Building a European Identity

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Abstract

We investigated the issue of the European identity by a social-psychological point of view. Building on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), we conceive the European identity as one of the multiple social identities individuals borrow from their membership in social groups. Thus, we expect a positive correlation between the strength of this identification and the allocation of decisional-power to the European Union. Despite the fact that the European Union is by definition heterogeneous, we also expected a link between the level of identification with the European Union and the perception of homogeneity amongst European citizens. The results of a study testing these two main hypotheses as well as the idea that different levels of identities (European, national, and regional) are not necessarily in competition, are presented. Finally, we present recent theoretical developments in Social Identity Theory and argue that a context-based conception of the European identity might better correspond to its phenomenology. Furthermore, we argue that such a conception allows us to look at the development of European identity as a project rather than as something that could or could not come out to the blue.

"Common Market is a process, not a product"

(Jean Monnet)

At about the same time that France gave up Algeria and that the Suez crisis took place, Diab (1963) published a very interesting study. He asked Arab nationalists to describe French people. Whereas some of the respondents only reported their perception of the French, others were also asked to describe the Algerians. Similarly, some respondents had to describe either the English alone or both the English and the Egyptians. The results are crystal-clear. When the respondents indicated their views about the French or the English in a context that included a rival group, the stereotypes ended up being much more negative. Does this pattern of findings, along with similar reports revealing the changing nature of social stereotypes, mean that our views about other groups, and for that matter about our own group, are fluctuating? More precisely, does this work indicate that stereotypes could be influenced by the specific context of comparison we find ourselves in?

In the present paper, we first summarize the main aspects of Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity theory (SIT) stands as a crucial contribution because it addresses the link between people's identity and many aspects of social behavior. We then present some data concerning the way people identify with their region, their country, and Europe as a whole. We show that the extent to which people identify with one or the other group is related to the perception of homogeneity of the respective groups. Moreover, we provide evidence that differential identification with the groups is associated with the allocation of power in a series of domains.

In a third section, we examine the specific contribution of a recent extension of SIT, namely self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987). We review the innovative ways in which the SCT approach conceives of people's identification with social groups. We then sketch our current research agenda regarding the impact of identity aspects on the integration of Europe. Contrary to the view that the content of our stereotypes is most difficult to change, we argue that the specific attributes associated with particular groups are highly sensitive to

the context of comparison. A second aspect of our perspective concerns the idea that people's identification regarding nested social groups are necessarily in competition. In contrast, we suggest that people can very quickly switch from one identity to the other depending on the specific context.

Social identity, ingroup bias and ingroup homogeneity

'The simplest statement that can be made about a nation is that it is a body of people who feel that they are a nation..."

(Emerson, 1960; quoted by Tajfel, 1981).

According to Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel and Turner, 1979), people define themselves both in terms of a personal identity and in terms of a multiplicity of social identities. Any specific social identity is defined by Tajfel (1981) as "...the part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1981). Thus, whereas our personal identity is idiosyncratic and refers to our uniqueness as individuals, social identity is shared with the other people who belong to the same group: male or female, psychologists or historians, Europeans or Japanese. To the extent that people behave towards other people and perceive their environment in accordance with their identity, any currently activated social identity is likely to influence perception and behavior. When we are looking a basketball game, we do perceive the players of our cherished team more often to be the victims than the promoters of aggressive acts. Of course, the reverse is true for the supporters of the other team. Accordingly, when judging the characteristics of the members of our group, say their likeability, their intelligence, or their performance, we judge them more favorably than the members of other groups. This phenomenon is known as ingroup favoritism and is clearly connected to the older concept of ethnocentrism (Sumner, 1906).

In a classic study, Tajfel and his colleagues (Tajfel, Flament, Billig and Bundy, 1971) wanted to examine the minimal conditions for ingroup bias to emerge. To achieve this goal, they decided to start with a minimal setting in which no bias would be observed. Then, supposedly, it would be possible to examine the impact of various factors. As it turned out, the experiment was a total failure. Indeed, participants always displayed ingroup favoritism.

Specifically, the study involved students who were categorized according to their alleged preferences for one of two painters. Membership to one or the other group was in fact random. Later on, participants were asked to allocate money to various group members. Results indicate the presence of ingroup favoritism. Interestingly, participants were more concerned in mazimizing the difference between the two groups (giving more to their own group) than in assuring to their group the maximum gain (minimizing the differences between the two groups).According to Tajfel, the fact that ingroup favoritism emerges even in this minimal context is the consequence of people's tendency to achieve a positive self-evaluation when they compare themselves to others (Festinger, 1954). Because the only way for people to achieve a positive identity is through their social identity, in this minimal context they tend to differentiate their ingroup from the other groups (Tajfel, 1981). Clearly, SIT posits a direct link between social identity on the one hand and social perception and behavior on the other. Ingroup favoritism constitutes a good example of the influence of social categorization on social behavior.

In addition to ingroup bias, research indicates that the judgment of ingroup homogeneity is also linked to the level of identification with the group. For instance, in a study conducted by Kelly (1989), participants were asked to judge the degree of homogeneity of the labour and conservative political parties on various dimensions. What she observed was that, as far as specific political issues were concerned, the official members of the conservative party perceived a greater degree of homogeneity within their own party than simple supporters did. Moreover, the official members also perceived the labour party (the ingroup) to be more homogeneous than the conservative party (the outgroup). Along the same lines, Simon and Brown (1987) categorized participants as members of a minority or a majority. They found

that minority members displayed more ingroup homogeneity than majority members. Interestingly, they also reported a stronger degree of group identification among members of minorities than among members of the majority.

More recently, Castano & Yzerbyt (in press) observed a similar pattern of results in a very different context. These authors measured the level of identification of psychology students with the larger group of psychologists. Two groups were then formed on the basis of the level of identification. In a later session, low and high identifiers were contacted again and asked to answer a series of question concerning the variability among psychologists (the ingroup) and social workers (the outgroup). In line with predictions, high identifiers perceived the psychologists to be more homogeneous than low identifiers did. High identifiers also perceived more homogeneity within the ingroup than within the outgroup (see also Lee & Ottati, 1995).

We believe this series of empirical studies to be relevant for the understanding of the European identity issue. There is little doubt that the European Union is an important social group. This means that the European identity stands as a meaningful social identity for European citizens. In the context of a larger research program, we wanted to investigate the link between people's readiness to see themselves as members of the European Union and the amount of decisional power they allocate to the European Union. Because by definition the European Union comprises several national and regional subgroups, we also wanted to investigate the link between the level of identification with the European Union and the perception of its internal homogeneity. We also measured the level of identification with the nation and the region. Accordingly, participants were asked to allocate power to these two groups as well as to rate their internal homogeneity.

The present study

Our sample comprised Belgian French speaking (N=200) and Northern Italian (N=229) undergraduate students majoring in Psychology and Law. In order to measure the level of identification with the three target groups, i.e. Europe, own country, and own region, we designed an identification scale (Brown, 1988; Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) consisting of 5-

positive (for instance, "I identify with Europeans") and 4-negative items (for instance, " 'Citizen of the European Union' does not mean a lot to me"). Because of the possible interference of one level of identity with the others, we used two versions of the questionnaire. One version started with the identification scale regarding Europe and ended with the identification scale regarding the region. The reverse order was used for the second version. The identification scale with the nation was always presented in the second position.

As far as the Italian respondents were concerned, we used the North/South distinction. Specifically, we measured the identification with Northern Italians (Settentrionali). In Belgium, respondents were Walloon, i.e. French-speaking Belgians. Therefore, we measured the level of identification with Wallonia. Wallonia stands as a very meaningful entity. It has a strong degree of political and economical independence from the Belgian federal government. In contrast, the "North of Italy" does not possess any political nor administrative structure. For these reasons, we expected regional identification to be greater among Belgians than among Italians.

Regarding the identification with the three different target groups, we did not expect our respondents to display a negative correlation between the identification with the European Union and the identification with the national or the regional groups. In other words, we hypothesized that the various social identities would not be mutually exclusive. We formulated this hypothesis because of the non-conflictual relation between the regional and national identity in our two samples. A different pattern of results is likely to occur when a strong regional identity competes with the national one (Huici et al., 1997), or a strong national identity is opposed to the European one (Cinnirella, 1997).

We also predicted the identification with the European Union to be positively correlated with the perception of homogeneity among European citizens and to be linked to the allocation of decisional-power at the European Union. As far as the two other target groups are concerned, we expected to find the same positive relationship between the degree of identification on the one hand, and the perceived homogeneity and power allocation on the other. As far as the allocation of decisional-power is concerned, we expected a positive

correlation between the amount of power individuals allocate to each specific group (EU, nation, region) and their level of identification with such a group.

<div align="center">Results</div>

Europeаn, national and regional identity

In order to compute an identification score for each of the three target groups, we first estimated Cronbach's inter-item reliability index for each identification scale. This index proved satisfactory for all the three scales (always >.88). We then averaged the scores for the 9 items forming each scale in order to obtain three identification scores: European, national, regional.

Insert Figure 1 about here

An ANOVA performed on the identity scores failed to reveal significant differences between Belgian and Italian respondents for national identity, $\underline{F}$<1, see Figure 1. Similarly, no differences emerged as far as the identification with Europe is concerned, $\underline{F}$(1, 427) = 1.95, $\underline{ns}$. In contrast, and as expected, Belgian and Italian respondents differed significantly as far as the regional identity is concerned ($\underline{F}$ (1, 427) = 13.91; $\underline{p}$ < .0002). Belgian respondents identify significantly more with their region than Italians. In line with predictions, there were no negative correlations between the three levels of identification. In sharp contrast, we observed reliable positive correlation between the European and the national identity and between the national and the regional identity in both Belgians and Italian samples (see table 1). The correlation between the identification with Europe and the region failed to reach a conventional level of significance.

Insert Table 1 about here

Group-identification and group perceived homogeneity

Belgians, compared to Italians, perceived European citizens to form a more homogeneous group, $\underline{F}(1, 299) = 23.40$, $\underline{p} <. 0001$, see Figure 2. The same pattern emerged at the regional level. Belgian respondents, compared to Italians, judged the members of their region to be a more homogeneous group, $\underline{F}(1, 299) = 27.23$; $\underline{p} <. 0001$. Interestingly, no differences emerged between Belgians and Italians as far as the perceived homogeneity of their countrymen is concerned, $\underline{F} < 1$.

We also looked at the differences within national samples. For the Belgian sample, the members of the region come across as a more homogeneous group than both the group of Europeans and the group of Belgians, both ps $< .0001$. The differential perception of the group of Europeans and the group of Belgians is only marginally significant, $\underline{p} < .10$. For the Italian sample, all pairwise comparisons came out highly significant, all $\underline{p} <. 0001$. Specifically, the region was perceived to be more homogeneous than the nation which, in turn, was perceived to be more homogeneous than Europe.

Insert Figure 2 about here

As far as the correlations between the perceived homogeneity and the level of identification with the target group is concerned, Belgians and Italians seemed to respond very much in the same way. To simplify the presentation of the data, Table 2 displays the correlations for both national samples together. In line with our predictions, each level of identity correlated significantly with the perceived homogeneity of the respective group.

Insert Table 2 about here

Group identification and the allocation of decisional power

For a series of seven topics, we asked respondents to assign the desired level of power to be found at the regional, national and European level. We insisted upon the fact that their

answer should reflect the ideal situation and not (necessarily) the current state of affairs. Interesting differences emerged between Belgian and Italian respondents (see Figure 3).

Insert Figure 3 about here

For most of the topics the amount of power given to the EU is less than that given to the nation or the region. Interestingly, however, Belgian respondents attributed the same level of decisional power to the EU and to their country as far as Social Affairs were concerned. Italians even attributed more power to the EU than to their own country for this same topic. Both Belgians and Italians seem to welcome the idea of a European army. Italians, contrary to Belgians, also ask for Education to be ruled at the European level more than at the national or regional level.

Turning to the correlations between the level of identification to each of the three target groups and the amount of decisional power assigned to each of the three levels, Belgians and Italians basically show the same pattern of answers.

Insert Table 3 about here

Because our main focus was the link between the level of identification with a given target group and the amount of power allocated to the various group, we averaged the answers given for the seven topics (Cronbach's alpha = .76, .81, .80 for the EU, the nation and the region, respectively). We then calculated the correlations between these scores and the level of identification to the European Union, the nation and the region. These results are shown in table 3. As expected, the level of identification with Europe, the nation and the region was positively correlated with the amount of power allocated to Europe, the nation and the region, respectively. Interestingly, we observed no negative correlations. In other words, a strong identification at one level was not related to a negative allocation of power to the other levels.

Conclusions

Our data confirm the hypothesis that different social identities do not necessarily compete. In fact, we did not observe negative correlations between the European, the national, and the regional identities. The expected pattern of correlation between the level of identification with the EU, the nation, and the region, and the amount of decisional-power allocated to these three groups was also observed. Thus, to consider the European identity as a social identity linked to a social group membership proved to be a meaningful conceptualization. Further, our measure of the European identity is linked to the perception individuals have of the European Union and more precisely of the similarity between European Union citizens. Our predicted correlational pattern involving the level of identification with a social group and the perception of its internal homogeneity was in fact also observed. This result has, in our view, an important implication for the idea that Europe is, and may be needs to remain, a heterogeneous group. On the one hand, it is clear that important differences between European citizens exist and will continue to exist. On the other hand, it seems that individuals who perceive a group as homogeneous are also those who strongly identify with it. To sum up, on the one hand we are confronted with experimental evidences supporting the hypothesis of a link between a specific social identity and the support for the social group in which the social identity is grounded. On the other hand, the level of identification with a social group goes hand in hand with the perception of its internal homogeneity. Both correlational patterns make evident the presence of a certain degree of variability in the individuals' level of identification with the groups herein examined. But why do people vary in their level of identification with, say, the European Union? In the next paragraph, we suggest one of the multiple answers to such a question. Focusing on our result concerning the link between the level of identification with the EU and the perception of its internal homogentity, and building upon recent developments of Social Identity Theory, we invite the reader to look at the process of identification with Europe as a process of self-categorization.

Self-categorizing as Europeans

In accord to self-categorization theory, a recent development of SIT, Turner and his colleagues (1987) argued that people can categorize themselves at various levels of inclusion. At one extreme, people would think of themselves as unique individuals. At the other extreme, people would conceive of themselves as human beings or even living things. All the levels in between these two extremes could be used depending on the specific context. Indeed, the context along with its comparative constraints is thought to regulate the activation of specific social categories. More importantly, for any social category that is activated, the specific content attached to that category is seen to be highly dependent upon the larger comparative context (Haslam et al, 1995). According to SCT, the context of comparison is supposed to influence the self-definition in terms of group membership as well as the perception of the specific characteristics of social groups.

Although we may accept the idea that some identity, for instance the national one, are more internalized than others, it is also the case that specific social environments suggest alternative social categories as being relevant. Obviously, it makes little sense to feel national pride and perceive oneself as a Frenchmen when telling a story to one's child in the evening! The category of father would be a much more relevant way to conceive of oneself in those circumstances. Importantly, thus, SCT may help us to understand the variability in self-definition.

The context of comparison seems in fact to affect the way we think about the groups to which we belong. We can in fact concentrate upon the differences between their members, or the difference between the members of our group and the members of the other groups (i.e. an intragroup and an intergroup context, respectively). An intragroup context is one in which other groups are not psychologically present. When Italians are in Italy, they do not think about what it is that makes a typical Italian nor do they think that all Italians are the same. Instead, attention is paid to regional differences, to differences between different cities, and so on. The situation (context) changes in a radical way when Italians arrive, for instance, in Belgium. They begin to think to their "Italianess" and end up perceiving a lot of similarities between their fellow Italians. They are in an intergroup context where self-definition as Italian

makes sense. Moreover, others approach them as Italians and this contributes to their self-definition. This idea has been put to an experimental test in some fascinating studies. To give only one example, Haslam et al. (1995) asked their Australian participants to describe Australians or Australians and Americans. What these authors observed was that participants selected different attributes in the two conditions. Specifically, when an outgroup was psychologically present, participants perceived more similarity among Australians than when no outgroup was mentioned. This result constitutes a clear departure from a view of social categories as having a specific and immutable content. In contrast, the pattern of findings strongly supports a dynamic and context-dependent view of group reality.

A second aspect of the influence of the context concerns the definition of the characteristics of the social groups (remember the study by Diab, 1963). Imagine that people think of themselves as, say Europeans. According to SCT, they supposedly would come up with a very different set of attributes when the outgroup is the Japanese or the Americans. For this reason, it seems hopeless and indeed wrong to look for an a priori (i.e. context-independent) content of the European identity.

Of course, in order to account for the some stability of our perception of social reality, we need to accept the idea that certain categories are more invoked than others. Also, we are likely to internalize some group memberships more regularly than others.

Some support for this rationale comes from two recent studies by Castano & Yzerbyt (in press). In the first one, the results of Haslam et al. (1995) were replicated: psychologists in an intergroup context perceived greater homogeneity among psychologists than among social workers whereas in an intragroup context no differences were observed. In a second study, the same paradigm was used but instead of controlling for the role of context, it was the level of identification with the group of psychologists that was used as independent variable. As expected, high identifiers perceived greater homogeneity (amongst psychologists) than low identifiers. Taken together, the results of these two studies clearly support the idea that the perception of group homogeneity results from both the context of comparison - i.e. a dynamic

factor - and the level of identification with the group -i.e. a more stable variable (see also Kelly, 1989).

Clearly, the above rationale offers some interesting insights as far as the variability or stability of the European identity is concerned. In contrast to some sort of essentialistic view of European identity or, more generally, of any social identity, we would argue that people's social identity needs to be conceived as being very much regulated by the social context. What is considered a stable internalization of a social identity could be thought as the consequence of a very stable context. In other words, national identities could be considered as chronically-activated identities. Quite concretely, this means that it should be possible to modulate the level at which people think of themselves and observe the consequences in terms of the perception of homogeneity and in terms of a whole range of socially meaningful behaviors (for instance, decisional-power allocation via voting behaviours). People do not just feel identified with their region or with Europe at the expense of being identified with Europe or their region. In some contexts, they are likely to act in line with their regional affiliation. In others, they would come across as typical Europeans. Moreover, even if people may think of themselves as Europeans in a variety on settings, the specific content of this social category may turn out to be very different depending on the nature of the intergroup comparison.

Clearly, the social context is a key aspect of the dynamics of European identification. This means that subtle and easy-to-implement changes in people's social environment may have dramatic effects on the way they would categorize themselves and others. Change the context and European identity may either vanish or engulf the field.

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Table 1. Correlations between European, national and regional identification scores

	European	national	regional
Belgians			
European	-		
national	.22*	-	
regional	.10	.37*	-
Italians			
European	-		
national	.19*	-	
regional	-.01	.21*	-

* p<.005

Table 2. Correlations between the level of identification and the perception of group homogeneity

	European	national	regional
Homogeneity among			
European citizens	.35**	-.02	.05
fellow-countryman	.13*	.26**	-.02
region members	.02	.11	.42**

** p < .0001; * p< . 05

Table 3. Correlations between the level of identification and the allocation of power

	European	national	regional
power allocated to			
EU	.22*	.03	-.08
nation	.03	.25*	.01
region	-.01	.02	.28*

* $p < .0001$

Figure captions

Figure 1. European, national,and regional identification scores among Belgians and Italians

(High scores mean high levels of identification).

Figure 2. Perceived homogeneity among European citizens, fellow-countryman,

and fellow-regionman (High scores mean great homogeneity).

Figure 3a. Power allocated to the EU, the nation, and the region by Belgian

respondents.

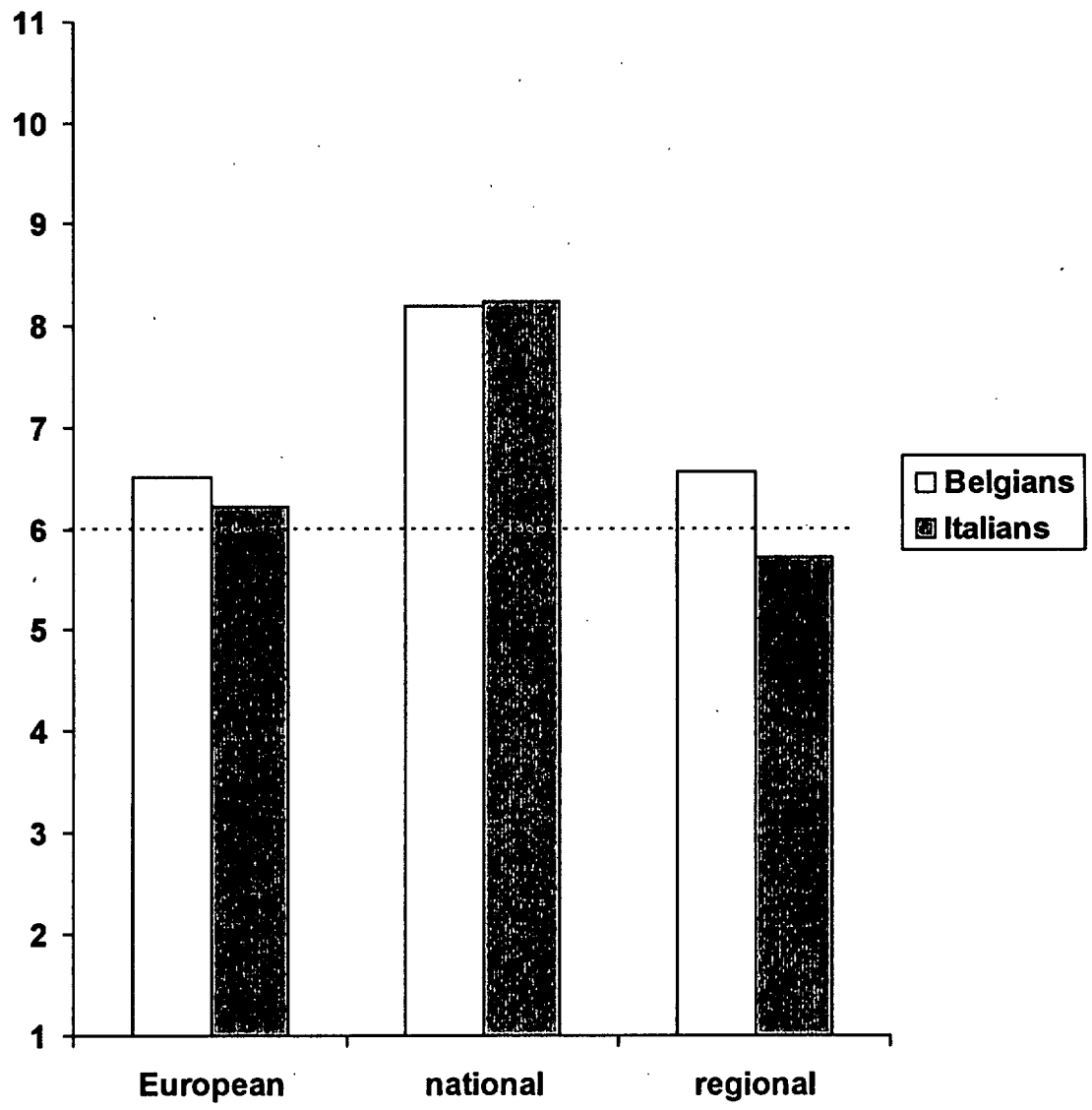Figure 3b. Power allocated to the EU, the nation, and the region by Italian

respondents.

Figure 1. European, national,and regional identification scores among Belgians and Italians (high scores mean high levels of identification).
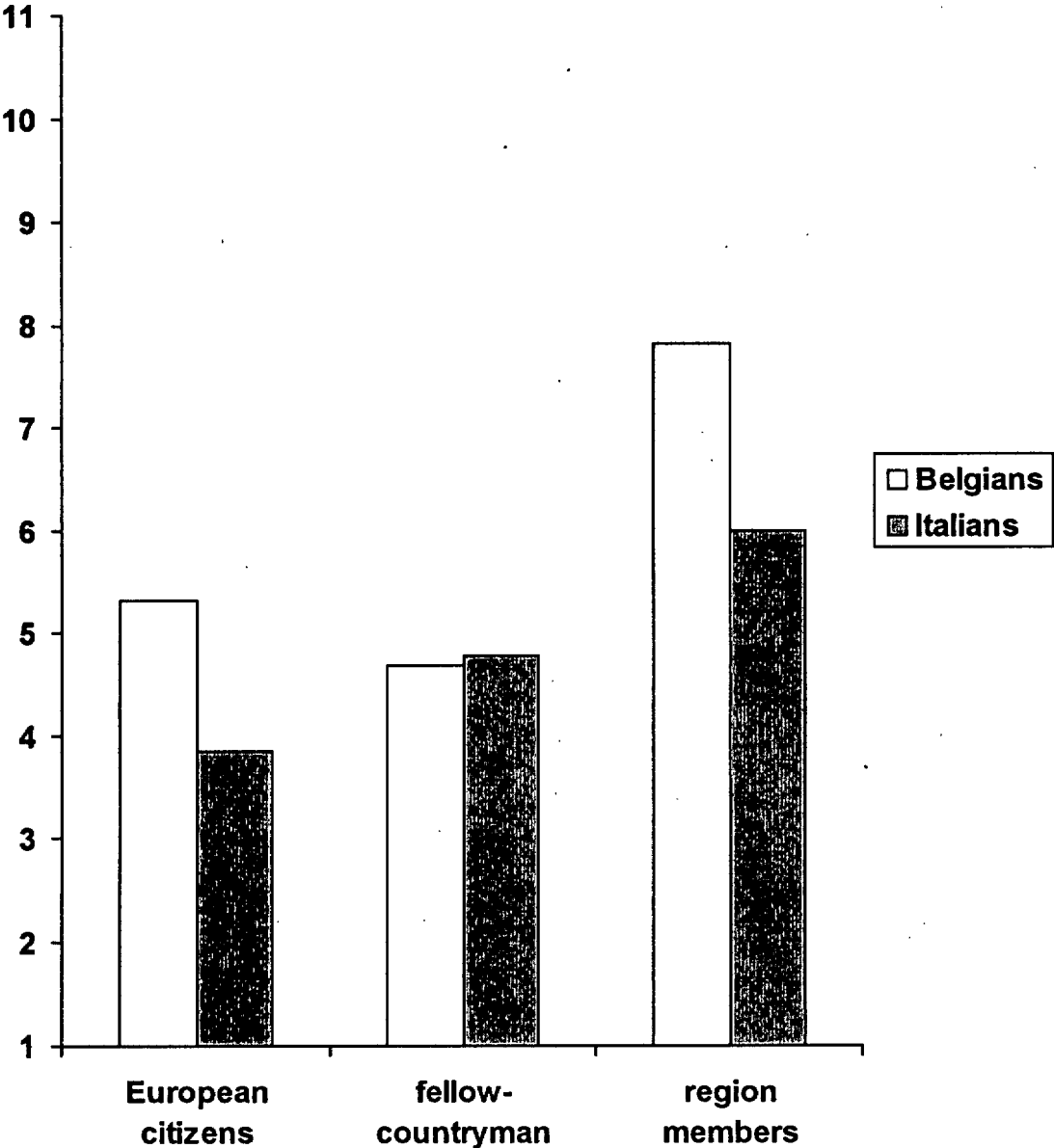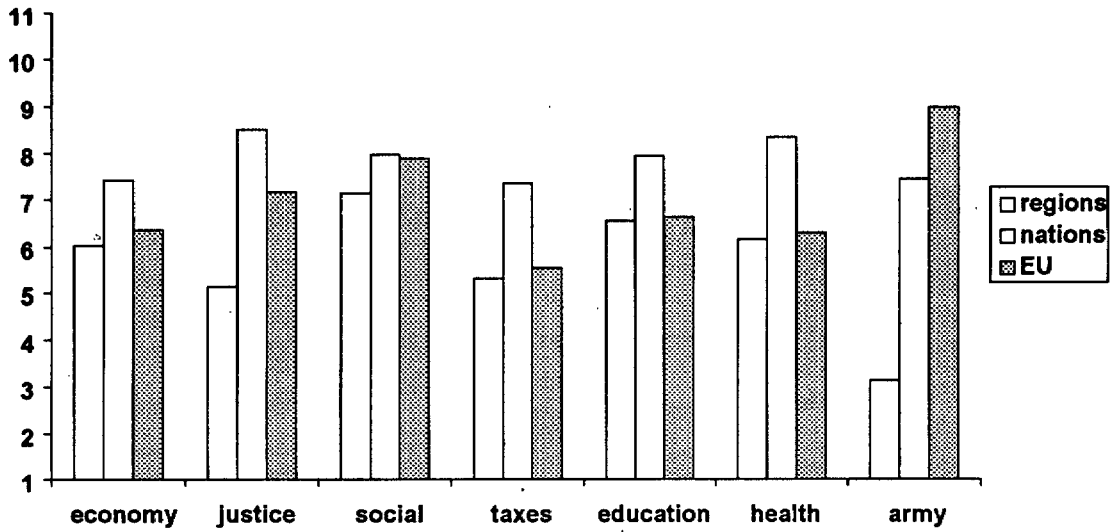
Figure 2. Perceived homogeneity among European citizens, fellow-countryman, and region members (high scores mean great homogeneity).

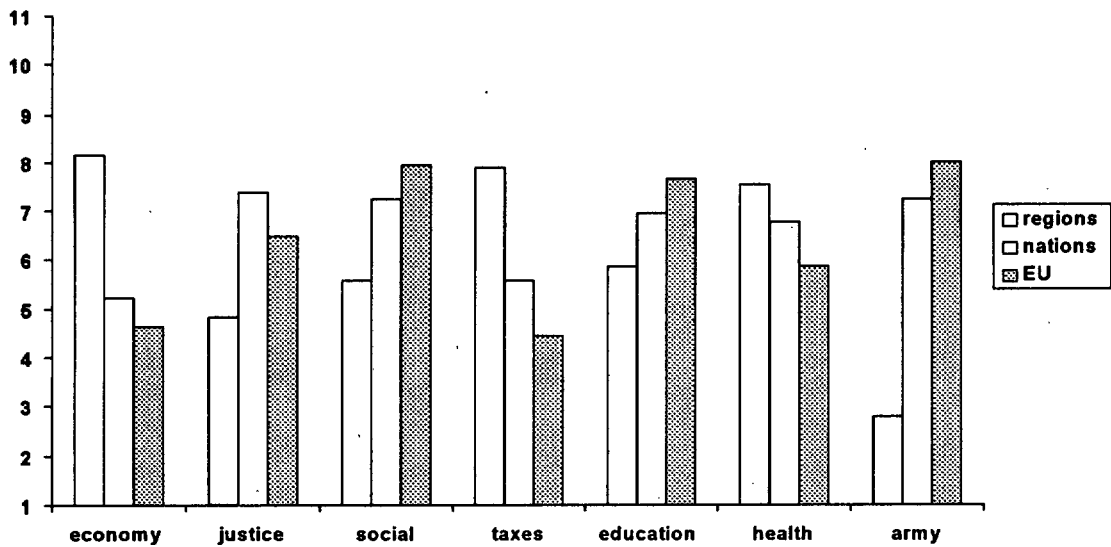Figure 3a. Power allocated to the EU, the nation, and the region by Belgian respondents.

Figure 3b. Power allocated to the EU, the nation, and the region by Italian respondents.