

Subjective Similarity and Positive Intergroup Behaviour¹

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine the association between subjective similarity between populations from different German federal states and positive intergroup behaviour. In our project *Subjektive Bewertung kultureller Unterschiede in Deutschland* (Subjective Evaluation of Cultural Differences in Germany) we explored subjectively perceived differences between four German federal states (Bavaria, North Rhein-Westphalia, Lower Saxony and Saxony). In order to do so, we conducted a survey (N=904) in which individuals from these German states were asked about (a) the extent of perceived similarity between the own group and the other regionally defined groups and (b) their behavioural tendencies towards these other groups, namely solidarity behaviour, cooperation behaviour and relocation behaviour. By conducting fixed effects regression models, we examined whether subjective similarity between groups leads to positive behavioral intentions between these groups. Our empirical results show that perceived similarity between the population of one's own region and the one of another region is positively associated with the all three dimensions of intergroup behaviour, and its significance increases with the personal costs associated with the behaviour in question.

Keywords: subjective similarity, positive intergroup behaviour, German states

Introduction

The post-modern individual is frequently forced to make decisions that are linked to future action of strangers. Upon what foundations are such decisions based on? Are there mechanisms that make strangers seem less alien? Can such a mechanism enhance the

¹ This paper bases on a common project conducted with my dear friend and colleague, Jolanda van der Noll, and I am very grateful to her taking the time to provide valuable comments and suggestions to improve the manuscript. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the ECPR VGC'2021, Section S12, <https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PaperDetails/60234>.

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probability to show solidarity, to be cooperative or even being willing and expose oneself to the more or less unknown?

This paper argues that subjective similarity plays a significant role in such behavioural decisions and can lead to positive intergroup behaviour. It claims that subjectively perceived similarity between regionally defined social groups fosters a sense of a common social space which translates into mutual solidarity and a propensity to cooperate with each other. Conversely, subjective dissimilarity decreases the probability for positive intergroup behaviour. The underlying idea is that the ascription of central commonalities leads to a perception of "the other" as member of a common political or social communion.

Using data collected via an online survey (N=904) in Bavaria, Lower Saxony, Nord Rhine-Westphalia, and Saxony, we conduct fixed effects panel regression models to test our assumption. Our empirical results verify our assumption and show that the significance of subjective similarity increases with the personal costs of the behaviour.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The following section describes the theoretical considerations and empirical findings regarding the association between regionally based subjective similarity and reported positive intergroup behavioural intentions. We then argue that social groups can be defined on the basis of regional aspects, which means that regional populations can be treated as social categories. Consequently, Perceived similarities between regional populations are a source of mutually positive behaviour. In the third and fourth section, We perform regression models with fixed effects to empirically test whether subjective similarity between one's own group and another group is associated with positive behavioural intentions between the two groups. Our empirical results show that perceived similarity between the population of one's own region and the one of another region is positively associated with the all three dimensions of intergroup behaviour, and its significance increases with the personal costs associated with the behaviour in question.

Subjective Similarity and Intergroup Behaviour

We know that social groups evaluate each other to orientate themselves in the social world and to align themselves along the expected future behaviour of the other group (Tenbruck 1989). Thereby, to gain predictability, they try to develop stable attitudes towards the other group by translating perceived behaviour into prototypical social imaginations.²

When people evaluate foreign groups, the perception of central commonalities enables the definition of a familiar common social space that promises a harmonious togetherness and mutual understanding (Kleiner 2014). Previous research has shown that

² Studies have shown that in intercultural contacts individuals act as representatives of their (national) cultural group and less as independent personalities (see Alexander et al. 2005; Cameron et al. 2005; Fielding et al. 2006).

subjective similarity between the own group and another group affects intergroup relations (Froehlich et al. 2021; Kleiner 2014; Kleiner and Bücken 2016; Rohmann et al. 2008; Westle and Kleiner 2016). For example, Rohmann et al. (2008) showed that a more similar migrant out-group is perceived as less threatening than a more dissimilar migrant out-group. Kleiner 2014 argued that nationally coded cultural characteristics are ascribed to individuals coming from the nation in question, and if cultural dissimilarities are perceived as low, this leads to a sense of closeness and the mutual ascription of trustworthiness. In another study, using Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory, Kleiner and Bücken 2016) argue that citizens' perception of sharing some relevant commonalities with members of another EU-nations can lead to a common EU-identity. Lately, Froehlich et al. (2021) demonstrated that individuals show higher social preferences toward others from nations rated similar to their own nation in terms of the stereotype content dimensions of agency, conservative/progressive beliefs, and communion.

The presumed underlying mechanism of all these studies is that subjective similarity nurtures a perception of "the other" being a member of a common (political or social) communion. These considerations can be traced back to Émile Durkheim's concept of 'mechanical solidarity'. According to Durkheim (2013: 60), to enable social cohesion, societies need common ideas about morality and concepts of obligations that are internalised and 'shared by most average individuals in the same society [...] inscribed upon everyone's consciousness'. Durkheim calls this moral intersection the 'collective conscience' (French: conscience collective) encompassing values, beliefs, ideas and perceptions. As a member of a society, the individual complies with these values not because s/he fears punishment, but because not complying would be experienced as immorality and failure.

Likewise, behaviour that threatens the 'collective conscience' leads to feelings of morality infringement and is experienced as a violation of a universal principle which must be protected for the 'greater good' (Durkheim 2013: 76ff). Thought ahead in this manner, basic similarities promise compliance with the moral rules and can become a definitive source of "attraction" between the members of a collective Kleiner 2012. If the attribution of central similarities leads to a perception of "the other group" as part of an expanded political or social community, positive intergroup behaviour becomes probable.

Hypotheses

As we assume that perceived similarities are a definitive source for "attraction" between social groups and foster mutual pro-social behaviour tendencies, our central hypothesis runs as follows:

H1: The perception of similarity between the own social group and another social group enhances the probability for positive intergroup behaviour towards the other social group.

Positive intergroup behaviour encompasses various dimensions, including (1) solidarity, (2) cooperation, and (3) the willingness for shifting the centre of one's life to

another region with a different sub-culture. The costs of these three forms of positive intergroup behaviour considerably differ from each other and include different degrees of costs: (1) Even if costs are incurred, solidarity behaviour is voluntary and we can stop it if necessary. (2) This also applies to collaborations. In a collaborative context, voluntariness and freedom can be much more restricted, but if necessary we can break off the collaboration. (3) Finally, If we decide to move to another location and live there, we have little choice but to adapt to the circumstances and follow the local rules to get by. Moving away would be very costly, if at all possible.

We assume that our first hypothesis (H1) applies to all three dimensions of positive intergroup behaviour, but that the strength of the association increases with personal costs, because the importance of subjective similarity is greater when there is more to lose. Hence, our second hypothesis runs as follows:

H2: As the potential costs of positive intergroup behaviour increase, so does the importance of the subjective similarity between one's own group and another group.

Data and Operationalization

Regional Populations as social categories

To test our hypotheses, we use regionally defined subnational groups, namely the populations of the German federal states (Bundesländer). We assume that a certain habitus and a certain mentality are ascribed to their population, which in turn influence intergroup behaviour.

Sub-national regions

A sub-national region can be interpreted as a spatial unit with its own specific constellation of historical, economic, social, political, religious, cultural, and intellectual elements, including mentality, value priorities, attitudes, lifestyle and density of relationships (cf. Fitzgerald & Lawrence 2011; Freitag 2010; Hirschle & Kleiner 2010; Hooghe et al. 2011; Jesuit et al. 2009; Kestilä & Söderlund 2007; Kleiner 2016a; Kleiner 2018; Veigh & Cunningham 2012; Oliver 2001; Vanhoutte & Hooghe 2013). Its geographically limited culture is cultivated, passed on from one generation to the next and shows a certain inertia regarding change (Charron & Lapuente 2013). In addition, selective migration patterns also affect regional cultures: The region in which one lives, serves as an important point of reference, as we meet friends and go to work there (Kleiner 2020). It is plausible to assume that people decide on the basis of the prevailing mentalities, attitudes and behavioural patterns to move to or leave a certain region because it suits them better or less (cf. Florida 2010, Rentfrow et al. 2015). In other words, when choosing a new place of residents, they try to adapt a fit between their individual personality and their new hometown to heighten their psychological well-being (Bleidorn et al. 2016; Florida 2010). Empirical studies have shown that personality traits like the Big Five systematically differ from region to region in Great Britain, the US and Germany (Jokela et al. 2015; Rentfrow et al. 2015; Obschonka et al. 2013), and other studies illustrate

the existence of interregional value differences within countries (Beugelsdijk et al., 2006; Kaasa et al., 2014; Minkov & Hofstede, 2014).

Social Imaginations

Such subnational differences in values and mentality may be small in direct comparison, but they can have major effects if they merge into images that in turn influence social, economic or political behaviour (Kleiner 2016a; Obschonka et al. 2019). When social groups evaluate each other, they use social imaginations. These are prototypical ideas of the other based on experiences with the populations concerned (Kleiner 2014).

The present study focuses on the German federal states (Bundesländer) and assumes that their populations are ascribed specific cultural mentalities and habits which in turn affect the intergroup behaviour. The Federal Republic of Germany, as a federal state, consists of federated states and the constituent states retain a measure of sovereignty. This means some topics fall under the exclusive authority of the states (such as the financial promotion of arts and sciences, most forms of education and job training, the penal system, assembly right, land consolidation, shop closing time, urban planning, the basic press relationship etc.).³ All of this goes hand in hand with a common territory, mostly a common dialect, a common political and social infrastructure and a common training system that creates common institutions and typical forms of communication and interaction that create their own mentality and habitus (cf. Hofstede & Hofstede 2010).

Sample

Data was collected via an online survey through a private survey company and was completed by 917 respondents. We excluded respondents because they did not agree to their data being used for analyses, additional respondents, as they indicated that they did not take part in a serious matter, and respondents very short and very long interview times were excluded. This resulted in a final sample size of 862 respondents, aged between 18 and 69 ($M = 45$, $SD = 14$) and 52 percent women. The respondents were equally divided over the four federal states with $n = 225$ respondents living in Bavaria, Lower Saxony and Nord Rhine-Westphalia, and $n = 229$ respondents living in Saxony. All respondents had German citizenship.

Variables

To measure our outcome variables of solidarity we presented respondents with a scenario for each of the federal states they did not live in: "Imagine it rains for days and the

³ The German "Länder" are descendants of previously sovereign principalities from the Middle Ages on until they became part of the Weimarer Republic. These predated the rise of nation-states, and their cultures were not completely annihilated by the invented traditions of "imaged communities" (Beugelsdijk et al., 2006: 318). With the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany the Länder of the Western part of Germany got limited sovereignty.

rivers overflow. [Federal state] is experiencing numerous floods and many people have to leave their homes." Subsequently, respondents were asked if they would agree that (1) additional federal funding should be made available to [the state] (response categories ranged from 1 = *totally do not agree* to 5 = *totally agree*), (2) their willingness to personally support the people in the affected federal states by means of (2a) donating money, (2b) recruiting financial or material donations, and (2c) travelling to the affected states to help on site. Response categories ranged from *not at all willing* [1] to *very willing* [5]. Since these four solidarity items highly correlate with each other (Cronbach's alpha > 0.90), they are combined into an index that measures solidarity with another group by adding the four distance variables and dividing the sum by four.

To measure willingness to work with people from another state, respondents were asked to imagine that their manager had told them that they would be working with a team of colleagues from another state in the coming year, and they were asked to indicate their willingness to do so. To measure the readiness to move to another state, the respondents were asked to imagine having to move to another federal state for professional reasons and live there. For both items, response categories ranged from *I cannot imagine that at all* [1] to *I can imagine that very well* [5].

Our predictor variable is the perceived similarity measured by the question "All in all, what do you think, how similar are the inhabitants in #v_29# [own group] and the inhabitants of the following federal states?" Respondents were asked to rate the three geographic groups they did not belong to, and the possible answers ranged from *not at all similar* [1] to *very similar* [5].

Design

In order to test whether subjective similarity per se is associated with positive intergroup behaviour (solidarity, the willingness to cooperate, and the willingness to move), we reshaped the data and converted it from wide to long format. The restructured data contained three rows per respondent – one for each of the three other regional populations. As a result of the reshape, the number of observations grows from 862 to 2,586. This panel design enables the within-variance to be examined, i.e. the variation within the responses of one and the same respondent when assessing the populations of different other regions.⁴ In our design - considering only variances within the responses of one person - all characteristics of the individual are "fixed", i.e. since the respondent answers the questions in one and the same survey situation, his/her personal attributes (e.g., age, gender, education) do not change or provide variance and thus have no explanatory power regarding our regression model (like panel data usually does when collected at different points in time). The personal characteristics are in perfect collinearity with each other and

⁴ In contrast, the between variance measures the variation of the personal statements between the respondents.

therefore our fixed effects regression model automatically controls for all individual characteristics which makes it unnecessary to include them in the analyses.⁵

Analyses and Results

Now, we are able to test the pure mechanism of whether subjective similarity between the own group and other groups increase the probability for positive intergroup behaviour.

Variables	Operationalization	Min	Max	Mean
<i>Dependent variables</i>				
Solidarity with population from another region	Imagine it rains for days and the rivers overflow their banks. FEDERAL PROVINCE experiences numerous floods and many people have to leave their homes. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?			
Solidarity (federal funding)	Additional federal funding should be made available for BUNDESLAND.	1	5	3.90
Solidarity (donate money)	And to what extent would you personally be willing to support the people of Bavaria in the following ways? * How great would your willingness be... donate money?	1	5	2.54
Solidarity (ask for donations)	How great would your willingness be... .. to promote financial/material donations?	1	5	2.73
Solidarity (helping on-site)	How great would your willingness be... to go there to help on site?	1	5	2.54
Cooperation	Imagine your manager tells you that starting next month, you'll be working with a team from another federal province for a year. Please indicate to what extent you can imagine working with a team from the following federal states:	1	5	3.66
Relocation of the center of life	Imagine that you have to move to another federal state for professional reasons and move your center of life there. For the following federal states, please indicate whether you could imagine moving to and living in this state.	1	5	2.73
<i>Independent variable</i>				
Subjective intergroup similarity	All in all, what do you think, how similar are the inhabitants in #v_29# [own group] and the inhabitants of the following federal states?	1	5	2.69

Table 1 shows the fixed effects regression models with the outcome variables, i.e. solidarity, cooperation, and the willingness to relocate. Results show that subjective similarity between one's own group and another regionally defined group is positively associated with behavioural intention in solidarity for the other group (M1). This applies not only to the

⁵ This panel design reduces the variance in the independent variable and narrows the scope of a study to a subset of the overall variation in the data set, but it also reduces concerns that omitted variables drive any associations between dependent and independent variables (Mummolo & Peterson 2018: 833).

solidarity index, but also to each individual dimension of the combined index (see Table 2), especially when solidarity comes with personal costs, e.g. going there and helping (in the latter case the link is stronger). Similar results are obtained for the other two outcome variables (M2 and M3, Table 1). The greater the subjective similarity, the more the respondents tend to work with people from the other group (M2) and the more willing they are to move to this region (M3).

Table 1. Subjective similarity and different forms of pro-social behaviour

	M1	M2	M3
	Solidarity	Cooperation	Relocation
	Coef. Sign.	Coef. Sign.	Coef. Sign.
Subj. Similarity	0.10 *** (0.02)	0.43 *** (0.03)	0.58 *** (0.04)
Constant	2.66 *** (0.04)	2.51 *** (0.08)	1.16 *** (0.11)
Number of obs	2584	2584	2584
Number of groups	862	862	862
Sigma_u	0.837	0.969	0.902
Sigma_e	0.394	0.797	1.135
Rho	0.819	0.596	0.387
R-sq within	0.044	0.177	0.163
R-sq between	0.047	0.094	0.082
R-sq overall	0.040	0.121	0.118

Note: *p ≤ 0.05; **p ≤ 0.01; ***p ≤ 0.001; The coefficients report the relative effects to the reference category which is the lowest possible value of perceived similarity on a 5-point scale. What we see in the first model (M1) is that our test rejects the hypothesis that 0.10 is not significantly different from the reference value 1.

A comparison of these three models for solidarity, cooperation and residence shows that subjective similarity is more important if the intergroup behaviour affects the respondents more personally. Moving to another region (M3) has greater personal consequences than having to work with people from another region (M2), which in turn involves more personal costs than voluntarily showing solidarity with people from another region (M1). The same pattern emerges when we examine the dimensions of solidarity individually (Table 2, M4 to M7).

Table 2. Subjective similarity and different forms of reported solidarity

	M4: Solidarity (federal funds)	M5: Solidarity (donations)	M6: Solidarity (promotion)	M7: Solidarity (on-site)
	Coef. Sign.	Coef. Sign.	Coef. Sign.	Coef. Sign.
Subj. Similarity	0.07 *** (0.02)	0.09 *** (0.02)	0.07 *** (0.02)	0.16 *** (0.02)
Constant	3.70 *** (0.06)	2.29 *** (0.05)	2.53 *** (0.05)	2.12 *** (0.06)
Number of obs	2584	2584	2584	2584
Number of groups	862	862	862	862
Sigma_u	0.996	1.189	1.176	1.204
Sigma_e	0.576	0.500	0.522	0.545
Rho	0.749	0.849	0.835	0.830
R-sq within	0.012	0.024	0.014	0.057
R-sq between	0.019	0.029	0.027	0.026
R-sq overall	0.015	0.024	0.020	0.028

Note: *p ≤ 0.05; **p ≤ 0.01; ***p ≤ 0.001; The coefficients report the relative effects to the reference category which is the lowest possible value of perceived similarity on a 5-point scale. What we see in the fourth model (M4) is that our test rejects the hypothesis that 0.07 is not significantly different from the reference value 1.

To examine whether this relationship is not just statistically significant, but also substantially meaningful, the predicted values are estimated over the full range of subjective similarity and plotted in Figure 1 (Table 3).

Consistent with the results from M1 to M3 all three graphs in Figure 1 show that positive intergroup behaviour increases substantially as perceived similarity is higher.⁶ With increasing subjective similarity, the respondents' probability to show solidarity, to be cooperative and to move to another region increases. From this we can conclude that the perception of the similarity between one's own regional (social) group and another regional (social) group increases the likelihood of different forms of positive intergroup behaviour.

⁶ The within standard deviation of the independent variable is 0.7 (not shown here), meaning that a typical change in the within-variance does amount steps of 0.7 points on the scale (1-5).

Table 3. Marginal effects based on the regression models M1 to M3

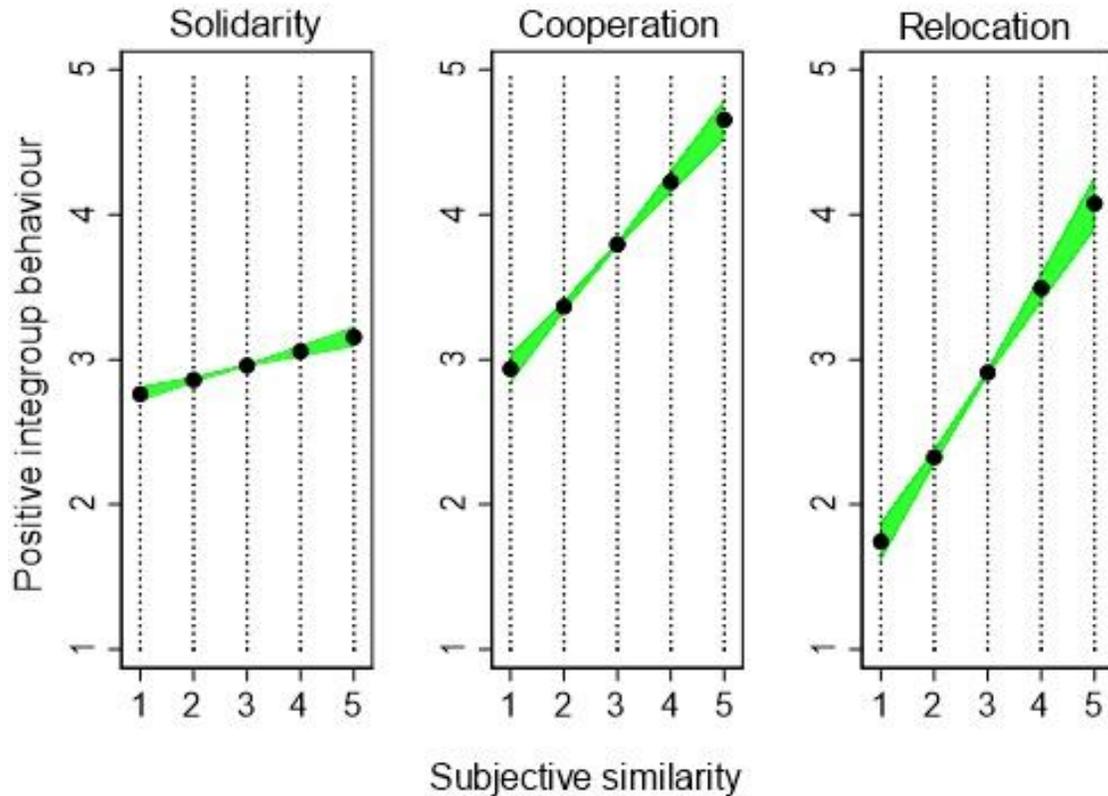
Marginal effects based on M1						
	Margin	Std. Err. (delta- method)	z	P>z	95% Conf. Interval	
_at						
1	2.76	<i>(0.03)</i>	106.99	0.00	2.71	2.81
2	2.86	<i>(0.01)</i>	271.59	0.00	2.84	2.88
3	2.96	<i>(0.00)</i>	622.69	0.00	2.95	2.97
4	3.06	<i>(0.02)</i>	152.60	0.00	3.02	3.10
5	3.16	<i>(0.04)</i>	89.35	0.00	3.09	3.22

Marginal effects based on M2						
	Margin	Std. Err. (delta- method)	z	P>z	95% Conf. Interval	
_at						
1	2.94	<i>(0.05)</i>	56.37	0.00	2.83	3.04
2	3.37	<i>(0.02)</i>	158.40	0.00	3.32	3.41
3	3.80	<i>(0.01)</i>	395.92	0.00	3.78	3.81
4	4.23	<i>(0.04)</i>	104.53	0.00	4.15	4.30
5	4.65	<i>(0.07)</i>	65.33	0.00	4.52	4.79

Marginal effects based on M3						
	Margin	Std. Err. (delta- method)	z	P>z	[95% Conf.	
_at						
1	1.74	<i>(0.07)</i>	25.20	0.00	1.61	1.88
2	2.33	<i>(0.03)</i>	82.43	0.00	2.27	2.38
3	2.91	<i>(0.01)</i>	228.52	0.00	2.88	2.93
4	3.49	<i>(0.05)</i>	65.06	0.00	3.39	3.60
5	4.08	<i>(0.09)</i>	43.07	0.00	3.89	4.26

Note: *p ≤ 0.05; **p ≤ 0.01; ***p ≤ 0.001

If we compare the three graphs, we can see that the importance of subjective intergroup similarity for positive intergroup behaviour increases with personal costs of that behaviour. The probability of moving to a certain region assumes a high degree of subjective intergroup similarity, and the same applies to cooperative behaviour. Theoretically, as subjective similarity increases from 1 to 5, the probability for relocation increases from 1.74 [1.61;1.88] to 4.08 [3.89;4.26] on the dependent variable. In contrast, if the subjective similarity rises from 1 to 5, the probability of solidarity increases by only from 2.76 [2.71;2.81] to 3.16 [3.09;3.22] on the dependent variable.



Note: Predicted strength of reported solidarity, cooperation, and the willingness to move one's permanent residence (y-axis) with 95 per cent confidence intervals over the range of subjective similarity (x-axis). Values are generated from the estimates of M1 to M3.

Figure 1.
Subjective similarity and positive intergroup behaviour

In practice, the within standard deviation of the independent variable is 0.7 (not shown here), which means that typical changes in the within-variance is in steps of 0.7 points on the scale (1-5). The mean on the similarity variable is 2.68. For example, a typical change of 0.7 points (from 2.68 to 3.38) on the similarity scale heightens the probability of solidarity from 2.93 [2.926; 2.927] to 2.99 [2.975; 3.016] which is statistically significant, but quite small on the scale. But probability of relocation increases substantially from 2.72 to 3.13 on the scale, which is noticeably better. Therefore, we can conclude that subjective similarity between one's own group and another group is meaningful for positive intergroup behaviour, although not equally for all forms.

Discussion

This present study concentrates on the question of whether meaningful subjective similarity between the own group and another group translates into positive intergroup behaviour. The rationale behind this is that perceived similarity fosters a sense of community which in turn increases the probability for mutual solidarity, cooperation, and the willingness to live among the other group. Thereby, we claim that regional populations may be perceived as "the other" group and can be treated as social groups.

Using data collected via an online survey in Bavaria, Lower Saxony, Nord Rhine-Westphalia, and Saxony, and conducting fixed effects panel regression models, we find confirmation for our assumption. The empirical findings suggest that-subjective similarity is indeed linked to positive intergroup behaviour intensions.

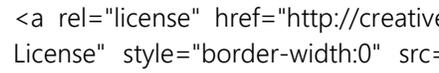
But even if the result fits the idea, they do not all do so to the same extent. We are aware that similarity may not be the only criteria for positive intergroup behaviour. It is also conceivable that positive social imaginaries are founded in characteristics attributed to another group which the own group does not seem to have. For example, if a regional population conforms to certain notions of modernity, they may be admired for it (Kleiner 2016b). In this paper, we did not focus on the question of which specific characteristics influence judgements and positive intergroup behaviour. Therefore, further research will have to fill this research gap.

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