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Can Social Identity Theory Address the Measurement Tangle in Survey-Based National Identity Research?

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ABSTRACT

Survey-based research on national identity has long grappled with a ‘tangle’ of conflicting concepts, inconsistent use of measures and inconclusive empirical findings. This article addresses the measurement side of this tangle, evaluating whether social identity theory (SIT) can serve as a conceptual framework to clarify and organize existing indicators. Drawing on methods from content validity analysis, we examine survey instruments from the National Identity module of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP). The analysis shows that all items can be related to SIT’s central components, including identification and content dimensions. However, many items cannot be unequivocally assigned to a single concept within SIT, and the degree of ambiguity varies across items. These findings highlight both the promises and the limitations of SIT as a structuring tool for addressing empirical challenges in national identity research and point to the need for further theoretical and methodological refinement in this field.

1 | Introduction

Survey research on national identity can draw on a rich array of concepts and measures to study this complex phenomenon. To name but a few, some researchers distinguish between nationalism and patriotism (e.g., Davidov 2009; Huddy et al. 2021; see further Mußotter 2022, 2024), while others apply the civic-ethnic framework (e.g., Helbling et al. 2016; Kunovich 2009; Reeskens and Hooghe 2010; for a review, see Piwoni and Mußotter 2023) or focus on the national identity argument (e.g., Miller and Ali 2014; Rapp 2022). Unfortunately, these different research traditions largely operate in isolation, adhering to their own terminology without addressing how their work relates to contributions from other approaches—despite the fact that the key questions motivating this research are largely the same, such as whether national identity promotes solidarity and cooperation or, conversely, competition and conflict within and between societies.

This fragmentation has left the field in what Leonie Huddy (2016, 9) aptly describes as an impenetrable ‘tangle’ of ‘different and sometimes conflicting definitions, measures, and results’ (Huddy et al. 2021, 1013; see also Bochsler et al. 2021; Bonikowski 2016; Huddy 2023; Yogeeswaran and Verkuyten 2022). The inconsistent use of terms, definitions, and measures across studies hampers clear communication among researchers (Huddy 2023, 770). On the measurement side, large-scale comparative surveys—most notably the National Identity Modules of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP)—offer opportunities to study national identity empirically in great detail. Yet it is not uncommon for the same survey item to be used to measure different concepts. For example, the question ‘How proud are you of being [NATIONALITY]?’ has been used to assess nationalism (e.g., Blank and Schmidt 2003), patriotism (e.g., Arieli 2012; Kosterman and Feshbach 1989), and national pride (e.g., Hjerm 1998; Smith and Kim 2006). Such inconsistency makes it difficult to navigate the field and impedes the

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accumulation of knowledge. When terms, definitions, and measures are loosely linked, findings and conclusions become hard to compare and contextualize.

Addressing this complexity is a significant challenge, but this article aims to contribute to it by outlining one *potential* roadmap to unravel the tangle and taking one step on this road. We start from the premise that for unravelling the tangle we need an overarching conceptual framework consisting of clearly defined components that comprehensively describe national identity without overlapping. On the conceptual side, such a framework would allow us to categorize existing concepts within a unified system, which would clarify their relationships. On the measurement side, it would offer researchers a set of target concepts to operationalize and a means to evaluate existing instruments in terms of what they measure. At the same time, such a common framework would facilitate communication across research traditions by allowing scholars to explain their conceptual and operational choices with reference to it. In this article, we explore the potential of one particularly promising conceptual framework to serve this function with regard to *the measurement side*. We thus analyse how widely used survey instruments in national identity research fit into the framework.

Rather than introducing a new framework—which could risk deepening the existing tangle—we assess the potential of an established one: Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel and Turner 1986; Turner et al. 1987). SIT is the leading theoretical perspective on intergroup processes (e.g., Brown 2000, 2020) and is already widely, though inconsistently, applied in national identity research (e.g., Blank and Schmidt 2003; Citrin et al. 2001; Huddy and Khatib 2007; Schatz et al. 1999; Theiss-Morse 2009). We argue that this makes SIT a natural candidate for bringing greater structure to the field. However, its actual suitability remains an open question, and our analysis also serves as a critical evaluation of its applicability.

We focus on survey instruments from the National Identity module of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), a prominent and widely used data source in comparative national identity research (Smith and Schapiro 2015). Due to its prominence, focusing our efforts on this source promises the greatest benefit for the field. Using a method analogous to a content validity check (Haynes et al. 1995; Krebs and Menold 2019), we examine the wording of ISSP items and determine which component of SIT's conceptual framework each aligns with most closely. By focusing on these instruments, we address a significant portion of prior research and provide insights relevant to

a broad scholarly audience. Given its objective—mapping ISSP items onto the SIT framework—this article should be understood as a review piece that analyses and reflects on existing survey literature on national identity from a meta-perspective, rather than a conventional empirical study that collects and analyses new data. Its practical value and contribution to addressing the measurement-related complexity lies in helping researchers situate their work on national identity more clearly within the SIT framework, offering arguments on how existing and widely used measures might be interpreted and applied.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we detail our analytical approach, including the method used to map survey items onto SIT's framework. Next, we review SIT and its conceptual structure before analysing the ISSP items, battery by battery, to assess their alignment with SIT. Finally, we evaluate the utility of SIT in light of our findings and offer recommendations for improving both empirical research and the SIT framework.

2 | Analytical Approach

To assess whether SIT can help untangle the variety of measures used in national identity research, we build on established principles of concept formation and measurement theory (Blalock 1982; Bollen 1989; Goertz 2006). National identity is best understood as a 'multidimensional and multilevel' concept (Goertz 2006, 6), comprising multiple lower-level dimensions that define what national identity 'is'. According to SIT, any social identity consists of two second-level dimensions—identification and content—each further divided into subdimensions (see discussion and Figure 1).

Measurement theory prescribes that these lower-level dimensions guide the development of specific indicators (Bollen 1989). However, as our focus is on existing indicators, we evaluate how the ISSP items align with SIT's conceptualization of national identity. To this end, we conduct a content validity analysis (Haynes et al. 1995; Krebs and Menold 2019). Content validity refers to 'the extent to which a specific set of items reflect a content domain' (De Vellis 2017, 84; see also Almasreh et al. 2019). According to Almasreh et al. (2019, 215) this type of validity 'provides evidence about the degree to which elements of an assessment instrument are relevant to and representative of the targeted construct for a particular assessment purpose'. Thus, content validity is achieved if an item captures the aspects of the phenomenon defined within its conceptual framework rather than related but extraneous aspects (De Vellis 2017).

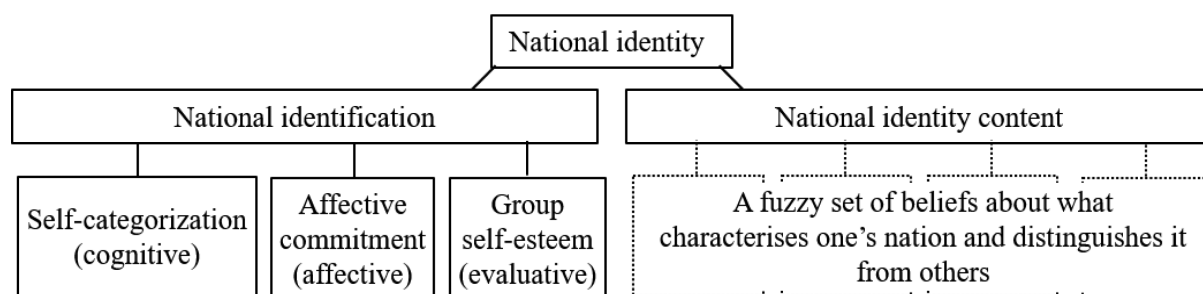


FIGURE 1 | Conceptualization of national identity (following SIT).

In content validity analysis, experts evaluate item content in relation to an explicit construct definition. As Almanasreh et al. (2019, 218) note, ‘the selection of experts to review and critique the content of an instrument should be based on well-defined criteria such as qualifications, experience, clinical expertise, and relevant training’. Their ability to make such assessments effectively depends on their theoretical expertise and familiarity with the measurement domain. Experts rely on their knowledge of the construct, methodological experience and the established literature to judge whether an item adequately represents a given subdimension (De Vellis 2017; Krebs and Menold 2019). Given the inherent subjectivity of this evaluation process, it is essential to provide explicit reasoning for the final assessment and be transparent about potential ambiguities. Importantly, the value of the method lies not only in the final verdict but also in the reasoning that underpins the content validity assessment itself.

In this context, we adopt the role of ‘content experts’. According to Almanasreh et al. (2019, 216), such experts are expected to possess ‘the necessary content expertise and theoretical background in order to provide a comprehensive assessment of the instrument’—criteria we fulfil as long-standing and active researchers in the field of survey-based national identity research (e.g., Mader 2016; Mader et al. 2018; Mader et al. 2021; Lindstam et al. 2021; Mader and Schoen 2023; Mußotter 2022, 2024; Mußotter and Rapp 2025; Piwoni and Mußotter 2023; Bruinsma and Mußotter 2023). Rather than merely offering a final judgement, our aim is to provide a transparent argumentation that links item content to theoretical subdimensions, culminating in a reasoned proposal that others may adopt, refine or contest. Concretely, we compare ISSP items, such as ‘How close do you feel to your country?’, with the definitions of SIT subdimensions, assessing whether responses to a given item plausibly reflect—are caused by—a single subdimension of national identity (Borsboom et al. 2004). Where such content-based plausibility is established, we treat the item as a potential indicator of the respective subdimension.

Where ambiguities arise in the assessment, we describe and discuss them without rendering a final verdict. In such cases, we reference prior research that addresses these issues. Previous studies on national identity have applied SIT (e.g., Huddy 2023; Yogeeswaran and Verkuyten 2022), and research on social identity measurement in social psychology (e.g., Ashmore et al. 2004; Ellemers et al. 1999) provides additional insights. Drawing on this literature enhances the transparency of our discussion, mitigates the subjectivity inherent in our approach and situates our analysis within broader academic debates, facilitating further discussion rather than foreclosing it.

Although content validity represents the most basic form of validity assessment, it offers a reasonable starting point for our question whether SIT can unravel the tangle of measures in survey-based national identity research. A poor fit between SIT’s framework and the ISSP items would cast significant doubt on the utility of SIT in addressing the measurement challenges. Conversely, a good fit would be preliminary evidence in support of SIT’s relevance and justify further exploration. Ultimately, our analysis serves both as an initial test of SIT’s potential and as a

stimulus for debate on how best to conceptualize and measure national identity.

3 | Social Identity Theory and National Identity

Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Turner et al. 1987), we conceptualize national identity as comprising two second-level dimensions: identification and content, each with multiple subdimensions. This approach builds on foundational contributions and subsequent work on group identification (Ashmore et al. 2004; Ellemers et al. 1999; Leach et al. 2008; Roccas et al. 2008).

Before elaborating on these dimensions, we address two preliminary points. First, in social psychology, social identity is often equated with the identification component alone (see Ashmore et al. 2004, 94), even if the relevance of identity content—or ‘meaning’—is widely recognized (e.g., Citrin et al. 2001; Schildkraut 2014; Yogeeswaran and Verkuyten 2022). We include content in the concept of social/national identity here, consistent with SIT’s emphasis on the in-group prototype (Hogg and Smith 2007; Reicher and Hopkins 2001) and common in research on identity development (McLean and Syed 2015). Second, while debates persist about how to conceptualize identification (e.g., Leach et al. 2008; Roccas et al. 2008), we adhere to Tajfel’s classical definition and Ellemers et al.’s (1999) elaboration.

The *identification* dimension refers to the subjective connection individuals feel with their in-group. Tajfel (1981, 255) defines social identity as ‘that part of the individuals’ self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance of that membership’. Based on this definition, Ellemers et al. (1999) identify three subdimensions of social identification: (1) self-categorization denotes the awareness of belonging to a social group and is a cognitive aspect; (2) affective commitment denotes the emotional attachment to the group and a sense of shared fate and is an affective aspect; (3) group self-esteem denotes the value connotation of that particular group membership, which can derive from both absolute assessments and relative (status-based) comparisons, and is an evaluative aspect.

These subdimensions highlight the multidimensional nature of identification. For instance, in the context of national identity, objective group membership (e.g., citizenship) may lead to clear self-categorization, but not necessarily significant affective commitment or high group self-esteem. Conversely, strong affective commitment may exist alongside critical evaluations of the nation’s status or trajectory. According to SIT, accounting for these distinctions is crucial for investigating the causes and consequences of different identification profiles. This raises the empirical question of whether existing survey instruments, such as those in the ISSP, adequately capture all three subdimensions.

The other second-level dimension, *content*, refers to the beliefs and attitudes that define what it means to belong to a given group. In SIT, this is conceptualized as the in-group prototype: ‘a fuzzy set of attributes that are meaningfully related to each

other and that simultaneously capture similarities within the group and differences between the group and others' (Hogg and Smith 2007, 94). Internalizing an identification with a group involves determining its prototypical characteristics, internalizing them and conforming to them when the group identity becomes salient (Hogg and Smith 2007; Huddy 2001; Reicher and Hopkins 2001).

SIT provides no specification of subdimensions of identity content, which is partially due to the nature of the concept. As discussed above, identity content is a *fuzzy* set of beliefs. Essentially anything might be (considered) a prototypical characteristic of the group. The specific content is the result of complex interactions between group members, group leaders and their environment, and hence fundamentally context dependent (Reicher and Hopkins 2001).¹ Moreover, identity content can be highly controversial within a group (Abdelal et al. 2006). This certainly applies with respect to national identity, where different (political) camps champion rivaling ideas about what the nation is—and should be—in most countries (e.g., Koopmans and Statham 1999). Consequently, one of the main foci of survey-based research has been to capture (enduring) variation in identity content *within* nations (Bonikowski and DiMaggio 2016; Jones and Smith 2001; Kunovich 2009; Reeskens and Hooghe 2010).

Figure 1 distils the previous discussion into a two-level conceptualization of national identity. The left side describes the neatly organized identification dimension and its three subcomponents. The right-hand side shows the content dimension, which, following the SIT, is not divided into specific subdimensions. The dashed lines and boxes indicate that such a conceptual specification is conceivable in principle and has been attempted in other studies (e.g., Abdelal et al. 2006; David and Bar-Tal 2009).² As we want to stick closely to the original SIT framework here, we do not attempt to structure the content dimension and leave this to later work.

4 | Mapping ISSP National Identity Items Onto SIT Concepts

The ISSP National Identity modules include four core item batteries that target national identity and that have been repeated verbatim in all three waves conducted to date.³ Additionally, a stand-alone item on general national pride was introduced in the second wave. Based on their content, we refer to these groups of items as the (1) closeness battery, (2) general pride item, (3) object-specific pride battery, (4) importance battery, and a mixed battery of items that we group into (5) superiority items and (6) (un)critical loyalty items. Three additional items from the mixed battery, which cover different topics, form a residual category (Miscellaneous). Table 1 reports the wording of the items as well as our grouping. For each of these, our analysis follows three steps. First, we briefly describe the question wording. Second, we assess how well the question wording aligns with the SIT subdimensions outlined above and discuss whether and how these or similar items have been classified in prior SIT-based research. Based on this second step, we conclude by assigning the subdimension or subdimensions to which each item is most appropriately assigned.

4.1 | Closeness Battery

The closeness battery measures how 'close' respondents feel to various reference objects at local, national and supranational levels. As a result, it addresses more than just national identity. Research that draws on multiple items from this battery often investigates the constellation of identities, particularly the relationship between national and European identities (e.g., Medrano and Gutiérrez 2001). For our purposes, the item that asks about closeness to one's own country is of primary interest.

From the perspective of SIT, this item is best understood as an indicator of the affective component of national identification. It directly verbalizes the emotional bond to the national category, a central idea in social identity theory. Correspondingly, the concept of 'felt closeness' is frequently employed in social psychological research as an indicator of group attachment. Factor analyses in this literature often show that felt closeness aligns with other indicators of emotional attachment, such as strong ties to the group, perceptions of shared fate and self-group merging (Ashmore et al. 2004, 90).

At the same time, there are arguments for interpreting this item as an indicator of the cognitive component, specifically self-categorization. Although self-categorization is typically treated as a dichotomous characteristic—individuals either perceive themselves as members of the group or not—the item might reflect nuances such as the certainty of self-categorization or the perceived fit between oneself and the national group (Ashmore et al. 2004, 85).

National identity research reflects this ambiguity. Studies employing the closeness item often cite Tajfel's multidimensional definition of social identity as the conceptual foundation. However, they differ in how they link item and concept. Some researchers explicitly use the item to measure affective attachment (e.g., Ariely 2012; Citrin et al. 2001; May 2023). Others treat it as a general indicator of the broader identification dimension without delving into specific subdimensions (e.g., Huddy and Khatib 2007; Pehrson et al. 2009; Staerklé et al. 2010).

In summary, the closeness item is clearly aligned with the identification dimension of national identity and other territorial identities. However, its ability to target specific subdimensions is ambiguous. Debate continues over whether it better reflects the cognitive or the affective component, or whether it is best regarded as a general, unspecific indicator of the overarching identification dimension.

4.2 | General Pride Item and Object-Specific Pride Battery

The ISSP National Identity module includes a general item on national pride—'How proud are you of being [COUNTRY NATIONALITY]?'—and a battery measuring pride in specific objects, such as 'How proud are you of the way democracy works?' Both target the concept of pride. Pride, while complex, is increasingly understood as a feeling of pleasure

TABLE 1 | Overview of ISSP Items.

Item/battery	Wording
Closeness battery	How close do you feel to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • your town or city • your [COUNTRY] • your [COUNTRY] • your [CONTINENT] Response scale: (1) <i>very close</i> ... (4) <i>not close at all</i>
General pride item	How proud are you of being [COUNTRY NATIONALITY]? Response scale: (1) <i>very proud</i> ... (4) <i>not proud at all</i>
Object-specific pride items	How proud are you of [COUNTRY] in each of the following? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The way democracy works • Its political influence in the world • [COUNTRY's] economic achievements • Its social security system • Its scientific and technological achievements • Its achievements in sports • Its achievements in the arts and literature • [COUNTRY's] armed forces • Its history • Its fair and equal treatment of all groups in society Response scale: (1) <i>very proud</i> ... (4) <i>not proud at all</i>
Importance battery	Some people say that the following things are important for being truly [NATIONALITY]. Others say they are not important. How important do you think each of the following is ... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to have been born in [COUNTRY]? • to have [COUNTRY NATIONALITY] citizenship? • to have lived in [COUNTRY] for most of one's life? • to be able to speak [COUNTRY LANGUAGE]? • to be a [religion]? • to respect [COUNTRY NATIONALITY] political institutions and laws? • to feel [COUNTRY NATIONALITY]? • to have [COUNTRY NATIONALITY] ancestry? Response scale: (1) <i>very important</i> ... (4) <i>not important at all</i>
Superiority items	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would rather be a citizen of [COUNTRY] than of any other country in the world. • The world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like the [COUNTRY NATIONALITY]. • Generally speaking, [COUNTRY] is a better country than most other countries. Response scale: (1) <i>agree</i> ... (4) <i>disagree</i>
Uncritical loyalty items	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People should support their country even if the country is in the wrong • The world would be a better place if [COUNTRY NATIONALITY] acknowledged [COUNTRY's] shortcomings. Response scale: (1) <i>agree</i> ... (4) <i>disagree</i>
Miscellaneous items	How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When my country does well in international sports, it makes me proud to be [COUNTRY NATIONALITY]. • I am often less proud of [COUNTRY] than I would like to be. • There are some things about [COUNTRY] today that make me feel ashamed of [COUNTRY]. Response scale: (1) <i>agree</i> ... (4) <i>disagree</i>

Note: This overview refers to the 2013 wave (ISSP Research Group 2015).

or satisfaction derived from affirming that one is meeting important identity goals (Tracy et al. 2020, 3). National pride, then, represents a group-based variant in which it is the

social rather than the personal self that appraises the group and experiences the positive emotion (Salice and Montes Sánchez 2016).

Although pride is not explicitly discussed in the original formulations of SIT (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Turner et al. 1987), the general pride item clearly aligns with the identification dimension. A more specific allocation to one subdimension, however, proves less straightforward. As a positive emotion, pride may be interpreted primarily as an expression of affective attachment. Yet pride is also inherently linked to evaluation, as it results from appraisals of the group. Tracy and Robins (2007, 264) describe pride as the emotion ‘that gives self-esteem its affective kick’, suggesting it can also serve as an indicator of group self-esteem within the evaluative subdimension.

This ambiguity is reflected in how items on general group-related pride are used in prior research. Scales developed to measure SIT subdimensions variously treat pride as an indicator of affective attachment (Ashmore et al. 2004; Phinney 1992) or group self-esteem (Ellemers et al. 1999; Leach et al. 2008). In national identity scholarship, the concept and measurement of national pride remain contested (Meitinger 2018; Mußotter 2022). While many scholars view national pride as a form of affective attachment, there are divergent interpretations. Some treat it as a neutral measure of affect, whereas others argue that it carries a ‘harder edge’ (Smith and Kim 2006, 128). Consequently, the general pride item has been used to measure a range of concepts, including nationalism (e.g., Blank and Schmidt 2003) and patriotism (e.g., Arieli 2012; Kosterman and Feshbach 1989). Others treat national pride as a standalone concept (e.g., Rapp 2022; Smith and Kim 2006).⁴

Turning to the object-specific pride items, much of the above applies, but the inclusion of specific objects introduces an additional layer related to identity content. Group-based pride arises when people perceive their group as meeting important identity goals, or, in SIT terms, when the group conforms to the group’s prototype. Taking pride in a given group attribute therefore offers insights into whether respondents consider this attribute as constitutive of their group.⁵ Blank and Schmidt’s influential work on German national identity uses this approach (e.g., Blank and Schmidt 1993, 2003). Their research posits that pride in specific collective national goods reflects both a positive emotional bond to the nation and the acceptance of those goods as prototypical attributes of the group. On this basis, they argue, variation in pride across different collective goods can be used to measure different types of national identity.⁶

In summary, while the general pride item clearly aligns with the identification dimension of SIT, it does not map neatly onto any single subdimension. Pride’s status as a positive emotion suggests a strong connection to affective attachment, but evaluative elements are also involved. Object-specific pride items introduce additional complexity, as they engage with identity content, complicating their classification even at the broader level of the national identity concept.

4.3 | Importance Battery

The importance battery asks respondents how important they consider various criteria for ‘being truly [NATIONALITY]’.

From the perspective of SIT, the importance battery primarily captures identity content. The approach of asking respondents to what makes someone truly French, Indonesian, etc. aligns closely with SIT’s assumption that people cognitively represent social groups through prototypes. The inclusion of the term ‘truly’ is pivotal, as it shifts the focus from formal citizenship requirements or average group member characteristics to attributes deemed constitutive—those considered prototypical for group membership.

This setup allows the battery to address core elements of national identity content as conceptualized in SIT. However, the degree to which this potential is realized depends heavily on the specific criteria included in the list.⁷

While we are not aware of an equivalent measurement strategy in research on other social identities, the importance battery has become a mainstay in studies of national identity. Its use in prior research aligns closely with our classification of it as a measure of identity content. Although our interpretation of the battery as reflecting respondents’ representations of group prototypes introduces a novel theoretical angle, many studies have implicitly or explicitly portrayed it in similar terms. For instance, several researchers referencing SIT have described the battery as measuring identity content (e.g., Citrin et al. 2001; Helbling et al. 2016; Mader and Schoen 2023; Reeskens and Hooghe 2010; Theiss-Morse 2009). Even in studies where SIT is not mentioned, and the term ‘identity content’ is not used, the importance battery is often framed in ways that align with this interpretation.

In summary, the importance battery unequivocally measures the content dimension of national identity. More specifically, it captures the symbolic boundaries of the in-group—those criteria that respondents view as defining who belongs to the national category.

4.4 | Mixed Battery: Superiority Items

Three items in the ISSP module measure the extent to which respondents perceive their own nation as superior to others. Two of these items directly target superiority, while the third—‘I would rather be a citizen of [Country] than of any other country in the world’—is more ambiguous. Respondents may endorse this statement for reasons unrelated to perceived national superiority.⁸

From the SIT perspective, these items are best interpreted as indicators of the identification dimension in general and the evaluative subdimension in particular. SIT posits that individuals strive for a positive evaluation of their own group, or high group self-esteem, ‘determined with reference to specific other groups through social comparison in terms of value-laden attributes and characteristics’ (Tajfel and Turner 1986, 16). Beliefs in national superiority reflect favourable outcomes of such comparisons, making them plausible indicators of the evaluative aspect of social identity.

However, this interpretation is not without ambiguity, stemming more from an indeterminacy of the conceptual

framework than from the design of the items themselves. Roccas et al. (2008), for example, integrate 'superiority' into their general model of group identification, treating it as equivalent to group self-esteem and a component of social identification. Yet, they also highlight a lack of consensus regarding whether superiority should be viewed as a distinct mode of identification (Roccas et al. 2008, 284). An alternative perspective conceptualizes superiority beliefs as manifestations of in-group bias, defined in SIT as any 'tendency to favor the in-group over the out-group in evaluations and behavior' (Tajfel and Turner 1986, 13).⁹ This distinction has significant implications. SIT identifies high group self-esteem as a *result* of favourable social comparisons, which implies that superiority beliefs and group self-esteem are conceptually distinct. Superiority reflects the outcome of a comparative process, whereas group self-esteem pertains to positive evaluations of the in-group itself. Supporting this distinction, measures systematically designed to capture group self-esteem—such as the scales by Ellemers et al. (1999) and Luhtanen and Crocker (1992)—do not reference outgroups. Instead, they focus exclusively on in-group characteristics, such as pride and satisfaction.¹⁰

Despite this ambiguity, we maintain that the superiority items can reasonably be classified as indicators of the broader identification dimension, with a specific connection to its evaluative subdimension. Their focus on positive comparisons between the in-group and out-groups aligns with the core premises of SIT, even if they do not perfectly overlap with narrower measures of group self-esteem.

4.5 | Mixed Battery: (Un)critical Loyalty Items

Two items in the ISSP module address views on the relationship between group members and their nation. Specifically, they ask whether individuals believe citizens owe their country uncritical loyalty or whether an honest appraisal of national attributes is desirable.

From an SIT perspective, these items are indicators of identity content. The first item reflects a group norm by specifying how members ought to behave based on their group membership. Similarly, the second item identifies certain actions—critical engagement with national attributes—as positive and desirable. Agreement or disagreement with these items therefore signals endorsement of different conceptions of what constitutes prototypical attributes of 'good' group members.

This interpretation aligns with the intellectual origins of the items in Staub, Schatz and Lavine's research on blind and constructive patriotism (Schatz et al. 1999; Schatz 2020). The key difference here is 'the *manner* in which one expresses attachment and allegiance to the nation' (Schatz 2020, 616; emphasis in the original), and more specifically in the attitude towards national criticism: blind patriotism involves unconditional allegiance, rejecting criticism as inappropriate, while constructive patriotism embraces criticism as a pathway to improvement. In the language of SIT, blind and constructive patriots can be seen as individuals who have internalized distinct prototypical norms regarding the relationship between group members and the group.¹¹

4.6 | Mixed Battery: Miscellaneous Items

Finally, the mixed battery consists of three additional items that address pride-related issues, each presenting unique challenges for classification within the SIT framework.

The first item concerns pride in national achievements in sports, which aligns closely with the sports-related item in the object-specific pride battery. As discussed earlier, the classification of object-specific pride within SIT is ambiguous, as it merges identification subdimensions and identity content. The second item asks whether respondents are sometimes less proud of their country than they would like to be. This item mixes elements of general pride, which—as previously discussed—is best interpreted as an indicator of group self-esteem, with the respondent's willingness to acknowledge that their nation may fall short of ideal standards. This latter aspect connects the item to the critical/uncritical loyalty items, as it touches on identity content concerning the normative expectations for in-group relations.

The third item, which addresses feelings of national shame, presents a similar duality. From the perspective of psychological research on emotions, shame is often considered the inverse of pride (Tangney and Fischer 1995), suggesting that the item could serve as a reversed indicator of group self-esteem. However, shame is typically triggered by recognition of negative attributes or failures of one's nation, which conflicts with the in-group norm of uncritical loyalty. Thus, a respondent's refusal to acknowledge national shame may reflect the internalization of this identity content.

5 | Discussion

The preceding analysis sought to address whether social identity theory (SIT) can clarify the complexities of survey-based national identity research. By mapping existing survey instruments onto an overarching theoretical framework, we explored the compatibility between the conceptual apparatus of SIT—arguably the most influential theory in group psychology (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Turner et al. 1987)—and the widely used measurement instruments included in the International Social Survey Programme's (ISSP) national identity modules (ISSP Research Group 1998, 2012, 2015).

The results yield arguments both in favour of and against adopting SIT as a guiding framework for national identity research. Summarizing our previous analysis, Table 2 provides an overview of the ISSP national identity batteries and their mapping onto SIT target concepts. While some nuance is inevitably lost in summarizing, the table highlights two degrees of classification ambiguity. Five of the six item groups align unequivocally with either the identification or content dimensions of SIT. The closeness battery (1), the general pride item (2), and the superiority items (5) tap into the identification dimension, whereas the importance battery (4) and the (un)critical loyalty items (6) measure identity content. However, most identification-related items cannot be clearly assigned to one of the subdimensions (self-categorization, affective attachment or group self-esteem). Only the superiority items unambiguously measure group self-esteem.¹² The object-specific

TABLE 2 | Overview of ISSP national identity batteries and SIT target concepts.

(No)	Batteries/items	SIT target concept
(1)	Closeness battery:	Identification— Affective component Identification— Cognitive component
(2)	General pride item:	Identification— Affective component Identification— Evaluative component
(3)	Object-specific pride battery:	Identification— Affective component Identification— Evaluative component Content
(4)	Importance battery:	Content
(5)	Superiority items:	Identification— Evaluative component
(6)	(Un)critical loyalty items:	Content

Note: Three items from the mixed battery are not included here; see section 'Mixed battery: Miscellaneous'.

pride battery (3) resists straightforward classification into either the identification or content dimension, which partly explains its inconsistent use in prior research (Bitschnau and Mußotter 2024). Resolving this ambiguity—and that surrounding the general pride item—may require integrating insights from emotion psychology on group-related pride (e.g., Smith and Mackie 2015). Given SIT's limited engagement with the concept of pride, such an integration could significantly advance both national identity and broader social identity research.

Critics may view the observed ambiguities as evidence against SIT's utility as a guiding framework. Conceptual gaps, such as the unclear relationship between pride, affective attachment and group self-esteem, as well as the theoretical distinction between intergroup comparisons and group self-esteem, further complicate SIT's application. These issues reflect broader challenges within SIT itself, as ongoing debates about the boundaries of key concepts (e.g., Leach et al. 2008; Roccas et al. 2008) suggest. Ironically, our effort to disentangle national identity research has exposed further conceptual tangles within SIT. Nonetheless, we argue that SIT's limitations do not negate its value entirely. Instead, they clarify areas where further work is needed in both national identity and social identity research.

The results also highlight practical implications for the use of ISSP data in testing SIT. While the ISSP allows for studying the relationship between broad national identification and certain aspects of identity content (or their associations with other variables of interest), it does not facilitate an analysis of the interrelations among the subdimensions of identification. For example, the data cannot address whether self-categorization alone suffices to trigger specific group psychological effects, or whether

affective attachment is necessary for that. Similarly, SIT predicts that individuals with high affective attachment but low group self-esteem will engage in compensatory behaviours, such as outgroup derogation (Huddy 2001; Tajfel and Turner 1986). These dynamics remain beyond the reach of the ISSP data, because they do not include *distinctive* measures of these concepts.

Our conclusions must be viewed with caution, though, as this study represents an initial, exploratory step rather than a definitive assessment of SIT's usefulness. The qualitative content validity approach employed here may be criticized as subjective. Other researchers may interpret or classify the ISSP items differently. Future research could refine and extend our analysis by incorporating more systematic approaches. For instance, quantitative content validity checks (Haynes et al. 1995), such as surveying experts, could provide a more robust, aggregated assessment of how ISSP items align with SIT concepts. Similarly, cognitive interviews or focus groups could shed light on how respondents interpret ambiguous items, such as the general pride question, thereby improving face validity (Latcheva 2011; Meitinger 2018). Another promising avenue involves examining correlations between ISSP items and instruments explicitly designed to measure SIT dimensions, which could help distinguish overlaps and clarify ambiguities (Westen and Rosenthal 2003). These complementary methods could confirm, refine,¹³ or refute the classification presented here, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of SIT's applicability to national identity research.

Independent of the specific results of our classification efforts and whether they withstand further scrutiny, we see a major contribution of this article as fostering a more transparent debate about measurement in national identity research—one that bridges different research traditions and enhances communication across them. Our main argument here is that to reach this goal, it would be paramount to find an organizing framework that can integrate these research traditions, where integration means that existing measures and concepts can, ideally, be seamlessly mapped onto this framework. Our more specific analysis how the ISSP measures map onto SIT hence represents merely one step on a longer quest. Along the way, SIT might eventually prove inadequate or another framework more adequate for the purpose. What is important is that alternative frameworks should be proposed and evaluated with similar rigour. The critical discussion, we believe, should not centre on whether a framework is necessary, but rather on which framework is best suited for this role.

As noted in the introduction, measurement issues are only part of the challenge in untangling national identity research. A full evaluation of the usefulness of SIT—or any competing framework—also requires assessing how well its concepts align with traditional national identity concepts. Whether SIT can resolve the conceptual side of the tangle remains uncertain at this point, but this uncertainty should be seen as an invitation to continued debate rather than a deterrent. Regardless of the outcome, pursuing a coherent and widely applicable framework is essential. Such an effort will enhance conceptual clarity, improve measurement consistency and facilitate communication across research traditions, ultimately benefiting national identity research as a whole.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Correspondingly, the ISSP initiators felt they would need a gargantuan list of indicators to capture the 'symbols and rituals that help constitute the sense [or content] of national identity' (Svallfors 1996, 131) across countries.
- ² Abdelal et al.'s framework in particular could be seamlessly integrated here as a specification of the content dimension. They distinguish four subdimensions: constitutive norms; social purposes; relational comparisons; and cognitive models. However, analogous to the fuzzy nature of identity content stressed in SIT, they also characterize these components as 'non-mutually-exclusive types' (Abdelal et al. 2006, 969).
- ³ See the core questionnaires of the National Identity I–III modules. We consider batteries/items Q1, Q4–Q6 in module I (ISSP Research Group 1998), Q2–Q5 and Q16 in module II (ISSP Research Group 2012), and Q1–Q4 and Q12 in module III (ISSP Research Group 2015).
- ⁴ To some extent these discussions in national identity research about the status of pride seem to reflect the distinction between authentic and hubristic components of pride (Tracy et al. 2020). Those who use the item as an indicator of pure attachment seem to have authentic pride in mind, whereas those who hear a 'harder ring' to the item seem to have hubristic pride in mind. Integrating these streams of literature seems like fruitful avenues of future research.
- ⁵ It is less clear what to infer from the absence of pride to a particular group attribute. This could mean that this object is not important to the person, or that it is important to them but they do not believe that the group currently meets expectations in this respect.
- ⁶ Examples of studies using this general measurement strategy are legion. So are these contributions aim to measure and the specific items used (e.g., Ariely 2012; Blank and Schmidt 2003; Davidov 2009; de Figueiredo and Elkins 2003; for a discussion, see Mußotter 2022). For example, Blank and Schmidt (2003) use items on pride in the democratic institutions and the social security system as indicators of 'patriotism' and items on pride in the history of one's nation and its achievements in sports as indicators of 'nationalism'.
- ⁷ Because SIT cannot speak to this question, we refrain from a discussion of whether the specific ISSP list realizes this potential. We would merely point out that the ISSP list is of course not comprehensive; that it might well be practically impossible to include such a list in a survey, especially a comparative survey (cf. Svallfors 1996, 131); and that the real question hence is whether the ISSP list gets the proverbial greatest bang for the buck.
- ⁸ For example, because their family members are also members of that nation and they do not want to be (symbolically) separated from them. Perhaps for this reason, some studies rely only on the first two when operationalizing national superiority (e.g., Ariely 2012; Davidov 2009; Huddy and Khatib 2007).
- ⁹ Correspondingly, the superiority items are often used in national identity research to measure nationalism. While nationalism is also an ambiguous concept, the intergroup aspect is stressed in many definitions (e.g., Citrin et al. 2001; Mummendey et al. 2001).
- ¹⁰ Another alternative is to treat the superiority items as indicators of affective attachment, as for example Powers (2022) does. This corresponds to the preference of national identity scholars to think of superiority as a feeling rather than a belief (e.g., Herrmann et al. 2009). Yet another alternative is to treat superiority as identity content, where some individuals may believe that a criterial attribute of the group is (and should be) its superiority to other groups. This view seems to be

implied in work on collective narcissism, which de Zavala et al. (2009, 1074) conceptualize as the combination of in-group identification and "an unrealistic belief about the unparalleled greatness of the group."

- ¹¹ More precisely, the concepts seem to link national identification with certain identity content. Blind and constructive patriots are people who are similar in their strong identification with the nation but differ in the prototypical norms that they have internalized regarding the relationship between group members and group.
- ¹² Note that on the content side, we did not introduce any conceptual subdimensions. Therefore, the framework precludes lower-level ambiguity on the content side by design. Ad hoc, however, the importance-battery and the (un)critical loyalty items seem to measure clearly different aspects of identity content. The importance battery it is about who belongs to the in-group, the (un)critical loyalty items are about whether in-group members—however defined—may criticize the group.
- ¹³ For example, prior research has already demonstrated partially differential item functioning of ISSP measures across contexts (Davidov 2009; Medina et al. 2009). Such cross-cultural or intertemporal variation may also exist with respect to the best assignment of items to SIT sub-dimensions.

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