

“Terms such as ‘true German’ [...] belong in the history books”: How Germans with and without migrant backgrounds understand concepts used in survey research on national attachments

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Abstract

Whilst survey research on national attachments has used various measures, the question of how respondents *understand* these measures, and especially the highly ambiguous concepts they entail, has remained understudied. Moreover, scholars have used samples consisting of “citizens”, thereby not distinguishing between citizens with and citizens without a migrant background. Drawing on qualitative evidence from six focus group discussions in Germany in 2023, we seek to contribute to filling this research gap and investigate the understanding of selected measures of national attachments and the terms they entail from the perspective of Germans with *and* without migrant backgrounds. In so doing, we explore the meaning of three concepts – namely, “true German” (*wahrer Deutscher*), “German people” (*deutsches Volk*), and “fatherland” (*Vaterland*). Our discussions indicate differences between these groups and show, among other things, that the understanding of Germans with a migrant background tends to be driven by an ethnic and ethno-cultural notion of nationhood, while the understanding of those without a migrant background often has a more civic notion. Moreover, the latter were more likely to question the three terms than the former. Overall, our study calls for refining extant measures to ensure they do justice to an increasingly multicultural society.

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KEYWORDS

civic and ethnic nationalism, migrant background, national attachment, survey measures, survey research

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a large body of survey research on national attachments has provided many valuable insights into individuals' attitudes towards their nation (e.g., Davidov, 2009; Huddy et al., 2021 on the nationalism–patriotism distinction) and notions of nationhood (e.g., Kunovich, 2009; Helbling et al., 2016 on the civic–ethnic distinction; for a review, see Piwoni & Mußotter, 2023) in Germany and beyond. However, there has been little study of how respondents *understand* these measures and the concepts that they entail, at least in the case of Germany. For instance, we know surprisingly little about what respondents associate with such an admittedly ambiguous term as “true German,” which is used in research on the civic–ethnic distinction (Lindstam et al., 2021, p. 100; see also Mader et al., 2021). Similarly, research on the nationalism–patriotism distinction has employed items such as “The world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like [COUNTRY NATIONALITY]” (e.g., Davidov, 2009; Huddy et al., 2021; Wagner et al., 2012), whereby it remains unclear what the broad term “people”—and thus “German people”—means to respondents.

Moreover, existing survey research on national attachment has been based on samples consisting of respondents holding national citizenship only, regardless of whether it occurred in the late 1990s (e.g., Blank & Schmidt, 2003), in the mid-2000s (e.g., Wagner et al., 2012) or more recently (e.g., Huddy et al., 2021; Lindstam et al., 2021). In other words, these studies do not indicate whether these citizens include people with migrant backgrounds and, if so, what attitudes this part of the population holds towards the nation—despite the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), the most widely used data source in this area, and other datasets, such as the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), including items asking about respondents' migrant backgrounds. However, even recent studies using these datasets (e.g., Huddy et al., 2021 on the ISSP; Lindstam et al., 2021 on the GLES) do not employ these variables and thus do not differentiate between national citizens with and without such backgrounds.

The same is true for qualitative studies on German national identity. Conducting semi-structured interviews, Miller-Idriss and Rothenberg (2012) have shown that feelings towards the nation and national pride are ambivalent and highly disputed. While valuable, they only interviewed “German citizens” and did not further report whether they had migrant backgrounds. Moreover, although 15% of the participants in Dittmann and Kopf-Beck's (2019) mixed-methods study on the meaning of being German were Germans with migrant backgrounds, they did not provide information as to whether their findings differed for Germans with and without such backgrounds. Overall, the perspectives of citizens with migrant backgrounds, defined as “people who were born without German citizenship and/or have at least one parent who was not born a German citizen” (German Federal Statistical Office, 2025; for a critique of the term, see e.g., Will, 2019), have been neglected in research on national attachments. However, and as shown in other qualitative studies (e.g., Holtz et al., 2013; Moffitt et al., 2018), Germans with Turkish backgrounds have a different conception of German nationhood in contrast to Germans without migrant backgrounds. As such, it is important to consider their perspectives when examining the meaning of German nationhood.

To the best of our knowledge, the present study is the first exploratory qualitative study that attempts to contribute to filling this research gap by investigating understandings of the measures of national attachment as seen from the perspectives of Germans with *and* without migrant backgrounds. In so doing, it makes two major contributions to the literature on national attachments. First, in six focus group discussions conducted in Germany in 2023, we examined

understandings of the measures of national attachment and, drawing on Mußotter's (2024) model for nationalism and patriotism, three associated concepts: "true German" (*wahrer Deutscher*), "German people" (*deutsches Volk*), and "fatherland" (*Vaterland*).¹ In so doing, we go beyond the very few qualitative studies in this field that have focused on either the meaning of being German (Ditlmann & Kopf-Beck, 2019) or the individual's feelings towards Germany and the meaning of national pride (Miller-Idriss & Rothenberg, 2012). Second, and in further contrast to the aforementioned studies, we consider the perspectives of Germans with a migrant background. Put differently, we compare how Germans with and without a migrant background understand the measures—and thus the three terms—and explore the potential differences and commonalities between the groups. In going beyond qualitative studies that examined German nationhood from the perspective of either Germans with Turkish backgrounds and White Germans (Moffit et al., 2018) or only German Muslims (e.g., Holtz et al., 2013), our interviewees with migrant backgrounds primarily represent the three largest immigrant groups in Germany: those of Turkish origin, of Polish origin, and from the former Soviet Union.

Studying persons with migrant backgrounds is of both academic and societal relevance; they constitute a growing section of the German population. Whilst Germany has not been regarded as an "immigrant" country for many years (e.g., Green, 2013; Schmidtke, 2017), it has de facto become one. Today, 29.7% of the German population (24.9 million) have migrant backgrounds, whereby 49.8% possess German citizenship (German Federal Statistical Office, 2024a). Germany currently has the second largest immigration after the US (IOM, 2024, p. 26). Traditionally considered the typical model of an ethnic nation (i.e., a community based on a common descent; e.g., Brubaker, 1992; Hogwood, 2000), Germany has, in recent decades, adopted a predominantly civic understanding of nationhood in spheres such as public discourse (e.g., Ditlmann & Kopf-Beck, 2019; Piwoni, 2012).

This article unfolds as follows: First, the measures commonly used to tap into national attachments in survey research (i.e., nationalism, patriotism, and notions of nationhood) are briefly described. Second, an analysis of the six focus group discussions follows, showing how participants with and without migrant backgrounds understand the measures and the three associated terms. In closing, we discuss our findings and offer suggestions for future empirical research on national attachments.

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH ON NATIONAL ATTACHMENTS

In quantitative studies on national attachments, the nationalism–patriotism distinction is one of the most influential lines of research (e.g., Davidov, 2009; Huddy et al., 2021; for a review see Piwoni & Mußotter, 2023) that has been applied in Germany and beyond. Addressing its shortcomings, Mußotter (2024) revisited this distinction. She introduced a novel triad consisting of nationalism and two types of patriotism that was empirically validated in several studies in Germany and another European country, Denmark. "Patriotism," defined as love for one's fatherland ("*Vaterlandsliebe*") and a strong loyalty to it, is operationalized by items such as "I love my fatherland," while nationalism, defined by a belief in the superiority of one's nation and other features such as a related belief in the superiority of one's people, is measured by five items, including "The German people are more important

¹Please note, that the term "country" is commonly used in measures for patriotism such as "I love my country" (e.g., Kosterman & Feshbach, 1989). In the German context, however, the term "fatherland" is the most accurate translation of the German term "Vaterland" (see also Kremer, 2016) and thus of "*Vaterlandsliebe*" ("love for one's fatherland"). According to the German dictionary (Duden, 2025), the term "Vaterland" means "the country one is from" and "the nation or people one belongs to". It is seen as a rather sophisticated, emotionally charged term that is not used often (see <https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Vaterland>).

than any other people in the world” and “The true Germans are not respected enough in Germany.” Notably, while terms such as “fatherland” have been used in previous studies in Germany (e.g., Blank, 2003; Mußotter, 2024), their meanings have hitherto been understudied. Similarly, concepts such as “people” or “German”—and thus “German people”—are included in frequently used items from the ISSP, such as “The world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like [COUNTRY NATIONALITY].” However, their meanings have not yet been studied. The same holds for the term “true German,” which is used in research on not only the nationalism–patriotism distinction (e.g., Huddy et al., 2021; Mußotter, 2024) but also, and especially, the civic–ethnic dichotomy. For instance, Lindstam et al., 2021 used the GLES dataset and assessed items “from a battery that asks respondents how important they think certain aspects are “for being a true German.” Likewise, studies drawing on the ISSP dataset (e.g., Helbling et al., 2016; Kunovich, 2009) have used a very similar item: “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?” Eight criteria are then presented, such as being born in the country, having legal citizenship status, speaking the dominant language, and having ancestors from that country. In summary, while these three terms are frequently employed, it remains unclear what respondents associate with them.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON GERMAN NATIONAL IDENTITY

Zooming in on qualitative studies on German nationhood, Dittmann and Kopf-Beck (2019) built and expanded upon the literature on the civic–ethnic distinction. Conducting a mixed-methods study with over 900 Germans, they explored the meaning of “being German.” Running a latent class analysis (LCA), they found four different classes, whereby the largest (accounting for over 39% of their sample) was called the “heritage-based identity class with a strong focus on language and culture.” In summary, they showed that “being German” can mean different things to German citizens, ranging from the importance of language skills and adhering to a “German” culture to the need to embrace democratic freedoms to the need to hold German citizenship. In another study on German national identity, Miller-Idriss and Rothenberg (2012) conducted over 90 semi-structured interviews, aiming to explore the individuals' feelings towards Germany, particularly feelings of national pride. They concluded that “feelings about the nation are often characterized by ambivalence, confusion, and contradiction [which] cannot be characterized easily as proud or not proud.” More specifically, they demonstrated that German citizens are “sometimes proud and sometimes ashamed, simultaneously dismissive of and inexplicably drawn to the nation,” thus calling for focusing more on “these shades of grey” that previous scholarship has neglected (Miller-Idriss & Rothenberg, 2012, p. 133). Their finding questions the validity of the frequently used pride items in quantitative research, which leave no room for such ambivalence (see also Latcheva, 2011; Meitinger, 2018 for similar findings).

Moffit et al. (2018) compared Germans with and without migrant backgrounds and showed, in line with Miller-Idriss and Rothenberg (2012), that they struggled with the notion of pride, because the term is still burdened by the Nazi past. Building on eight narrative interviews with Germans without migrant backgrounds (“White Germans”) and another eight with Germans with Turkish backgrounds, they showed that Germany is still seen as a primarily ethnic nation. In short, “[T]o be German... means having German ancestry” (Moffit et al., 2018, p. 884). In contrast to Germans with Turkish heritage, the “Germanness [of White] Germans was not viewed as being in question” (Moffit et al., 2018, p. 886). The authors concluded that “being German means being a White, non-Muslim native German speaker” (Moffit et al., 2018, p. 891).

Similarly, drawing on five focus groups with German Muslims, Holtz et al. (2013) showed that being German means having a certain look (i.e., a certain skin color and hair color), which also hints at having German ancestry. German Muslims and their “easily recognizable features like black hair or a dark complexion” consequently do not feel accepted as “being German” because they lack these criteria (Holtz et al., 2013, p. 240). Overall, qualitative studies on how German national identity is perceived point to significant differences in how German citizens in general and especially Germans with migrant backgrounds understand concept such as pride and the content of national identity (see also Çelik, 2015; for the Danish case see Simonsen, 2018).

Building and expanding upon these studies, our article (1) explores the meaning of three concepts that are widely used in quantitative research but arguably leave considerable room for interpretation (i.e., “true German,” “German people,” and “fatherland”) and (2) compares how citizens with *and* without migrant backgrounds understand them.

DATA AND METHODS

Within an exploratory research design, we conducted six focus group interviews in July 2023 via Zoom, with a total of 36 respondents. Participants were recruited by a specialized agency, which we chose because of their expertise in recruiting people, particularly from migrant backgrounds, and for reasons of efficiency. The agency also helped to collect the signed written consent forms and set up the Zoom meetings. For recruitment purposes, it was announced that we were interested in opinions about German society and German national identity. Participants were recruited for the purpose of discussing the survey research terms as analyzed in this paper and German national identity more generally.

Of the 36 participants, 15 were Germans without migrant backgrounds, and 21 were first- or second-generation immigrants, mainly from the former Soviet Union, Turkey, and Poland, the three most common origins of immigrants and their descendants in Germany. According to the German Federal Statistical Office (2024b), persons with migrant backgrounds from the former Soviet Union (4.5 million, of whom 2.83 million hold German citizenship) represent the largest immigrant group, followed by persons with Turkish migrant backgrounds (2.9 million, of whom 1.58 million hold German citizenship) and Polish migrant backgrounds (2.19 million, of whom 1.45 million hold German citizenship).

In our study, fourteen of the interviewees with migrant backgrounds held only German citizenship, while six held dual citizenship (i.e., German and another). There was also one interviewee who was only a Turkish citizen and therefore an outlier; we do not use material from this interviewee in reporting our findings. For the group of Germans with migrant backgrounds, participation criteria included (1) being born in Germany or having arrived in Germany before the age of 14 and (2) having at least one non-German parent. In addition, each respondent had to have reasonable German skills and have attended school in Germany.

Written informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews, and all participants were assured that their confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained. In line with the exploratory nature of our research, we aimed for a mix of voting preferences, age, gender, marital status, place of residence, level of education, and occupation. However, those living in Berlin were overrepresented, which can be explained by the location of the agency that helped to recruit the participants.

Two focus groups were conducted exclusively with Germans without migrant backgrounds (one of which comprised participants living in Eastern Germany), another three with only first- or second-generation immigrants, and the last was mixed. Each session lasted approximately 120 min. The interview template contained general questions about German society and its cohesion, German national identity, the criteria for becoming German, and the Holocaust and its

significance. In particular, we asked the following questions in every interview: “What do you associate with Germany in general?” “What do you associate with the term ‘true German’?” “What do you think about the term ‘German people’?” and “What do you think about the term ‘fatherland’ and thus ‘love for one’s fatherland’?”

Both authors of this paper were present in all focus groups. We are White, middle-aged female researchers, and one of us (Author 2) has a Polish migrant background (second generation). We introduced ourselves to the participants at the beginning of each session. Author 2 also mentioned her migrant background as part of that introduction and asked the questions. Mentioning this migrant background may have helped to equalize the power imbalance, especially in the mixed and migrant-only focus groups. However, because we did not share any personal experiences and because the discussions unfolded exclusively among participants, our position was more that of interested third parties, who, aside from asking questions, occasionally inquired to better understand interviewees’ standpoints.

Analytic procedure

Focus group discussions allow the collection of data at three units of analysis: the individual, the group, and the interaction (Cyr, 2016; Morgan, 1996). First, focus groups help to elucidate a range of individual opinions on a specific topic (individual-level data). Second, regarding the group level, “[F]ocus groups help to demonstrate agreement or disagreement on interpretations or understandings of questions and phenomena” (Cyr, 2016, p. 244). Finally, focus groups may be used to highlight interactions between participants. In the present study, we are primarily interested in whether differences exist between Germans with and without migrant backgrounds, with regard to their opinions on highly ambiguous terms such as “German people.” We thus used focus groups to explore patterns of consensus (where it exists) on the group level, and we refer to interactions to show how such consensus came about. In addition, individual-level data is conducive to illustrating such patterns.

While focus group interviews have been criticized for the group dynamic inducing pressure and bias and respondents adapting their opinions accordingly, it has also been argued that social interactions in everyday life are similarly shaped by such dynamics (Hollander, 2004). Moreover, internal evidence exists in the interviews themselves that participants did not shy away from expressing controversial viewpoints. Importantly, and in line with constructionist conceptions of the interview, we see the meaning created in the focus group discussions not as permanent “nuggets” to be “mined” (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 12) but as reflective of participants’ overall “repertoires” of meaning-making (Lamont & Swidler, 2014), which are re- and co-constructed in the interview situation.

Before analyzing the focus group interviews, each was transcribed verbatim. Our analytical approach is thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), which is especially appropriate for highlighting patterns (themes) within data. In so doing, we followed the six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), but applied them, as also suggested by the authors, in a flexible way so as to fit our research questions. Overall, we approached the data with the questions of, first, how individual interviewees made meaning of the terms we were interested in, and second, whether interviewees’ meaning-making regarding these terms was “patterned” when compared across interviews and between Germans with and without migrant backgrounds. These terms were “true German” (*wahrer Deutscher*) and “German people” (*deutsches Volk*), in terms of nationalistic attachments, and “fatherland” (*Vaterland*), under the heading of patriotic attachments, all common measures of national attachment (see e.g., Mußotter, 2024). All parts of the interviews that were relevant to our research questions were included in the analysis.

To understand whether “repeated patterns of meaning” (Braun & Clarke, 2006) arose, we used two techniques: First, we used “in vivo” codes to capture interviewees’ opinions

in their own words regarding the meanings of these terms and their connotations. Second, and to identify commonalities and differences between (1) the meanings expressed by the interviewees and (2) the two groups (Germans with and without migrant backgrounds), we used the constant comparative method (see Boeijs, 2002). In addition, we read the interview transcripts with a focus on whether and where participants openly agreed and/or disagreed with each other.

The main findings, derived from quotations taken from the transcriptions of the recordings, are presented in the following sections. We translated the quotations from German to English ourselves and, where necessary, edited the resulting texts for clarity of context. We used pseudonyms that reflected the interviewees' real names, using either foreign names/spellings or German names/spellings, depending on the individual's background. Interviewee pauses ("...") and omissions ("[...]") are indicated where appropriate.

FINDINGS

“True Germans are the people with German roots”

Surprisingly, when asked about the term “true German” (*wahrer Deutscher*), most citizens with migrant backgrounds agreed on an ethnic notion of nationhood, which would clearly exclude them. Thus, they understood a “true German” as someone with German roots. This resonates with “the ethnic-oriented master narrative that to be German... means having German ancestry” (Moffit et al., 2018, p. 884) but stands in contrast to the predominant narrative in public discourse of a civic and pluralistic German nation (Piwoni, 2012). The following statements by Amira, a 32-year-old German of Lebanese origin with dual citizenship, illustrate this:

Amira: There are ethnic Germans, and there are people with a migrant background that have grown up in Germany [...]

Interviewer: So, you would say that true Germans are ethnic Germans?

Amira: Yes, Germans who were born here. Not Germans with a migrant background with foreign blood, but the ones with German roots are true Germans.

Two points are noteworthy here. First, while being born in Germany and having “German roots” were listed as criteria, Amira seemed to emphasize the latter. Using the term “foreign blood,” she substantiated the notion of *jus sanguinis*, a community bound by blood lineage, a notion on which German citizenship law was based until 2000 (e.g., Hogwood, 2000). In so doing, and in line with the literature (e.g., Moffit et al., 2018), she hinted at a boundary that confronts second-generation immigrants in particular; these are people born in Germany but without German ancestors. Second, she used the term “true Germans” in a neutral manner and seemed to accept these categories in general and the distinction between Germans with and without migrant backgrounds in particular.

After Amira's statement, the discussion continued as follows:

Agnieszka: I am still thinking about it. It has never been a topic I have thoroughly dealt with.

But I think that I have an advantage. Appearance does play a role, unfortunately. If you are often confronted with prejudices because you look different, not like a German, then this will become a topic. And one can understand that.

Interviewer: How does a German look like, in your opinion?

Agnieszka: Well, the skin color [...]

Selin: I have not thoroughly thought about it either, but I see it like Amira [...]

Besides the importance of having “German roots,” there was agreement that appearance was particularly important with regard to whether one was considered a “true German,” as also shown in the following statements:

Ahmet: Well, I see it as follows: What is the difference between me, who has been living here for 52 years, who went to school here, who works here, and such a person? What is the difference between myself and a true German—except for my look?

[..]

Igor: Well, I have never had the problem that I was differentiated from a “true German.” [...] I have not had negative experiences.

Notably, and as suggested in previous studies (e.g., Holtz et al., 2013; Moffit et al., 2018), a “true German” has a certain appearance (i.e., a particular skin and hair color). It is therefore not surprising that someone such as Agnieszka, who has Polish roots, “has an advantage” in this regard or that Igor, who has a Russian background, has not had “negative experiences,” because their appearances do not differ from a “true German.” This contrasts with the experiences of someone such as Ahmet, who has Turkish roots.

Relatedly, interviewees such as Maja, a 38-year-old German of Polish descent, stated that there was no difference between “true Germans” and Germans with migrant backgrounds, “except for their appearance and their culture,” thus indicating an ethnocultural notion of nationhood (e.g., Lindstam et al., 2021). Strikingly, many also agreed that this culture differs from theirs (i.e., citizens with migrant backgrounds). For instance, Selin, an 18-year-old German with a Turkish background, noted that “true Germans” are “really different from us foreigners” in general and “pretty different, culturally speaking.” With this remark, she indicated that she herself identified with the “foreigners”.

In addition, some participants did describe the culture in more detail, with Agata, a 26-year-old German of Polish origin, emphasizing the “typical features” of the German character. These traits included “being obsessed with planning,” a “love for order,” being frugal, and not being very welcoming to guests. Interestingly, one participant highlighted “German virtues such as punctuality and discipline.”

Alongside this consensus on an ethnic and ethnocultural concept of nationhood among some of the interviewees, very few participants advocated a more civic concept. For instance, Jannek, a 21-year-old German of Polish origin, said, “In any case, he has to have a German passport [...] And he needs to speak German. He does not need to have German ancestors. That is nonsense [...] I have more German ancestors than the most fervent Nazi [...] And you have to adhere to the law: The *Grundgesetz* [German constitution], and not to any religious scriptures.”

While Jannek endorsed these civic criteria, he alluded critically to ancestry as a criterion, emphasizing that he has “more German ancestors than the most fervent Nazi.” When stressing the importance of the constitution, he seemed to be thinking of people with Muslim backgrounds, who are, in the German context, often accused of rejecting democratic principles and instead being in favor of “religious scriptures” (e.g., Eskelinen & Verkuyten, 2020).

Maxim, a 35-year-old with a background in the former Soviet Union and dual citizenship, also highlighted the civic notion that being a true German “is more a matter of attitude than of ancestry.” He continued, “There are not many of those [true Germans] anymore [...] a true German is someone who has certain values and who cares about those values. He aims for success and prosperity and loves his country without glorifying it. Simply a true patriot [who puts] Germany first [...]. But there are not many of those anymore.”

In contrast to the other interviewees, Maxim expressed a sense of nostalgia (“There are not many true Germans anymore”) and seemed to be concerned that the mentality of the “true

German” was fading. Perhaps paradoxically, given the civic notion expressed here, the statement also strongly resembles a claim made by right-wing populists that the country's glory days are in the past and must be restored, because present-day Germany is destroying itself (e.g., Elgenius & Rydgren, 2022; Steenvoorden & Harteveld, 2018).

Overall, the majority of the interviewees had a rather clear notion of a “true German” (*wahrer Deutscher*), supported by an ethnic or ethnocultural notion of nationhood. Moreover, with the exception of two interviewees who questioned the term (“There are not many things that are truly German anymore”), most interviewees seemed to “accept” it.

“(True) Germans are those with a German passport”

In contrast—and following the predominant conception in German public discourse (e.g., Piwoni, 2013)—most of the interviewees without migrant backgrounds agreed on a civic notion of nationhood. All of them posited that, in line with Article 116 of *Grundgesetz* (the German constitution), everyone with a German passport is a “true German” (*wahrer Deutscher*). However, interestingly, one participant felt that an individual should only have German citizenship (and not dual citizenship), because one should be loyal to only one country (“You cannot serve two masters”). This view resembles a critique often made by the Christian Democratic Union (CDU/CSU), a conservative political party in Germany, concerning dual citizenship (e.g., Hogwood, 2000).

In contrast to the views of the citizens with migrant backgrounds—and in line with the citizenship reform in Germany in 2000, in which *jus sanguinis* was supplemented by *jus soli* (see Green, 2000; Hogwood, 2000; Morjé Howard, 2008)—tacit agreement arose that a true German need not have German ancestors, further substantiating the civic notion of nationhood. For instance, Susanne, aged 60, said that one of her children had a father from the United Kingdom but that she would not regard that child as any less German than the other, who has a German father. This is noteworthy as Susanne also expressed sympathy for the Alternative for Germany (AfD), a right-wing populist party that bluntly promotes an ethnic notion of nationhood and thus the importance of ancestry (e.g., Pesthy et al., 2021).

Besides German citizenship, a few additional criteria were also mentioned as vital for a “true German” (*wahrer Deutscher*). However, the interviewees seemed to reach no consensus on these additional criteria, further illustrating the ambiguity of the term. On the one hand, some mentioned criteria that are usually regarded in the literature as ethnic (e.g., Kunovich, 2009; Reeskens & Hooghe, 2010) or ethnocultural (e.g., Lindstam et al., 2021), such as being born in Germany, holding “Jewish–Christian values,” and abiding by German culture (“You can tell if someone is German by his culture”), but these were strongly disputed by other interviewees. On the other hand, aspects usually seen as civic criteria in the literature (e.g., Helbling et al., 2016; Reeskens & Hooghe, 2010), such as an identification with Germany (“A passport does not necessarily mean that one also identifies with Germany, and vice versa”) and, relatedly, “healthy patriotism,” were highlighted. In addition, one participant stressed the importance of German language skills: “[preferably] native level—i.e., C1 or C2—and without any accent.” This criterion can be, depending on the context, regarded as either ethnic or civic (e.g., Piwoni & Mußotter, 2023). Overall, the findings are in line with those of Lindstam et al. (2021, p. 100), showing that “a substantial share of the German population embraces both ethnocultural and civic norms.”

Whereas the citizens with migrant backgrounds seemed to have a rather concrete notion of a “true German” (*wahrer Deutscher*), most of those without such backgrounds struggled with the concept. For instance, 48-year-old Regina said, “Heinrich Heine? [laughing] That sounds pretty random, ‘true Germans’. It could be something from the past—the true Germans with a [specific] physical appearance? That sounds random. Or do you mean the thinkers and poets?”

Mentioning famous German authors such as Heinrich Heine and stereotypical notions of Germany as “the country of thinkers and poets,” Regina tried to tackle the complexity of this “random” term. The fact that she laughed may suggest that she did not take the term seriously and felt insecure about it.

Like Regina, most participants questioned the term, as the following exchange shows:

Norbert: Is there a “true German?” I think there might have been a true German in the 19th century, in times of nationalism. But nowadays, Germany is diverse. I think one cannot say that there is the [one true] German [...]

Luisa: I personally agree and would also say it. My half-brother has a different father who is Serbian. Is my half-brother, who is half-Serbian and who was born in Germany, less German than me having German parents? [...] Saying “he is German” and “he is not German” is pretty difficult.
[...]

Jürgen: I think it is generally odd to answer such a question. How would you do it? One of my children was born in Bermuda, the other one in London. My wife is from Bermuda. I would never like to say: well, they are not German [...]

Susanne: Well, I am also struggling. I am just wondering if one would draw a German, how would that person look like

In contrast to citizens with migrant backgrounds, interviewees without migrant backgrounds regarded the term as highly questionable and outdated and stressed that they did not use it in their daily lives. To summarize in the words of 22-year-old Nico, “You better eliminate the [adjective] ‘true’ from [before] the term ‘German.’” In so doing, they distanced themselves from right-wing populists, who, in their view, use the term to intentionally exclude citizens with migrant backgrounds from public life. Drawing a parallel to the period of National Socialist rule, during which the notion of the “true German” was proclaimed, these participants hinted that the Holocaust was a latent, predominant theme in the discourse on national identity in Germany (Piwoni, 2013). For instance, 49-year-old Sabine said, “To be honest, I find these terms rather difficult. And I think they were probably used more during Nazi Germany. To be honest, it's a bit difficult for me to say, because I can't define it. It has a certain touch—well, an Aryan [...] blond and blue eyed.”

“Everyone with a German passport belongs to the German people”

On the meaning of “German people” (*deutsches Volk*), a consensus emerged among citizens with a migrant background, within one focus group, that the “German people” are primarily shaped by civic criteria. This contrasts with the previously discussed term “true German,” which was mostly associated with an ethnic notion of nationhood. As the following demonstrates, the participants concurred that everyone with a German passport and everyone who lives in Germany belongs to the German people:

Ahmet: Everyone who lives here, has been born here and has a German passport. Here in Germany is my center of life [...] And then you belong to the German people.

Maja: I also think that all who live in Germany, pay taxes and vote [belong to the German people].

Igor: Yes, as already said, all who live here, who have their center of life here in Germany.

Selin: All, who have been born here and who have a German passport.

Agnieszka: All who live in Germany and who maybe also feel as German somehow.

Amira: I would say all who have the German passport.

Surprisingly, while endorsing an inclusive notion of nationhood, they did not identify with the “German people.” Lale, a 29-year-old German of Turkish origin, expressed this contradiction very well: “Well, I cannot think of anything to say. I do not know; somehow, I feel addressed by it, but somehow, I do not. We also belong to the German people somehow. We live here; some of us were born here, but somehow, this is alien to me. I do not know.”

Interestingly, by using the term “also,” Lale said that they—that is, citizens with migrant backgrounds—“also belong to the German people, somehow.” Moreover, the adjective “alien” further substantiated her lack of identification with the term and her distance from the “German people,” even if she outlined that people with migrant backgrounds have been living in Germany and that some had even been born there. Thus, it appears that the civic notion of nationhood is not perceived as being a fully established reality, at least from the perspective of those Germans with migrant backgrounds, but is rather infused with ethnic criteria (such as German roots) that then manifest as a boundary.

While some found the term to be neutral, most had a predominantly negative image of the expression “German people” (*deutsches Volk*). With the exception of one participant, who stressed that the term was intended to unify, most participants felt it had an exclusionary character. Relatedly, agreement arose that the term was used by right-wing populists to demarcate native and immigrant populations. In summary, most participants said that the term was outdated and that they did not use it in their daily lives. Furthermore, two of the participants made interesting claims regarding the future of the term: Milena, a 26-year-old German with Polish roots, felt that the term was likely to disappear in the future, and Maxim, a 35-year-old interviewee with a background in the former Soviet Union, held that the term would eventually be banned.

“All people who live in Germany belong to the German people”

When asked about the term “German people” (*deutsches Volk*), the interviewees without migrant backgrounds once again endorsed a rather civic notion of nationhood. Unlike the citizens with migrant backgrounds, they seemed to consistently emphasize attainable criteria. For instance, 60-year-old Susanne said that the German people consisted of “all people who live in Germany, regardless of their origin or the region they come from, including people with a migrant background.” Some of the interviewees, such as 49-year-old Sabine, highlighted that “this is an association of all people who live in that country [...] as one people [...]”

However, while the majority of the participants endorsed a civic conception of the German people, they felt that the term has rather negative connotations, similar to those of “true German.” While not explicitly mentioned, the Holocaust as a latent “blockade to a specific interpretation of the *German Volk*” (Piwoni, 2013) recurred as a theme. As 62-year-old Jürgen said, “Terrible. It is as if we have gone backwards many years. ‘The German people’—what is that? I always focus on the person; I do not care much about nationality [...] ‘German people’ is a terrible thing to say. What does it do? You exclude some; you put others on a pedestal. I do not like it at all.”

With these comments, Jürgen seemed to hint at the Nazi period (“It is as if we have gone backwards many years”), a time during which the term “German people” was employed to justify the eradication of Germans with Jewish backgrounds (“You exclude some”). On that basis, he distanced himself from the term (“I do not like it at all”), highlighting that he did not think in those categories (“I do not care much about nationality”). Similarly, 35-year-old Manuela found that “thinking of people in those terms is no longer accepted” and that “you are likely

to be denounced as racist if you think in those categories.” One interviewee concurred, stating that one must be “very cautious” and that they “[tend] to avoid using them [these terms].”

While Nazism was the main latent theme, one participant made another historical argument for why the idea of one homogeneous people is more of a myth than a fact. As 56-year-old Helmut said, “I think we cannot speak of the ‘German people’ as such. The *Deutsche Reich* [German Empire] was founded in 1871, but before, there were just federal states such as Bavaria and many more. And there were differences. I think there has just never been a synthesis among the German people that was homogeneous. It has not existed [...]”

There was a general agreement that this term, much like “true German,” should no longer be used. In the words of the 24-year-old Luise, “These terms [“true German” and “German people”] do not belong in contemporary Germany but in history books and should be dismissed.” Mirroring their comments on “true German,” the interviewees agreed that the only people using the term today are right-wing populists who seek to exclude Germans with migrant backgrounds, whom they do not regard as part of the “German people.”

“Lebanon is my fatherland [...] and Germany my home”

In relation to the term “fatherland” (*Vaterland*), two competing notions were expressed during the discussions. On the one hand, a few participants with migrant backgrounds associated this term with their countries of origin. This was especially common in one focus group. In so doing, they sharply distinguished between their emotional attachment to their countries of origin and their less emotional attachment to Germany. For instance, Maja, a 38-year-old German of Polish descent, said that her “daily life is in Germany, [...] but [her] heart beats for Poland.” This use of the term “but” underscores the distinction she made between the two countries. Amira, a 32-year-old German with a Lebanese background, concurred and went into more detail:

Interviewer: If you think about the term “fatherland” and thus “love for one’s fatherland,” what do you associate with that?

Amira: Lebanon.

Interviewer: Why do you think about Lebanon, if I may ask?

Amira: In principle, our lives here are about making money [...] and investing it in Lebanon [...] It is important to not forget where you are from [...] It is our fatherland [...] Lebanon is my fatherland. My roots are there, and Germany is my home. It is a bit complicated to grow up in two different cultures [...].

Interviewer: So, it is not like you can have two fatherlands?

Amira: It’s difficult. The thing is that your fatherland goes back to your roots and is something you want to defend [...] You would give your blood for your roots [...] Lebanon is our fatherland; that is important. Germany is not really ours. We live here [...], we like it here. In some ways, we identify as Germans [...] But it actually belongs to the [true] Germans [...]

Amira seemed to see herself primarily as a guest worker in Germany, reporting that “[her] life is about making money” in Germany, for investment in her country of birth, Lebanon. In so doing, she differentiated between Lebanon, her “fatherland,” and Germany, her “home.” She touched upon the ethnic notion of nationhood again, explaining that Germany “actually belongs to the [true] Germans” and is therefore “not really ours.” In line with the literature on patriotism (e.g., Bar-Tal, 1993; Viroli, 1995), her strong attachment to Lebanon was accompanied by an expression of a readiness to sacrifice herself (“You would give your blood for your roots”).

Later, Amira explained her love for Lebanon by highlighting the exclusionary ethnic notion of nationhood that she faced:

The thing is that people also put a label on you. If I say, “I am German,” I often hear, “But you do not look German. Where are you from?” So, it is difficult to claim that Germany is my fatherland when the majority does not regard you as German, though you speak perfect German and have grown up here.

Amira thus explained that, like the concept of the “German people” (*deutsches Volk*), this boundary prevented identification with the term “fatherland.” Except for two interviewees, most did not consider Germany their fatherland but “just associate[d] the Germans with it,” as Lale said. Proposing an ethnic notion of nationhood, she stressed the importance of national ancestry: “Foreigners or people who are not originally from Germany would not use it [the expression ‘my fatherland’ to refer to Germany]” and emphasized her own sense of a lack of belonging.

In addition, for many interviewees, the term “fatherland” (*Vaterland*) had negative connotations, and they associated it with “terrible movies from the Second World War.” On a similar note, they found it outdated. In contrast, the term “home” (*Heimat*) was seen as a much better alternative. Interestingly, the interviewees not only preferred this term but also expressed a strong emotional attachment to it. Notably, Bahar, a 50-year-old German with Turkish roots, said, “[...] Love for one's home—that is a term I would use [...] Because Germany is my home, I love Germany, and I am committed to it.”

The general agreement that home is “the place that one feels one belongs to” resonates with the literature, which commonly associates “home” as “a symbolic space of familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment” (Antonsich, 2010, p. 646). “Home” was regarded by the participants as a term that could be applied to various countries simultaneously. For instance, Nader, a 25-year-old German with a Lebanese background, argued that he has two “homelands.” In so doing, he seemed to draw on the distinction proposed by Barrington et al. (2003, p. 293) between an *internal homeland* and an *external homeland*. Overall, and compared with the other two concepts (“true German” and “German people”), the terms “fatherland” (*Vaterland*) and “home” (*Heimat*) seemed to be much more emotionally charged.

“Fatherland is a term that does not fit in our times at all”

In relation to the term “fatherland” (*Vaterland*), little agreement existed among interviewees without migrant backgrounds. While two participants associated the term with Germany and thus “simply the country where one was born,” most mentioned old poems and pieces, history books, or old songs (such as “*Die Wacht am Rhein*”). No consensus arose on the term's meaning, but there was strong agreement on its connotations: Almost all participants regarded it as an old-fashioned term and, like the citizens with migrant backgrounds, preferred the term “home” (*Heimat*), as the following statements show:

Sabine: I have strange feelings. I think this is a term that one does not use anymore. Well, I do not know. Was this used in the past for the term *Heimat*?

Interviewer: *Heimat* would be a better term for you?

Sabine: Yes, *Heimat* would be better, but fatherland (*Vaterland*) has a bit of a military character [...] and has a strange aftertaste. I would not use it.

Susanne: Patriarch.

Interviewer: You do not like it either, Susanne?

Susanne: It does not fit in our times at all.

Interviewer: And *Heimat*?

Susanne: *Heimat* is nice. It is home [...] Yes, that is nice.

Sabine: I have been born here; my family is here [...] This is *Heimat*.

Interviewer: Do all agree with that?

Andreas: *Heimat* is where I feel accepted, where my friends live, where my family is [...] *Heimat* is where I am loved and where I feel well.

This notion of *Heimat* resonates with the literature that conceives of homes “as spaces of familiarity, comfort and emotional attachments, and feelings of security” (Lähdesmäki et al., 2016, p. 237). Notably, one participant (Andreas) introduced a further distinction that underlined the term's emotional character: While fatherland is a rather overarching term that is more neutral and objective, home is “a term of the heart” (*Herzensbegriff*) and refers to “family, nature, and a place in which one feels well.”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Going beyond previous research, this exploratory study provides insights into how Germans with and without migrant backgrounds understand measures of national attachment and thus the three highly ambiguous concepts, that is, “true German”, “German people”, “fatherland”, that these measures entail. Overall, our six focus group discussions revealed that the two groups have different understandings of these terms, demonstrating that whether respondents have migrant backgrounds has an impact that is worth investigating. This study has two major findings. First, the understandings of Germans with migrant backgrounds are driven by more ethnic and ethnocultural notions of nationhood and stress the need to have national ancestry to be a “true German.” In comparison to Germans without migrant backgrounds, they have a rather concrete notion of “true German” and a clear vision of what this person looks like. They themselves often lack these criteria (e.g., national ancestry, a “German” look) and are thus repeatedly confronted by a bright boundary that separates them from Germans without migrant backgrounds. Thus, we should interpret survey results on national attachments in general and those relating to the civic–ethnic distinction in particular with more caution; Germans with migrant backgrounds might score higher on the ethnic dimension, not because they themselves endorse such a notion of nationhood but rather because they perceive such a notion to be the dominating one. In contrast to the Germans without migrant backgrounds, they seem to accept concepts such as the “true German” and the “German people” and are less likely to question them. Relatedly, many of the participants with a migrant background identified Germany as their “home” (*Heimat*), distinguishing it from their country of origin, which they regarded as their “fatherland” (*Vaterland*) and to which they had strong, emotional attachments.

Second, and in contrast to Germans with migrant backgrounds, those without migrant backgrounds expressed a more civic notion of nationhood. In particular, they strongly rejected the importance of having national ancestry to be considered a “true German,” emphasizing instead criteria such as holding German citizenship and living in Germany. In contrast to Germans with migrant backgrounds, they questioned the three concepts much more and had difficulties describing the appearance of a “true German.” With the exception of a very small number of interviewees, the majority strongly distanced themselves from these terms, stating that the language is “burdened by the Nazi past” and is used by right-wing populists to exclude citizens with migrant backgrounds. Especially for the Germans without migrant backgrounds, National Socialism is a major chapter in the collective memory and, more importantly, a latent theme that predominates the discourse on national attachments (e.g., Hogwood, 2000; Piwoni, 2013). Our study thus links in with

the findings by Miller-Idriss and Rothenberg (2012) on the “pride taboo”, with Germans without migrant backgrounds being highly sensitive to terms such as “national pride” and concepts such as “German people.”

While providing valuable insights, this study has a few limitations that can be seen as points of departure for future research. Overall, we consider our study as a first exploratory work that examines respondents' understanding of three specific concepts (i.e., “true Germans,” “German people,” and “fatherland”) from the perspective of Germans with and without migrant backgrounds. In the future, more qualitative research with larger and different groups of Germans with and without migrant backgrounds is worth conducting to investigate further the differences between Germans with and without migrant backgrounds but also between different groups of Germans with migrant backgrounds. This avenue appears promising because, as shown in our data and in line with previous qualitative studies (e.g., Holtz et al., 2013; Moffit et al., 2018), respondents with migrant backgrounds who are more phenotypically “identifiable” as of non-German ancestry (i.e., a Turkish or Lebanese background) are faced with more boundaries and have a more exclusionary notion of “true Germans” and “German people” than other migrant groups, such as ones with a Polish background. Moreover, the study was conducted in Germany, which is a very specific context. In line with previous studies (e.g., Miller-Idriss & Rothenberg, 2012), we found that terms such as “true German” and “German people” are (still) burdened by the Nazi past, thus hinting at Nazism as a main latent theme in discourse on national identity in Germany. Moreover, in recent decades, Germany has undergone a significant change regarding its notion of nationhood, from an ethnocultural notion to a more civic one (see Piwoni, 2012). As such, our findings regarding the differences between citizens with and without migrant backgrounds might be conclusive for this case but not necessarily for other countries. Thus, conducting focus group discussions in other countries with traditionally civic notions of nationhood or, alternatively, countries with strong immigration histories (e.g., the US) seems promising.

Against the backdrop of our findings, our qualitative study highlights the need for further reflection and makes two suggestions for future survey research. First, given the differences between the two groups in this study, it is evident that understandings of these concepts are highly dependent on having a migrant background, which should therefore be taken more seriously. As such, it is important to systematically study the perspectives of Germans with migrant backgrounds to do justice to the increasingly multicultural German society. Of the German population (24.9 million), 29.7% have migrant backgrounds (German Federal Statistical Office, 2024a), which deserves more attention in the scholarly discourse on national attachments. It is striking that both the seminal works on national attachments of the late 1990s (e.g., Blank & Schmidt, 2003) and more recent ones (e.g., Lindstam et al., 2021) have failed to include Germans with migrant backgrounds and/or differentiate between Germans with and without such background. As such, we strongly suggest not only using categories such as region, education, and age but also including “migrant background” when generating samples for future research. If studies are to be representative, they must do justice to the perspectives of citizens with migrant backgrounds in Germany and beyond. Relatedly, as Germans with migrant backgrounds often have different understandings of these terms than those without such backgrounds, we call for survey research to adapt the measures accordingly. Respondents with migrant backgrounds do not consider the term “fatherland” as a single unified concept but distinguish between their country of origin and the country that they consider home. As such, this distinction must be explored with more empirical rigor, and concepts such as “fatherland” (*Vaterland*) must be refined and substituted by terms such as “country of origin,” “country of residence,” or simply “Germany.” Overall, it is important to note that we have focused only on Germans with migrant backgrounds and have not included in our analysis other persons with migrant backgrounds who do not hold German citizenship and are more likely to feel even less attached to Germany than the group we have focused on.

Second, it is worth highlighting that most of the Germans without migrant backgrounds agreed that the three concepts were outdated, stating that they did not use them in their daily lives and would rather “leave them in the history books.” Future survey researchers would consequently be well advised to substitute terms such as “fatherland” (*Vaterland*) for alternatives such as “home,” which were introduced by the interviewees in this study. Alternatively, items that use “home” as their object of attachment could be employed. In this way, the potential differences between “love for one's fatherland” and “love of home” could be analyzed. Moreover, in addition to “German people,” the term “German citizens” could be included in surveys, because it better aligns with the civic notion of nationhood that many people endorse today.

Overall, our study highlights the urgent need to adapt survey research on national attachments to the changing reality of multicultural immigrant societies. Only in doing so can we expect it to generate meaningful results.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from data4you. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study. Data are available from the author(s) with the permission of data4you.

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