Summary
Meanings Attributed to the Flag:
The Role of Social Identity Motives

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Flags are widely used in todays' societies as representatives of nations. Bu using flags, nations remind their members of their national group membership and encourage them for national group attachment. National flags, at the same time, activate the concepts, meanings, and feelings related to the national group in the mind of individuals (Billig, 1995). Research suggest that people's sense of national group attachment is closely related to their sense of self-esteem, belonging, distinctiveness, meaning, continuity, and efficacy (Brewer, 1991; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Taşdemir and Öner-Özkan, 2016; Vignoles, 2011). In other words, people develop attachment and attribute meanings to national groups based on some social identity motives (Taşdemir & Öner-Özkan, 2016; Taşdemir, 2019). Flags as being national representatives may function to maintain or enhance people's sense of these social identity motives (see Butz, 2009). People attempt to maintain or enhance their sense of self-esteem, belonging, distinctiveness, meaning, continuity, and efficacy, particularly, at the face of threat to social identity motives (Vignoles, 2011). According to motivated identity construction theory (Vignoles, 2011), these social identity motives are universal and each is important for individuals.

Assuming that flag lowering incidence poses a threat to social identity motives (see Butz, 2009), the present study aims to examine the meanings attributed to the flag in the context of reactions to the flag lowering incidence in Turkey, on June, 8, 2014. In the study, the meanings attributed to the flag are analyzed in relation to social identity motives. For this purpose, news on flag lowering incidence in the papers published following the incidence within 3 days are utilized.

Theoretical Framework

According to social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), group memberships play critical role in people's self-definition and people aspire to perceive their group memberships or social identities positively. For having a positively evaluated social identity, people tend to differentiate their in-group from a relevant out-group positively or try to achieve positive in-group distinctiveness. SIT argues that need for self-esteem underlies people's this tendency (Tajfel ve Turner, 1979).

According to optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991, 2007), people have group memberships or social identities based on needs for both belonging and distinctiveness. This theory predicts that in the groups, which provide the feelings of belonging and distinctiveness, people can feel safe (Brewer, 2007). Studies showed that when the feelings of social belonging (Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino & Sacchi, 2002) and social distinctiveness are threatened (Jetten, Spears, & Postmes, 2004), people tend to evaluate out-groups negatively.

According to subjective uncertainty reduction theory (Hogg, 2007), people aspire group memberships, which reduce uncertainty or provide with a feeling of meaning. This theory argues that people tend to identify with groups, which provide them with clear descriptions of beliefs, values, norms, and behaviors. When the feeling of meaning is threatened, people are more likely to evaluate out-groups negatively (see Hogg, 2007).

Motive for social continuity refers to people's need to identify with groups, which provide them with a feeling of connection between past, present, and future times (Sani, Bowe, Herrera, Manna, Cossa, Miao, & Zhou, 2007). National groups are particularly important in the perception of transcendence across time and space (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Studies showed that people perceiving threat to their national cultural or identity continuity tend to express more negative attitudes toward threatening group (Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2013).

Motive for social efficacy refers to people's need to identify with groups, which provide them with a feeling of power, control, or competence (Breakwell, 1996; Cinnirella, 1996; Lyons, 1996). In an experimental study,

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those participants, whose personal control were threatened, expressed more negative evaluations of out-groups (Fritsche, Jonas, Ablasser, Beyer, Kuban, Manger, & Schultz, 2013).

To summarize, having social identities people may satisfy their need for self-esteem, belonging, distinctiveness, meaning, continuity, and efficacy. According to motivated identity construction theory (Vignoles, 2011), these motives influence the meanings attributed to, and defense mechanisms employed for, group memberships. However, it is notable that contents of social identities are mostly shaped in social context and show cross-cultural differences (Vignoles, 2011). In an open-ended question study in Turkey, for example, researchers found that participants attributed the meanings to having a Turkish identity parallel with the definitions of this identity in the country (Taşdemir and Öner-Özkan, 2016; see also Taşdemir, 2019). The present study aims to examine the meanings attributed to the flag as being representative of national group, in relation with social identity motives.

Flags, Social Identity, and Inter-group Relations

As being symbols of national groups and identities, flags represent knowledge about the national group and its history and carry these to people's mind (Geisler, 2015). National flags involve the meanings and feelings related to people's national group membership (Billig, 1995).

Presentation of national flags is closely associated with perceptions of social identities and inter-group relations. Mere exposure to national flags may lead people to define themselves in terms of national group membership and to differentiate the in-group from the relevant out-group (Butz, 2009).

Definitions and representations of national flags show variation across time and place. In an experimental study, in Germany, participants mostly associated the flag with football, patriotism and National Socialism and among those exposed to the flag negative inter-group attitudes increased with the nationalism (Becker, Enders-Comberg, Wagner, Christ, & Butz, 2012). In USA, researchers suggested different kinds of results. Some claimed that American flag represents equality and humanism and decreases negative inter-group attitudes (among nationalist Americans) (Butz, Plant, & Doerr, 2007). Some others argued that American flag represents the national power and superiority and exposure to it increases nationalism rather than patriotism (Kemmelmeier & Winter (2008). Ferguson and Hassin (2007) suggested that those who follow political news are more likely to associate American flag with aggressiveness. In New Zealand, researchers found that in the minds of those exposed to flag, equality related concepts are more likely to be activated compared to power related concepts (Sibley, Hoverd, & Duckitt, 2011). As seen, the ways flags are defined may parallel with the perceptions of social identities and inter-group relations. In this way, it seems important to explore how flags are represented and what meanings they are attributed to (Butz, 2009).

Aim of the Study

National flags raise people's identification with national groups and lead them to feel the national group in integrity and solidarity. Presentation of national flag in a negative manner, on the other hand, is perceived as a threat and in such situations, flags play important role in the manifestation of social identity (Butz, 2009; see also Helwig and Prencipe, 1999). In the context of threat, national flags are presented more widely and people's awareness of meanings with respect to the national group does increase.

In this way, it seems important to investigate why people approach national flags particularly in the context of perception of threat. That is, what sorts of needs people meet by facing with the flags in the context of threat (Butz, 2009). The present study aims to put forth these needs considering reactions to flag lowering incidence in Turkey, on June, 8, 2014. As noted, in the context of threat, people attempt to maintain or enhance their feelings of self-esteem, belonging, distinctiveness, meaning, continuity, and efficacy, which they may derive from their national group membership (Butz, 2009; Taşdemir, 2019; Vignoles, 2011). In the study, it is expected that the meanings are attributed to the flag in relation with these social identity motives.

Flag Lowering Incidence: On 8 June 2014, the Turkish flag was brought down by the Kurdish protester in the Lice district of Diyarbakır. The protesters' illegal entry into the military unit and climbing up and getting the flag down has led to huge reactions throughout the country. After the incident, well-attended protests were organized and "respect for the flag" walks were made (Flag Respect Walk Start, 2014). At the same time, the flag was widely exhibited throughout the country in personal and public spaces and its visibility increased markedly (Yer Öfke Gök Bayrak, 2014).

Method

Data Collection

The daily national newspapers published following the flag lowering incidence on 8 June 2014 within 3 days and available in library at Anadolu University were used. The newspapers were Yeni Akit, Akşam, Cumhuriyet, Dünya, Evrensel, Güneş, Hürriyet, Milliyet, Ortadoğu,

Posta, Sabah, Star, Türkiye, Vatan, Milli Gazete and Yeni Şafak.

Process

The news on flag lowering incidence covered in the relevant newspapers were all examined. For the purpose of this study, news including the reactions to the incidence were given particular attention. These news, in general, involved statements of people covered directly or summarized. Among others, these statements reflected the interpretations about what are the meanings of the flag. The statements were given mostly by politicians (AKP, CHP, HDP, MHP, and BBP), MPs, ministers, governors, representatives of military associations, non-governmental organizations, and some other recognized persons.

Data Analysis

In order to investigate the qualitative data on the meanings attributed to the flag, a thematic analysis (Hayes, 2010) was used. This analysis allows to both producing previously defined patterns of contents (deductive) and exploring new patterns (inductive). Inter-rater consistency ratio was 87.81%.

Results and Discussion

Meanings attributed to the flag are defined as Flag is a source of proud, Flag is being a We, Flag is something distinguish us from them, Flag is to have a meaning, Flag is to be ever, and Flag is being independent and sovereign. These meanings may reflect social identity motives as proposed by motivated identity construction model (Vignoles, 2011).

Related to motive for social self-esteem, the meaning of Flag is a source of proud (e.g., "Glorious red flag with moon stars is Turkish nation's") was attributed to the flag. This seems consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and with this meaning positive social identity may be maintained or enhanced at the face of threat.

Related to motive for social belonging, the meaning of Flag is being a We (e.g., "Flag is the value of all of us") was attributed to the flag. This seems consistent with optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991, 2007) and with this meaning feeling of social belonging may be maintained or enhanced at the face of threat.

Related to motive for social distinctiveness the meaning of Flag is something distinguish us from them (e.g., "The flag, which is an important symbol that 76 million care about…") was attributed to the flag. This seems again consistent with optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991, 2007) and with this meaning feeling of social distinctiveness may be maintained or enhanced at the face of threat.

Related to motive for social meaning the meaning of Flag is to have a meaning (e.g., "The flag is sacred for every member of our nation") was attributed to the flag. This seems consistent with subjective uncertainty reduction theory (Hogg, 2007) and with this meaning feeling of social meaning may be maintained or enhanced at the face of threat.

Related to motive for social continuity, the meaning of Flag is to be ever (e.g., "Let us all die, let our flag live") was attributed to the flag. This seems consistent with the idea that national groups are critical for perceiving transcendence across time and space (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001) and with this meaning feeling of social continuity may be maintained or enhanced at the face of threat.

Related to motive for social efficacy, the meaning of Flag is being independent and sovereign (e.g., "The flag is the proof of the sovereignty of the Turkish nation") was attributed to the flag. This seems consistent with the idea that people tend to identify with groups perceived powerful, competent, or controlling (Breakwell, 1996; Cinnirella, 1996; Lyons, 1996) and with this meaning feeling of social efficacy may be maintained or enhanced at the face of threat. Thus, the themes described in the present study suggest that flags as reflecting national group identification play critical role in the manifestation of social identity and social identity motives, particularly, in the context of threat.