them in the context of their identity-building. Therefore, it is not important if they objectively are familiar, understand or ‘get’ one or the other cultures, or if this culture really exists as an entity as long as their understanding of it plays a role in their identity formation.

immediately added that she does not mean 'nationalistic', pointing to a general perceived exclusion of higher education and nationalism or just the general taboo of nationalism. Instead, she describes her bi-national identity as 'cultural'. She continues that neither 'the French' in Germany nor 'the German' in France is alien or strange to her, in which she links identity to familiarity. She elaborates this point by giving an example of knowledge about pop music. Familiarity came through language and interaction on a daily basis, and in routine in knowledge and application of such knowledge, which she could only experience in France itself. Without mobility, she might have been a Francophile. However, to identify with France and the French, it was necessary to live among them. Her phrasing was interesting when she began to describe her identity—rather than saying, for example, '*I have a German–French identity*', Vanessa started with '*I naturally always want to say "I have a German–French identity."*' This implies, on the one hand, that such a bi-national identity is something desirable in her view but, on the other hand, it also implies that this bi-national identity is contested, either by herself or by others. According to SIT, she might have the feeling of not being part of the in-group because of her own subjective insufficiencies (whatever that might be in her view) or that (established) members of the in-groups are denying her the status of being a member (again, for reasons she did not reveal during her narrations). Vanessa was raised with both languages, but a bi-linguistic upbringing does not necessarily lead to a bi-national identity. Her mobility manifested her perception of being bi-national. In contrast, Thomas saw himself '*very clearly as German–French*', as exemplified through his dual citizenship (formalized awareness of the membership), the omnipresent use of French language in his everyday life and also in his dreams, his '*French peculiarities*', as well as '*not feeling as a stranger*' (in France) (emotional significance). This perspective shows again how the new surroundings when living in France played into the formula of a successful social identity building—awareness plus emotional connection plus positive connotation. In his previous mobility experience, Thomas was very keen to meet French people and not to stay in an international bubble (as can sometimes be the case during the Erasmus semester, which he cited as an example). Both Thomas and Vanessa constructed their bi-national identity through credentials that they only earned after their mobility to France and which were very much focused on the country. Being in France, and being interested and capable of exchange helped them to foster a part-French identity during the years that they had spent in the country.



The obvious question remains for people with a bi-national identity: why had their (mobility) experiences not led them to develop a European identity instead of a national identity? It should be noted that this is at the time of the interview, which does not mean that they might or might not develop such a European identity later in their lives. Those cases with bi-national identity were very much focused on the respective country of destination, having long stays in the country and culture, paired with the wish to continue their professional career and private life in the host country, and in the absence of mobility and experience of other countries. It is therefore not surprising that their space of mobility and awareness was 'limited' to the bi-national context, which was additionally reinforced through institutional settings in France, and was not extended to Europe as a whole. The absence of a European identity is not primarily because of the weakness of such an identity but is due to the dominance of the bi-national context and identity, which over-rides the feeling of making European experiences.

### ***Nested identity***

The most discussed and most prominent featured pattern of European identity in the current research (see the section on the state of the debate) is the nested European identity (Diez Medrano and Gutiérrez 2001). This pattern can also be found in the sample. Interviewees saw European and German identity not as a contradiction or something that would exclude each other, but as an amalgam of their own social identity. Sebastian begins his answer as follows:

I am a European, erm, (pause) so I am European, I am (pause) – What am I actually?  
I am a German European.

His slight indecision towards the answer is very typical for all of our interviewees. The question of identity is not necessarily something you would think about every day and it was not expected as a question in an interview about PhD mobility. The same struggle can be found in his weighing up—he first describes himself as a European and only then describes himself as a German European. The process of thinking of one's own identity becomes visible while giving the answer, and it shows how delicate and context-driven such an answer and can be. Being a doctoral candidate in France, his narration also very much focused on German–French relationships, cooperation, and differences. He took a comparative view between the two countries. In addition, his previous mobility experiences led him

mostly to France. In this way, his narration showed few differences to those of Thomas and Vanessa from the first group but Sebastian had then embraced a nested European identity instead of a bi-national identity. Even though his view of his identity draws on his experiences in France explicitly, he did not tie this experience exclusively to the country or culture of France; instead, France represented another experience in Europe, which is represented through differences—but of small magnitude. Mobility gave him the saliency that France is another European country and he felt more European because he was so well-adapted to France. The context that became relevant for him in the course of his mobility was France and the French culture, not as a distinctive national experience for itself but more as a European experience from the perspective of someone from another European country. This led Sebastian towards his European identity, without denouncing his German identity, as he stated:

Erm, yes, but between those countries, I am – I am a European. I like to return to Germany and I can well imagine myself to live there again.

The German–French experience, which led the first group to integrate both into their social identity to a more or less same amount, is addressed here as an ‘in-between’, and the solution to get out of being stuck in-between is to embrace a supra-national European identity. Sebastian closed his longer answer with: *‘insofar, I am German - European of German descent,’* which again emphasizes the nested dimension of his social identity.

Mobility can also exert an influence on the establishment of a nested identity in other ways. For example, Lydia explained that her mobility to the Netherlands had sharpened her interest in German politics and, therefore, also her German identity. She realized that although she resided in the Netherlands, she was not allowed to cast a vote in national elections in the Netherlands. This led her to think about citizenship and the status of being a citizen, which led to a higher interest in German politics (where she still could vote) and consciously identifying as a German, while being in the Netherlands. The mobility to the Netherlands provided a new context for her to rethink and reframe the question of political and civic opportunities, which were then transferred to her perception of her own social identity. She acknowledged that her dominant perception of her social identity was context-related and she gave an example of a recent conference in Germany, where she much more felt like the researcher from the Netherlands (among German researchers) and therefore perceived a stronger Dutch identity—the saliency was



very different from her usual environment in the Netherlands. Beyond the perception of differences in the political process in the Netherlands, in her narration she also emphasized on cultural differences, which triggered different processes of thoughts and reflections on cultural and social relations in Germany. This knowledge about different traditions, customs, and cultures in Europe, to which she came through her mobility in the Netherlands and other European countries, gave Lydia a European identity with a German identity nested within, even though her point of reference remained the native German culture and Germany. Farrell 2010, 109) said that: 'This kind of interaction is important in overcoming an exclusively national identity and allowing students to relate to the citizens of the other member states. In this way, a multicultural sense of membership is fostered.' In this case, Lydia's multicultural sense of membership is marked by the nested dimension of her identity.

The dependency of European social identity on the context (saliency) was further demonstrated by Katharina's story, who described her experience as a European as being the most intense when she was in the United States during her studies. Only through the saliency of being outside of Europe could she understand and embrace a European identity. Although she had been back in Europe for a while by the time of the interview, this experience had stuck with her and is 'still true'. Katharina described the same effect in the Netherlands, where she had embraced her German identity, resulting in a nested identity of German and European. Her mobility brought her to new contexts, which confronted her with the outsider's perspective of her identity, which she then took for herself. Because of the significance of her experience in the United States, her European identity was brought with her back to Europe and was then harmonized with her sense of German identity in the Netherlands.

Although these examples of nested identity addressed different paths and ways of how a nested identity can be constructed and perceived, they all have in common that a European identity is not seen as being in conflict with a German (general: national) identity, but is harmonized in interlacing. The European dimension of their social identity is relevant enough to be singled out in their narration, however constricted, or complemented by their German identity, which they still see as important in their identity construction. Cultural experiences abroad, such as in the country of PhD, are contextualized in an experience of 'Europeaness' rather than the specific national culture. Experiences outside of the space of

relevance, either in Europe or Germany, make them more aware of their background and this (subjectively) separates them from people in regions outside of Europe or France/the Netherlands.

### ***European identity***

This last pattern includes people who assigned themselves openly to a European identity. As with the other cases, these participants perceived and constructed their identity under relational terms. This was emphasized with examples where the context would make them feel more towards a specific notion of identity (e.g., German). Nevertheless, in describing their own identity, they chose to focus on a European dimension of their social identity, with slightly different perceptions and ways of construction. One of these ways was characterized by extensive mobility and relocation experiences in Europe. For example, Sylvia left Germany for vocational training and worked for many years in a third party European country before returning to her studies in the Netherlands, where she also worked as a research assistant and towards her PhD at the time of the interview. Her biography was dominated by high mobility and many relocations immediately after high school. When the question of identity was raised by the interviewer, she answered

I think, that my – that I (pause) do not have a national identity. I think. Like as I said, I said it before, I think I am a good European. That always sounds weird in the current political discussion around us, but I don't know, we – my German-being was never important for me.

Clearly indicating a European identity, Sylvia continues to explain that her choice of identifying as European is also a political decision for her. Equipped with experiences in three different European countries, she identified a current political turn in those countries as important for her own position in contrast to those more national-orientated political developments. Through her mobility she had been able to witness that certain political trends are not to be found isolated in single countries but are seen almost everywhere. She had created the out-group of national-orientated people (without devaluing them per se, as other passages show) to define the group of European people as her own in-group. This demarcation and shaping of a European identity have a clear political message for her. The notion on being a 'good European' in her own view should not be confused with righteousness but



demonstrates that she actually makes use of Europe in terms of a common space—she had travelled Europe, she had worked in different European countries, learned European languages, made friends with other Europeans, and so on. At the same time, the word ‘good’ indicates that all this is something that is desirable in her view, referring once again to the political dimension. In contrast, she described her German identity as weak for herself and not important, which also helped her to embrace an exclusive European identity.

While Sylvia’s case represents a pattern of high intra-EU mobility and is undeniable connected to a political view or vision on Europe, she was not professionally connected to the topic of Europe. This was the case for Adam, who worked in European studies and, maybe not surprisingly, identified himself very strongly as European. His response to the question of identity was as follows:

Er, I am of course influenced through my philosophical approaches during my studies. But (pause) what I can definitely say: I feel as a European and very strongly so. Er, and not as a German.

Similar to experiences discussed in the group of nested identity, he quoted experiences outside of Europe that had increased his awareness of his European identity. This could be seen in his feeling of happiness returning to Europe as ‘home’ from a trip to South America, because he saw more similarities within Europe than with countries or regions of comparison outside of Europe. His large social network covered Europe, which added to his strong notion of being European. This social network was very closely connected to his mobility activities, through which he made a lot of new acquaintances and friends. Furthermore, European studies programs are designed to foster a European identity among its students (King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003), which was reflected by Adam in his answer. It can be expected that students who choose European studies are generally keen and interested in Europe, and probably lean more towards pro-European issues than their fellow students.

Alper combines Sylvia and Adam’s indicators of the perception and construction of his European identity, and sheds light on a dimension that goes beyond these indicators. Similar to Sylvia, Alper lived (studied and worked) in three European countries, showing a high intra-EU mobility. Similar to Adam, Alper worked in European studies. Unsurprisingly, he identified himself as European. However, he felt that this question was closely connected to the question of citizenship—although Alper holds German citizenship, he was not born with it and had migrated as a child with his parents from a non-European country. His European passport allowed him



to pursue his studies in two different EU countries without much hesitation or financial burden (i.e., tuition fees), which he gave more prominence and emphasis than our interviewees with no migration background. Bearing in mind that free movement, and free choice of work and study could be a lot more difficult for citizen a non-EU country (such as his parents), Alper associated being European and having a European identity as something very positive and desirable. In his narration, he made it very clear that his social identity was and always is subject to the circumstances and contexts he relates to, such as feeling more German while being in the Netherlands. However, the possibility of hauling his identity up to a higher level than the national level gave him the chance to simplify questions of identity building for himself.

The group of people who are assigned to a European identity showed either a pattern of high intra-EU mobility—where they lived and worked in several European countries, resulting in an outspread social and professional network, which guided them towards a stronger European identity—or they had specialized in European studies, which signals an initial and early interest in Europe, or they had combined both patterns. In contrast to the nested identity, they did not foster a clear German identity, which was then easily ‘overridden’ by a European identity.

## **Conclusion**

This paper asked about how European identity is perceived and eventually constructed by doctoral candidates with European mobility experiences. As part of the intellectual class and with visible Europeanization pattern (Schäfer forthcoming), this group seem to be primed to foster a European identity. However, the pattern of forging a European identity was only one way among several forms of social identity construction, the others being a bi-national social identity and a nested social identity. A recurring model for all narrations was their approach towards their own identity not as something static but as something fluid and in change. The participants acknowledged that their self-stated identities varied over the contexts, depending on the salience of the context. Their biographies reveal the need and necessity to adapt and be flexible for academia and mobility.

Overall, intra-EU mobility did not necessarily or clearly lead to a European identity, although the theoretical conditions can be seen as very much in favor of this development. This is especially interesting because the same sample showed



evidence of horizontal Europeanization processes (Schäfer forthcoming). It also indicates that ‘doing Europe’ (as the Europeanization process is understood) and having a European identity are not necessarily entwined. Further research is necessary to explore in more detail and more explicitly the relationship between horizontal Europeanization and European identity. Mobility experiences also fostered a bi-national identity, with no references to a European dimension, when mobility included a long and focused history in the host country of the PhD. In those cases, the construction was marked by deep pervasion of the host culture and language, with a very positive and affirmative understanding and approach. However, intra-EU mobility also supported the formation of a European identity, either as a nested or as an exclusive identity. France or the Netherlands were salient as European countries and not as distinctive cultural experiences. The participants focused on similarities and not differences, and on extensive mobility to other European countries. The latter made the experience in the country less-dominating compared to the bi-national group. Beyond intra-EU mobility, extra-EU mobility gave an opportunity to make Europe feel more familiar and home-like, which strengthened European identity.

This paper’s novelty lies in its approach to spatial mobility as a social phenomenon to explain the construction of European identity within a social psychologic framework. It also goes beyond mere quantitative indicators and the student population, as studies on mobility and European identity did before. Politically, the findings show that mobility and its consequences are context-driven and that mobility within the EU is not necessarily enough or the only way to foster a European identity, which is in line with current quantitative longitudinal research (van Mol 2018).

Part of this study’s findings are also among its limitations—social identity building was not as important or central as was expected based on prior analysis of horizontal Europeanization and many of the interviewees talked about their identity in more individualized/personal ways. Therefore, the pattern of perception and construction of European identity that is introduced in this paper may have overemphasized the social dimension of identity for the sampled doctoral candidates. Furthermore, with one exception, the participants had all been brought up in Germany. Some studies have suggested that the relevance of European identity and its relation to the national/regional identity varies over countries and regions (Ciaglia, Fuest, and Heinemann 2018; Jugert, Šerek, and Stollberg 2019; Scalise

2015). Finally, Germany has a history of Nazi-related hyper-nationalism and chauvinism, which had militaristic consequences for all of Europe. This led a more ambiguous post-war relationship to national identity when compared to other European countries (Kattago 2001). Therefore, Germany occupies a very special place when it comes to national identity within the European context, and thus these findings might not be transferable to mobile doctoral candidates from other European countries.

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