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The nation in context: How intergroup relations shape the discursive construction of identity continuity and discontinuity

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The perceived collective continuity (PCC) of a national identity serves as a crucial source of stability and self-esteem for group members. Recent work has explored the consequences of perceived continuity when the meaning of a nation's past is seen in a negative light, and the challenges this brings for the negotiation of a positive identity in the present, signalling the potential value of perceived discontinuity The current paper extends this literature by examining the role of intergroup relations in the construction of both collective continuities and discontinuities. Through analysing the discursive management of national identity in nine focus groups in a post-conflict context (Serbia, $N = 67$), we reveal how the tensions between continuity and discontinuity are embedded within a broader discussion of the nation's relationship with relevant national outgroups across its history. The findings contribute to theoretical knowledge on the interlinking of national identity and PCC by illustrating the ways in which intergroup relations of the past shape the extent to which continuity is seen as desirable or undesirable. We argue that despite the psychological merits of collective continuity, discontinuity can become attractive and useful when there is limited space to challenge how a nation's history is remembered and the valence given to the past. The paper concludes by offering an account of how social and political contexts can influence the nature, functions, and valence of PCC within national identities.

A key challenge for identity scholars has been to understand how individuals and groups address the paradox of sameness within change: the human ability to experience individual and collective aspects of the self as remaining continuous over time, while simultaneously acknowledging the inevitability of change (Chandler, 2000; Chandler & Proulx, 2008). The challenges this paradox presents for collective identity are brought to the fore when nations go through periods of political transformation as those promoting change face the task of aligning it with a continuous narrative of group identity. Frequently, this is done by drawing on references to history as a source of legitimacy (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

Literature outside of psychology has shown how the historical dimension of national groups can support their claims to authenticity and constructs the nation as an imagined

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community (Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). Social psychological research on national identity has extended this work by showing how perceived historical continuity is associated with perceptions of the group as 'real' and entitative (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000) and heightens levels of identification with it (Sani et al., 2007). Much of this work contends that continuities are beneficial for the psychology of in-group members, while discontinuities are problematic (Jetten & Wohl, 2012; Sani, 2005). Because of this, relatively little attention has been paid to the strategic function of group *discontinuity*.

We seek to remedy this by analysing the role of both continuity and discontinuity in in-group members' discursive constructions of national identity in the wake of socio-political change. We argue that discontinuities, such as continuities, are constructed with a purpose. In analysing them as such, we seek to illustrate that discontinuities play an important role in the construction of national identities. While illuminating the functional role of discontinuities, we also aim to show how relevant 'others' become integral to the creation of a consistent group narrative by allowing group members to differentiate between what is perceived to be 'our' history and what is 'imposed' on us by outsiders (Holý, 1996; Tileagă, 2009).

Historical continuity and national identity

Despite temporality being evident in the initial conceptualization of social identity and social relations as continuously developing processes (e.g., Tajfel, 1974), much of the early social identity research involved a horizontal and static version of the collective, 'bracket(ing) the historical dimension of social life' (Condor, 1996, p. 302). To tackle this, Sani et al. (2007) developed a framework to capture 'Perceived Collective Continuity' (PCC), broadening the analysis of social identity to include a group's past and future. PCC conceptualizes the extent to which social groups are viewed as stable and continuous over time, and research has shown how it links with group identification, entitativity, esteem, social well-being, and existential security for in-group members (Sani, Bowe, & Herrera, 2008; Sani *et al.*, 2007; Sani, Herrera, & Bowe, 2009; Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2015).

Perceived collective continuity encompasses two sub-dimensions: perceived cultural continuity and perceived historical continuity. Perceived cultural continuity is achieved through an emphasis on the stability of an in-group's core features (i.e., values, norms, and cultural markers) that define a group's 'essence', while perceived historical continuity is achieved through perceptions of interlinking historical events that create a consistent narrative. This distinction becomes useful to consider in contexts of change. As Sani *et al.* (2007, p. 1121) argue, 'groups that have undergone dramatic and radical social and political transformations may find it hard, or even undesirable, to claim high degrees of cultural continuity, while they may wish to stress historical continuity in order to enhance the intelligibility of the group narrative and to make sense of the changes that have taken place.' This active dimension of 'stressing' continuity illustrates that PCC can be strategically constructed by in-group members. Yet, less has been done to examine collective continuity as a socially negotiated process, and empirical explorations of the construct itself are largely quantitative and experimental (e.g., Roth, Huber, Juenger, & Liu, 2017; Sani *et al.*, 2007; Smeekes, McKeown, & Psaltis, 2017).

Existing accounts of how group identity is constructed in relation to history are most clearly articulated within discursive psychology (Condor, 2006; Gibson, 2012;

Greenwood, 2015; Kirkwood, 2019; Tileagă, 2009). Following Billig's (1995) seminal work on banal nationalism, rhetorical approaches have provided insight into the strategic use of history in talk on nationhood, identity, and the politics around it. This literature reveals the power and contested nature of discourses on history and identity, as these reproduce a way of life, legitimize political changes, and mobilize towards collective action (Gibson, 2012; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

As times of change make the drive for a coherent group narrative all the more necessary (Chandler & Proulx, 2008), a focus on how historical continuity is managed in talk on political change can reveal the strategic use of continuity for the management of a positive identity (Greenwood, 2015). It also has the power to reveal when the use of narratives of continuity becomes constrained. Thus, a deeper exploration of how continuity is socially negotiated affords an opportunity to advance theoretical insights on the relationship between collective continuity and identity.

The limits of historical continuity

The successful construction of a nation's history as continuous over time requires both selective remembering and forgetting. As such, the positive effects of continuity for group identity depend on the ability to remember the past in a certain way (Roth *et al.*, 2017; Topcu & Hirst, 2019; Warner, Kent, & Kiddoo, 2016). While previous research has found that discontinuity can be experienced as threatening and lead to group schisms (Sani, 2005; Smeekes et al., 2017), in their experimental study on historical representations and German identity, Roth et al. (2017) found that perceived historical continuity only alleviated identity threat for individuals when the group's past behaviour was presented as positive. In contrast, when the past was portrayed negatively, continuity became *more* threatening to group identity.

In acknowledging the role of valence for whether continuity has a positive or negative impact on identity, we must also acknowledge that this valence is not defined in isolation from relevant others. National histories are typically embedded in international contexts, and those who hold the power to shape how events are remembered can also shape how we position ourselves in relation to the past (see also Figueiredo, Martinovic, Rees, & Licata, 2017). For example, in a study on representations of world history in 12 countries, participants rated Eurocentric events as more important than ethnocentric events, even in non-European countries (Liu *et al.*, 2005). Illustrating the importance of intergroup power relations in shaping what history is deemed important to remember both nationally and internationally, these findings have implications for the extent to which a nation's version of its past, embedded within a transnational context, can be seen as legitimate if it deviates significantly from more dominant versions of world history. Thus, it becomes necessary to appreciate how PCC depends on how the meaning of the past is perceived by both self *and* other. It matters not only what 'we' think, but also what relevant others think (Elcheroth, Doise, & Reicher, 2011). Consequently, there are limits to when historical continuity becomes desirable for groups. Therefore, in examining historical continuity as a socially negotiated process we must also consider how it is shaped by the broader intergroup context.

While the relationship between historical continuity and collective identity can become constrained by intergroup relations, paradoxically, the reverse is also true. Intergroup relations can become constrained when individuals perceive continuity between history and identity. For example, Warner *et al.* (2016) found that perceiving an outgroup as a past enemy and as continuous over time led to more negative outgroup

attitudes in the present than if the outgroup was perceived as a past ally and continuous over time. This aligns with Sani *et al*.'s (2007) argument that perceived historical continuity becomes important in times of change, to enhance the intelligibility of the group narrative, and by extension here, the role of others within it. However, it also hints at a possible benefit of historical discontinuity: the potential for groups to reconstruct their relationships and identities in the present by moving towards a discontinuity with an undesirable past.

On the potential of historical discontinuity

Discontinuities tend to be perceived in national identity literature as negative disruptions to the linear flow of history (Runia, 2014). Yet, like continuities, discontinuities can be constructed by in-groups, and they are often done so strategically.

Discontinuities can function to mark the 'end' to a particular history and the potential beginning of another (Zerubavel, 1993). This is evident in how we talk about historical transitions, labelling societies as 'post-communist' or 'post-socialist', indicating a break in historical time (Holý, 1996; Ristić, 2007; Tileagă, 2009). In contexts where the past is stigmatizing, discontinuities can facilitate a fresh start for groups to renegotiate a positive collective identity. However, given the links between entitativity, essentialism, and perceived continuity (Haslam *et al*., 2000; Sani *et al*., 2007), discontinuities can also be experienced as problematic as they threaten the ability to reproduce the 'essential' characteristics that make a nation and its identity unique (Reicher, 2008). One way of alleviating this threat is by shifting the perspective on the cause of perceived discontinuities. Group members can do so by using discontinuities to differentiate 'our' history from that imposed by an 'other' (Holý, 1996). For example, in talk on historical transitions, metaphors of ruptures serve the purpose of justifying what could have been, had the nation not been interfered with, or hindered, by relevant others (Holý, 1996, p. 120). As such, discontinuities are often attributed to the actions of foreign others who have forced their beliefs and politics onto us. In post-communist Romania, the 'Othering' of communism in official reports accomplished the task of distancing a positive nation from a stigmatizing past by constructing communism as an ideology imposed on the nation by external actors (the Soviet Union; Tileagă, 2009).

In the distinctions made between continuity and discontinuity, we see different versions of the nation emerge in relation to its history. In the former, the nation is seen as a subject of history, acting in agentic ways that reproduce an 'essence'. In the latter, the nation is seen as an object of history, being acted on by others, to the detriment of the group's identity (Holý, 1996, Chapter 4). In using discontinuity arguments then, history becomes about what was done 'to us' rather than what was done 'by us'. By extending our focus to discontinuities, we are able to more thoroughly examine the role of intergroup relations for the construction of national identity. To do this, we ask: *How do citizens, in contexts of socio-political change, strategically use historical continuities and discontinuities, and what purpose do these serve in the discursive construction of national identity?*

In answering this question, we address two interrelated aims: (1) to examine how group members construct and manage national identity in times of socio-political change using historical continuities and discontinuities; and (2) to examine whether, and how, intergroup relations are drawn upon and utilized in arguments of collective continuity or discontinuity. In examining both processes, we bring attention to the strategic function and socially negotiated nature of collective continuity.

Research context

The present study draws on qualitative data collected in Serbia. The choice to explore the construction of continuity and discontinuity in the context of Serbia is informed by a number of recent socio-political changes unique to the context. Firstly, Serbian history is marked by group narratives emphasizing the nation's identity as defined by being 'in-between' two worlds: between east and west, between Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, and between western level-headedness and eastern irrationality (Russell-Omaljev, 2016, p. 1). This characteristic is captured in the metaphor of Serbia as a bridge between civilizations and ideological systems, emerging with a 'split identity' and divided society (Ristić, 2007). In the past 30 years, Serbia has transitioned from being part of a supranational communist union (Yugoslavia), to engaging in civil wars, experiencing the redrawing of national borders, and finally becoming its own nation state aimed at achieving EU membership.

However, public ambivalence towards EU integration persists and is rooted in concerns that political change threatens socio-cultural markers of the nation and its history (Ristić, 2007). Prospective EU membership places intergroup relations at the heart of political change, as integration entails a revision of existing political allegiances, and in the case of Serbia, a move towards a 'Western' future. Integration into a supranational union defined by western values signals a potential end to 'being in-between' two worlds, a characteristic feature of Serbian nationhood. Thus, the transition from 'post'-socialist (and 'post'-conflict) society to prospective EU member makes Serbia an ideal context to explore how citizens try to reconcile real-world socio-political change with collective continuity of national identity. Bearing this in mind, we ask: *How do citizens in contemporary Serbia strategically use historical continuities and discontinuities, and what purpose do these serve in the discursive construction of their national identity?*

Method

Design

Following discursive psychology and research on national identity (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001), we acknowledge that the meaning, boundaries, and nature of group identities are contested and have powerful consequences for who is included, and how they should act. Our focus on examining the discursive functions of continuities and discontinuities for national identity led us to approach the question with a qualitative design, so as not to limit the imposition of fixed representations of the past (as previous research has tended to do), but to instead examine how these are elicited in dialogue (Wilkinson, 1998). In order to fully capture the 'social' dynamics of the discursive, focus groups were chosen for data collection as they allow for a research context that elicits data from interactions, encouraging 'sharing and comparing' within the group and providing insight into both what participants think, and why (Morgan, 2012).

Participants and procedure

A total of nine focus groups were conducted in Serbia between 2015 and 2016 ($N = 67$, 27 females and 40 males) in seven different cities[1]. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, targeting individuals living in selected cities via networks and social

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[1] *Belgrade, Čačak, Niš, Novi Sad, Paraćin, Surdulica and Vranje.*

media advertisements. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 57 years ($M = 34$ years) with occupations ranging from full-time study to employment in the public and private sectors. Each focus group followed the same topic guide, with six questions covering themes of Serbias of domestic and foreign politics, as well as history. For example, participants were asked about their opinion on Serbia joining the EU and what changes they anticipated for the future.

Each focus group lasted between 21 and 77 min ($M = 61$ min) and the audio-recordings were transcribed and analysed in Serbian by the first author, with illustrative quotes translated for the purpose of presentation.

Analytic procedure

The research aims required taking a functional approach to language in context. Following others (e.g., Greenwood, 2015), we consider continuity as something that is constructed through talk, with the purpose of legitimizing certain identity projects. While previous work on national identity in social psychology has favoured a discursive psychological approach, we chose to draw on a particular strand of critical discourse analysis (CDA) as it allowed us to pay particular attention to how the relationship between language and power is expressed and legitimized in discourse. As our focus is on how intergroup (power) relations shape discourses on history and identity, our analysis required placing history at the centre of the framework. As such, the particular strand of CDA chosen was the discourse-historical approach (DHA; De Cillia, Reisigl, & Wodak, 1999; Wodak, De Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 2009).

The DHA emphasizes triangulation through the inclusion of different levels of context within which a text is embedded, from the immediate situation in which talk occurs, to the broader historical context which shapes discursive practices. Analytically, the DHA distinguishes between three interrelated levels: (1) identification of contents/topics; (2) analysis of macro-discourse strategies; and (3) micro-linguistic means of realization (e.g., the use of metaphor, parallelism, and normative language; De Cillia *et al.*, 1999, p. 157). These were applied to the data in the following manner: Firstly, the content of the data was examined (level 1 of analysis). Taking into account the aims, coding focused on selecting all data where (1) the in-group (Serbia, social groups), (2) outgroups (the EU, Russia), and/ or (3) historical events (i.e., WWII) were mentioned. Often, these overlapped. Once defined, this smaller corpus was analysed to identify the different discursive strategies and to examine the functions they served in constructing historical continuity or discontinuity with the present (level 2). There are four common macro-strategies employed in discourse on national identity that function as discursive plans of action (see Table 1 and De Cillia, 1999).

For each strategy analysed, the means of realization were then examined (level 3), identifying the specific micro-level linguistic tools used to support the arguments made and the conclusions warranted for whether socio-political change was perceived as positive or negative. For an example of the interlinking levels of analysis, see Table 2 below.

Analysis

Our analysis addresses the aims of the study in the following ways. In response to our first aim, we analyse how participants use both historical continuity and discontinuity arguments to negotiate national identity in response to socio-political change in the

Table 1. Macro-level discourse strategies of the discourse-historical approach

Macro-discourse strategy	Purpose
Constructive strategies	Aimed at constructing national identity in a certain way
Perpetuation/justification strategies	Aimed at reproducing or justifying a threatened identity and status quo
Transformative strategies	Aimed at transforming the meaning of a well-established identity and the status quo
Destructive/ dismantling strategies	Aimed at dismantling parts of an identity and the status quo without providing alternatives

present. As the first section will show, participants acknowledge the differences between the past and present, and while appeals to continuity become desirable, in changing circumstances these become more difficult to sustain, opening up a space for historical discontinuities to play a positive function for national identity. Next, in line with our second aim we examine how intergroup relations within the international context are articulated and used in the construction of national identity continuity and discontinuity. As the second section will show, intergroup relations are drawn on to either legitimize or delegitimize politics in the present, where continuity arguments focus on using the past to explain the present, while discontinuity arguments are used to argue for the potential benefits it might bring for the future.

Managing continuity and discontinuity in times of change
Not all change is perceived as a threat to collective continuity (Chandler, 2000). Change can be seen as a natural way to enhance a group's identity, ensuring progress and development in the future (Greenwood, 2015; Roth *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, EU integration and the political change it brings should not be assumed to be problematic, and indeed, it was not discussed as such by some participants (e.g., Ana's position below). However, the political commitment towards EU membership brought the management of Serbia's 'in-betweenness' – its historical position as balancing eastern and western influences – to the forefront (e.g., Russell-Omaljev, 2016). This led to discussions of the differences between the past and the present, and the country's ability to sustain its unique 'in-between' identity in the future:

Extract 1. Belgrade (2)
1   *Ana: We're in Europe, it's completely normal that we become [part of the EU].*
2   *Marko: Absolutely, geographically yes, and we shouldn't run away from that, but we*
3   *should be bold, and the way that Tito[2] knew how to balance [politics],*
4   *that'll never happen again.*
5   *Lara: I agree, but back then you had a significantly bigger state, it wasn't just*
6   *Serbia, and he was able to keep up the balancing act because Yugoslavia was a*
7   *significant factor in the Balkans, in Southern Europe, and now we're nothing.*

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[2] *Former President of the Social Federalist Republic of Yugoslavia, 1953–1980.*

Table 2. Illustrative analytic methods and example extracts

Data (quotes)[a]	Level 1: content/topic	Level 2: Macro-discursive strategy	Level 3: Micro-linguistic means of realization
1. Ema (Novi Sad): We're uncommitted, we don't know what we want, we change state politics and history every ten years. We can't expect complete loyalty from Russia or the EU when we don't give anyone our loyalty.	In-group/outgroup	*Constructive strategy* Constructing in-group as defined by unique (negative) features which have negative implications for progress and intergroup relations	'We' – inclusive national in-group, repetition of which focuses attention on (negative) similarity within the group
2. Ivan (Paracin): I think there will be some 3rd World War, and Serbia will again be in trouble because it will again be torn about whom to join. In every world war we've been seen as a protagonist, but we're not, Serbia is always, you know, Serbia doesn't allow urgent passage through Belgrade, so then it gets bombed. And now Serbia is between Russia and the EU. I really think that before that gets settled there'll be some World War, or some bigger unrest because of bigger issues. That's what I expect.	Historical events	*Strategy of perpetuation* Perpetuation of 'we' within a personified 'national body' which is seen as the scapegoat for bigger conflicts within which it ends up in the middle, as a battleground for bigger powers. Temporal words emphasize continuity to threatened identity.	'We' – historical; links Serbs of the past (every world war) to Serbs of present ('we're not') 'Serbia doesn't allow' – anthropomorphism; personification of nation as living form 'Always'; 'Again' 'In every' – emphasis on perpetuation to threatened identity.
3. Katarina (Paracin): Today, they [politicians] are sitting on two chairs, and going nowhere. Dejan: They [EU] shouldn't be meddling in our affairs but it is problematic to be sitting on two chairs. Vladan: Especially now. Dejan: In fact, we should be only on one, but we're on two. And that's the problem. Because we're small, balancing becomes impossible.	In-group/outgroup	*Transformative strategy* Appeal to temporal comparisons between now and then to argue for changed circumstances and the inability to maintain balancing to 'in-betweenness', and therefore the meaning of the in-group.	'We' – Serbian nation 'They' – politicians and EU; Othering of both domestic and foreign political actors 'Today' – 'Now' – emphasis on changed circumstances in the present.

Table 2. (*Continued*)

Data (quotes[a])	Level 1: content/topic	Level 2: Macro-discursive strategy	Level 3: Micro-linguistic means of realization
4. Kristina (Belgrade 1): Those are stories from the Second World War, 'Russians are our brothers', those are old stories, and I mean, for example, yes our brothers came towards the end of WWII and they freed Belgrade, and that's great, everyone talks about that. But no one talks about how their soldiers raped our women.	Historical events/outgroup	*Dismantling strategy* Deconstructing perceived positive historical relationship with Russia and its association with a national identity whose meaning is shaped by a positive historical relationship with Russia.	Hypothetical discourse – positive relationship with Russia constructed as rooted in past 'stories' – questioning objective reality 'Everyone' – aligns pro-Russia sentiment with opinion of generalized other 'No one' – critique of Russia silenced.

[a]These have been labelled 'Quotes' so as not to confuse them with the in-text extracts.

In this exchange, Ana draws on spatial references (line 1) to strategically construct EU membership as natural, by appealing to geographical unity that has remained constant. This is challenged by both Marko and Lara who respond with 'yes but' arguments (ll. 2, 5), indicating partial agreement followed by disagreement (Pomerantz, 1984). Both Marko and Lara draw on transformative strategies to differentiate the past from the present (ll.4, 'that'll never happen again'; 'll.5, 'back then', ll.6, 'now we're nothing') and to emphasize a change to the status of the in-group. While for Marko this change in status is used to argue for a need to regain it (ll. 3), for Lara it functions to argue for historical discontinuity. By evoking a change to the context and power of Serbia (l.5–7), Lara draws on discontinuity to justify the lack of political progress in the present as caused by the absence of strong leadership. This was evident in other discussions as well (see Table 2; Quote 3) where participants used transformative arguments of discontinuity to acknowledge a lack of control over change and the group's future, where power affords nations the agency to be a subject of history and of its present:

Extract 2. Belgrade (1)

1   *Nenad: I think the killer here is that every 10 years our elite changes, and our value*
2   *systems [change] [. . .].*
3   *Bodgan: Let's compare us to the English. England traces its roots back to the middle*
4   *ages, and all that has remained, has stayed continuous, without occupation of over*
5   *500 years. Here, you were annihilated for 500 years, and your state was only*
6   *created in the 19th century. In the 19th century, we were compared to Europe,*
7   *set back, even if we might have been ahead of them in the past, if we look at history.*
8   *We're lagging behind a whole century, with regards to everything,*
9   *and our national consciousness is endangered.*

As in previous work (Holý, 1996), arguments of historical discontinuity are strategically used to defend the nation's lack of progress, and attribute blame for its current political situation to others. Drawing on comparisons with other nations participants successfully construct a narrative of Serbian history as defined by ruptures, where the value ascribed to the stable continuity of other nations affords them legitimacy and power on an international stage (ll. 3–9). Historical continuity is constructed as an achievement of a nation able to be in control of its history (l. 3–4), in contrast to Serbia whose history is defined by the actions of others (l. 5). It is important to note two things here: (1) that these others are located both outside of the nation (Ottoman occupation) and within the group (via its leaders/politicians) indicating a divide between those in power and the Serbian people, and (2) that the need to explain lack of progress stems from a general consensus in the group(s) that EU membership confers legitimacy to the progressive nature of a nation.

Yet, the stigma of lack of progress is countered by opening up a 'what if' argument towards the end, where the mention of being 'ahead' of other nations in the past allows participants to represent where Serbia could have been today, had it not been interfered with by foreign powers, and also to draw a sense of legitimacy via a continuity with the deeper history of the Serbian nation. Historical discontinuities then, in removing in-group

agency by constructing the nation as an object of history, end up threatening the cultural continuity of the group by limiting its ability to progress. This is voiced more extremely below:

Extract 3. Niš

1   *Luka: For 10 years we've been living in transition, we are aware that everything*
2   *they're [EU] requiring is clear manipulation. [. . ..]*
3   *Are you aware that 80% of the people don't know the words to the anthem?*
4   *Are you aware that 90% of people don't know the order of the colours on the flag?*
5   *What territory are we even talking about? When nothing is certain anymore,*
6   *where you lived in four countries without even crossing the street.*
7   *And that's all consciously done so that you'll lose your identity and lose sense for*
8   *everything around you. And that you'll become indifferent to whether*
9   *tomorrow this place is called Bangladesh or Serbia.*

Luka draws on suggestive rhetorical questions (ll. 3–5) to construct political transformation over time as negative for national identity (see Wodak *et al.*, 2009, p. 40). Ongoing political change, imposed from the outside, is portrayed as destabilizing and evokes a sense of collective angst (cf. Jetten & Wohl, 2012). As in other discussions, political change is constructed as problematic when it is perceived as enforced by foreign actors, threatening cultural continuity, evident in references to the preservation of the symbols of banal nationalism (ll. 3–4; see Billig, 1995).

The reference to Yugoslavia's disintegration (ll. 5–6) is significant here, as Luka constructs the conflict and its consequences as being 'done' to citizens in a deliberate act to make them 'indifferent' to their future (ll. 7–9). Noteworthy is the removal of agency in discussing the conflict, again using discontinuity arguments to position the in-group as a victim of political changes imposed on them. In this extract, as in the previous one, we see the two dimensions of PCC interact in discussions on socio-political change, where ruptures to historical continuity are seen as endangering the preservation of features of perceived cultural continuity (e.g., national symbols, traditions, and values; Sani *et al.*, 2007), threatening the survival of the in-group in the future (ll. 7–9).

In this section, we have shown how arguments of historical continuity or discontinuity can hold either positive or negative consequences for national identity. Appeals to continuity become vital as they afford groups legitimacy and power to be in control of their own politics, safeguarding the group when disruptions to the narrative continuity of history means it endangers claims to essentialism and come to threaten the entitativity of a group (i.e., 'national consciousness is endangered'; 'loss of identity'; Chandler, 2000). Claims to continuity become desirable, yet in changing circumstances these become more difficult to sustain. As such, historical discontinuities can serve a desirable function, by allowing participants to protect themselves against the negative implications of ruptures (i.e., stigma of lack of progress, Extract 2), and side-step responsibility for negative events (i.e., Yugoslav wars, Extract 3; Table 2, Quote 2). Arguments of discontinuity function to defend a threatened national identity by positioning negative changes and ruptures as done to us by others and not 'our' fault or responsibility.

In the next section, we illustrate how intergroup relations of the past become used to either legitimize or delegitimize socio-political changes for the future, where continuity and discontinuity arguments serve different functions and with different temporal orientations.

Continuity and intergroup relations: How the past legitimizes and delegitimizes change for the future

In line with social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), group identities are deeply influenced by both social and historical contexts including beliefs about the characteristics of relevant intergroup relationships (Warner *et al.*, 2016). Thus, EU integration was not seen as just an economic and political transformation, but also a social psychological one, requiring a re-evaluation of existing international relations. A key 'other' in this context was Russia and discussions often moved towards detangling what kind of relationship Serbia had with Russia, and whether EU integration threatened continuity to this and the meaning it held for Serbian identity. A common approach for tackling this tension was to draw on strategies of dismantling, which allowed participants to challenge the idea that Serbia–Russia relations had been positive across history:

Extract 4. Belgrade (2)
1   *Jelena: I think that Russia is our biggest fake friend, the biggest fake friend*
2   *we've had throughout centuries,*
3   *that's a big blunder that we should be pro-Russia and that they always protect us,*
4   *that they're always with us and that we should look up to them [. . .]*
5   *Marko: But you lose your roots. The EU destroyed your country.*
6   *Germany destroyed it, which was first to support the war. Germany destroyed SFRJ.*[3]
7   *it supported that.*
8   *That makes her your true friend? [. . .] But how can you forget just like that,*
9   *that someone who was beating you, is today your friend? And you're running around*
10 *trying to grab onto him. . . If someone hurt you once, you can expect him to hurt you*
11 *again.*

Wodak *et al.* (2009) argue that in discussions of national identity, participants tend to use the self-inclusive 'we' when making claims, but revert to an 'I' position when making potentially taboo points. Jelena's use of 'I' to deconstruct a positive temporally enduring ('always', ll. 4) relationship between Serbia and Russia, and the assumption that this is a normative position ('should', ll. 3–4), shows her awareness that this stands in contradiction to the official narrative of history. In response to Jelenas' deconstruction of the significance of Russia through Serbian history, Marko responds with appeals to continuity to persuade Jelena of the consequences of rejecting Russia for Serbian identity (ll. 5–11). His construction of the EU, and in particular Germany, as key actors responsible for the dissolution of Yugoslavia silences the in-group's own accountability and instead positions Serbia as a victim of past events (l. 9). The choice to mention SFRJ here is significant primarily because of the function it serves in constructing what it means to be Serbian in the present. For Marko, 'real' Serbs are those who do not forget history (ll. 5–11), and his use of 'you' to refer to Jelenas' point of view on history (ll. 5, 8–9) positions it as outside of 'our' discourse on history, and thus not part of how 'we' see the past (see also Obradović, 2016). Instead, 'our' history positions the EU as a threat and use of historical

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[3] Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

continuity to strategically perpetuate the legitimacy of this threat supports previous findings on the defensive function of historical narratives and their relationship to PCC (Smeekes *et al.*, 2017). This was common across groups:

Extract 5. Vranje

1 *Zoran: You know what, I've always been a believer in the whole idea that history*
2 *repeats itself. And if you go through history, Russia never hindered you.*
3 *Even if they didn't help you, they sure enough didn't hinder you.*
4 *While Germany, the US, England, France, they didn't spare any ammunition,*
5 *if you see what I mean.*
6 *(General agreement).*
7 *They screwed you over at least once or twice in life.*

Above, we see how participants use historical intergroup experiences to construct arguments around historical continuity that justify present-day intergroup relations and in turn delegitimize political change. Zoran's claims presume that past intergroup relationships will be predictive of future intergroup interactions via claims to historical continuity, extending PCC judgments to outgroups as well (Warner *et al.*, 2016). This is accomplished through drawing on comparison between different outgroups (ll. 3–4) and using history as a teacher for decoding the present (ll. 1–2). By using strategies of justification, participants are able to argue that Russia is closer to the in-group than the west because historically it has allowed Serbia to be in control of its own fate and future (ll. 2–3). The general agreement within the group indicates an in-group consensus. There is no need to provide an elaboration of specific events to support the claim, but rather it is accepted as a general pattern 'through history'.

In both extracts, above we see the use of micro-linguistic tools that bring the nation's history to life, making it relevant to the present (Extract 4; ll. 5–11; Extract 5: ll.5, 8–11). The anchoring of the nation in metaphors of the body situates the consequences of national history within the lived experiences of contemporary citizens, emphasizing the extended temporality inherent in how we experience our identities (Condor, 1996). Continuity arguments are used to justify anti-EU arguments, yet in other discussions, strategies of dismantling were used to challenge claims to positive historical relations between Serbia–Russia, where continuity was perceived as problematic, both in the eyes of the in-group and the outgroup (see also Table 2, Quote 1 and 2):

Extract 6. Belgrade (1)

1 *Suzana: Can I go first? I think that Serbia absolutely isn't pro-Russian,*
2 *I think that the influence of Russia is blown out of proportion and that that is a fear*
3 *of the West, that Serbia will, now I'm not saying we're innocent, we're on the*
4 *fence, we want to [join the EU], but we don't want to [join], and the Russians aren't*
5 *idiots, even they're tired of us. And then we're acting like we don't want to join*
6 *either but in reality we are more inclined towards the EU, and we end up looking*
7 *like idiots in the eyes of both. Yes, Serbia historically has closer ties with Russia*
8 *than say Croatia has had, and I agree with the decision not to implement sanctions*

9   *against Russia [during the Crimean crisis] but that's not valued where you're*
10   *trying to go. [...]*

Suzana deconstructs the enduring image of positive Serbia–Russia relations as exaggerated (ll. 1–2; see also Table 2, Quote 4) and perpetuated by outgroups (l. 3). She voices the stigmatizing implications that continuity to balancing has for the in-group ('looking like idiots'; ll. 5–7), and while she acknowledges the generally positive historical relations between Serbia and Russia, she challenges the significance of these for the future goals of the nation (ll. 8–10). Here, appeals for historical discontinuity are seen as desirable for the in-group, in moving away from a stigmatizing identity and towards a future that is defined by the decisions of Serbia, rather than other nations.

The present section has shown how intergroup relations are drawn on to strategically legitimize or delegitimize politics in the present, by either focusing on continuity with the past or the potential benefits of discontinuity in the future. Arguments of historical continuity extend not only to the characters of the in-group, but also to the characters of the outgroups, where attitudes towards outgroups become shaped by shared intergroup histories (Warner *et al.*, 2016). These become challenged by arguments for historical discontinuity that are used to dismantle narratives of positive historical intergroup relations, which function to challenge the extent to which political change is threatening to national identity, instead constructing the possibility of discontinuity as opening up opportunities for progress in the future.

Discussion

How do social groups manage the paradox of sameness within change? Through analysing the discursive management of national identity in nine focus groups in contemporary Serbia, we have sought to extend our understanding of PCC beyond a perceptual and cognitive phenomenon (e.g., Sani *et al.*, 2007). We have done so by acknowledging and examining the socially negotiated nature of collective continuity (Reicher, 2008), and recognizing the potential limits of continuity (e.g., Warner *et al.*, 2016) and the possibilities that discontinuity arguments offer for the discursive construction of a desirable national identity.

Serbia, with a national identity defined by its in-betweenness and balancing of 'opposing' ideological and cultural systems (Ristić, 2007; Russell-Omaljev, 2016), offers a unique context within which to examine how the tensions between continuity and discontinuity become embedded within broader discussions of the nation's relationship with relevant outgroups across its history.

Our analysis shows that both collective continuity and discontinuity are used as rhetorical devices in discourses on socio-political change and have implications for national identity in Serbia. Across both sections of the analysis, collective continuity is predominantly portrayed as valuable; it affords groups the legitimacy to be subjects of history with power to act independently (Extracts 1 and 2), it offers stability to an in-groups values and systems (Extracts 3 and 4) and it legitimizes the core 'essence' of the in-group (i.e., 'national consciousness', Extract 2; 'identity', Extract 3; 'roots', Extract 4) which makes its identity unique. The value of these key national group characteristics that PCC is theorized to involve (Haslam *et al.*, 2000; Sani *et al.*, 2007) was evident not only in how the in-group was constructed, but also in its comparison with other nations with more historical continuity (i.e., England, Extract 2), who were seen as able to progress throughout history, uninterrupted by foreign actors.

The data illustrate that intra-group negotiations around the role of continuity for identity are inherently dialogical, where intergroup relations permeate not only how we define our in-group, but also its history, and potential future. Arguments of historical continuity allow history to serve as a teacher, making an uncertain present legible through the lens of the past. In the case of Serbia, the EU is seen as implementing changes from the outside, making it difficult for participants to construct political transformation as a natural 'choice' for the in-group and thereby allowing them a sense of control over their future. This is legitimized by continuity arguments where across history the EU never let Serbia be 'in control' of its country (Extract 4 & 5). Unlike the EU, Russia let Serbia be a subject of its own history, making it a better 'ally' to Serbia in the present. However, these constructive processes depend on selective remembering and forgetting, thus becoming open to contestation, as past wrongs and behaviours (such as those discussed in Quote 4, Table 2) can be called upon to question how shared intergroup histories are remembered (i.e., Extract 6).

The extant literature on PCC has provided evidence suggesting that drawing upon collective identity continuity can act as a buffer in times of identity threat brought on by proposed change (Jetten & Hutchinson, 2011; Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2015). Smeekes *et al*. (2017) show that under conditions of heightened threat, group members tend to endorse in-group narratives on past intergroup conflicts and that these increase feelings of collective continuity. Within our data, we also find evidence of how historical narratives are used to make continuity-based claims within citizens' own accounts of group history and how these function to further arguments for or against a projected group future. Yet, there were also instances where collective continuity was seen as problematic. This was particularly the case when it entailed continuity to potentially negative elements of a nation's identity, embodied in discussions around balancing between east and west, and not being able to find a united way forward (i.e., Extract 6; Table 2, Quotes 1 and 2). Thus, our analysis also offers another opportunity to extend the PCC literature by exploring the role and function of narratives of *dis*continuity. The value afforded to national identity continuity, and the ability to negotiate this depended not only on the strategic use of continuity arguments, but also on discontinuity arguments.

The data revealed two types of discontinuity arguments. First, arguments *of* historical discontinuities serve the function of allowing individuals to acknowledge negative historical events and transformations between the past and the present, without taking responsibility for these on a group level or internalizing the stigma they might hold for the national identity. These construct the nation as an object of history, where discontinuities were 'done to us' by others (i.e., 'Ottoman occupation' and 'EU manipulation'; Extracts 2 and 3). Second, and distinct from the first, are arguments *for* historical discontinuity: These emphasize the desire for change in the present due to an acknowledgement of changed political or social circumstances (i.e., Extract 6; Table 2, Quote 3) and a desire for a move towards a more progressive future. These discontinuity strategies functioned to dismantle official narratives of history by bringing to light the complexities of shared intergroup histories, in attempts at justifying political change as a way to break away from a past marked by in-betweenness (Extracts 4 and 6). By arguing *for* historical discontinuity, participants supported EU integration as a move from a powerless past defined by the actions of others, and an opportunity to make progress in the future (i.e., Table 2, Quote 1).

The arguments made by the citizens of the nation under analysis paint a complex picture of the role of collective continuity for in-group identity, by supporting the experimental evidence showing that the valence associated with continuity is crucial

in determining whether it is perceived as positive or negative (Roth *et al.*, 2017). We extend this work by arguing that valence is not shaped in isolation from relevant others, but rather in dialogue with them. By using focus group data, we show how participants wrestle with contrasting views of group history and their implications for the present. While our data support previous conceptualizations of PCC as a positive feature of national in-groups (e.g., Sani *et al.*, 2007), we extend this by illustrating the socially negotiated nature of continuity and its function for the discursive construction of a desirable national identity. In doing so, we show that the desirability of perceived continuity for national identity depends on how the social category is defined by both the in-group itself, *and* how continuity is perceived to give meaning to intergroup relations. Without the constraints of relevant others and our perceptions of them, we would not have representations of the past that were stigmatizing, nor experience our identities as such. Yet, it is precisely because intergroup relations are intertwined that these dynamics exist and become consequential for intra-group processes (i.e., Figueiredo *et al.*, 2017). Thus, while the nation might be seen as less agentic and in control in the past (i.e., Topcu & Hirst, 2019), it is the ability to claim control over the historical narrative and the choices of action in the present that allow for a desirable national future to be imagined.

By examining the active shaping of group history as a rhetorical and strategic tool for supporting and mobilizing particular identity projects, we can conceptualize collective continuity (and discontinuity) as a socially negotiated process that is managed and used by in-group members for particular purposes. This offers an appreciation of social identities as dynamic and embedded within both temporal and intergroup relations contexts, allowing us to more fully grasp their complex nature (Condor, 1996; Tajfel, 1974). The strategic use of arguments of historical continuity and discontinuity allow citizens taken on the active role of entrepreneurs of identity and history (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001), constructing the nation as both a subject and object of history. By doing so, they safeguard a desirable national identity from the negative consequences of historical ruptures, and providing a template for how to relate to and meet present socio-political challenges in the context of long-standing intergroup relations.

Conflicts of interest

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

Sandra Obradović (Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Writing – original draft; Writing – review & editing) Mhairi Bowe (Conceptualization; Writing – review & editing).

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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