Saskia Langer*

The (conceptions of) European identity of pupils in the border region of Rhineland-Palatinate

Abstract

Do you identify with Europe, and if so, why? 248 lower secondary school students answered this question in a survey conducted in Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany. The area is part of the so-called Greater Region, which is a cross-border region between Germany, France, Luxemburg and Belgium with the possibility of a transnational everyday-life. The aim of the article is to give space to the pupils' perspectives on their felt identity as well as to reflect on the importance of the border region for their justification of identifying with Europe. The justifications of the students offer a new perspective: the patterns of reasoning not only indicate different reasons for identity, but also a variety of conceptions of Europe, and refer to different levels and dimensions of social identity. While no correlation between proximity to the border and their identification with Europe could be found, individual practices, such as crossing the border freely, were students' preferred justification for European identity. Because the students were capable of independently arguing their position on European identity, this article suggests to treat European identity as a topic in school giving students the opportunity to reflect on the contested nature of Europe and European identity in class.

Keywords: European identity, sense of belonging, secondary school, border region, justification

1. Introduction: "I live in Europe, so I feel it, too"

Why do we feel like we belong? Why do we identify with abstract ideas, institutions, cultures, or groups? These questions are not only relevant to academia, but also to every person. The question of identity can also become political, as Brexit and identity politics over the last years have shown.

When it comes to Europe, this question is evermore contested, because what constitutes Europe is part of a political debate as well. While the Council of the European Union (2018) suggests that the member states of the EU may foster a European identity through the educational system, in the academic discourse it is disputed, whether this is a legitimate goal for education (Eis & Moulin-Doos, 2018; Oberle, 2020). Research on the identification with Europe focuses on the question, whether or not young people share a European sense of belonging and examines predictors and moderators for that. The study presented in this paper follows an explorative approach to add depth to research on European identity. Taking the perspective of the pupils into account, in the digital questionnaire study they had the chance to voice their own reasoning as to why they identify with Europe. The examined area is the border region of Rhineland-Palatinate, which is part of the so-called Greater Region, a cross-border region between Germany, France, Belgium, and

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Luxembourg. In this region the possibility for a transnational everyday-life is given, enabling students to "experience" Europe. Therefore, this article examines if the border region is of importance for students' justifications for the identification with Europe.

After introducing the theoretical background of European identity and existing research on it, the potential importance of the border region will be discussed. The analysis of one item of the digital questionnaire study revealed ten types of justifications, which will be presented and placed into a model of social identity. To conclude, the implications of the results for education about Europe will be addressed.

1.1 European identity

The concept of European identity is contested. On one hand, there are numerous concepts of identity (for an overview on the concepts of identity see Jörissen & Zirfas, 2010), on the other hand, there is no uniform conception of what constitutes Europe and respectively European identity (Quenzel, 2005). In order to be able to work with the idea of identity, the concept of social identity by Turner and Tajfel is used. This allows to leave open the question how Europe is understood. A social group is defined as "two or more individuals who share a common social identification of themselves or, which is nearly the same thing, perceive themselves to be members of the same social category" (Turner, 1982, 15). Every individual is part of a variety of social groups. Social identity is the sum of all social identifications used by a person and is part of the self-concept of the individual. It is formed through knowledge about membership in social groups and the perceived importance of these memberships. The characteristics of a group only gain significance in relation to (perceived) differences to another group (Tajfel, 1982).

Following Turner and Tajfel and further conceptualizations of their theory (Westle, 2003; Kaina, 2009; Weber, 2017), collective identity can be understood as a sense of belonging on different levels: the cognitive dimension, which consists of the knowledge of group membership, the affective dimension, which expresses the felt attachment to the group, and the evaluative dimension, which includes the subjective meaning of the group for the individual. While Westle (2003) adds definitions of the group in form of common characteristics within the group and differences to other groups on a horizontal level, in this article the differentiation between the perspective on the individual and the perspective on the collective is added on the horizontal level. The perspective on the collective contains the understandings of Europe. There is, to use Weber's formulation, a "portfolio of meanings" (Weber, 2017, 106): in social discourse there are various possible interpretations of what is "European". Since there is no consensus on the meaning of Europe or European

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identity, it is the subject of a political negotiation process and can be politically instrumentalised.

The European identity of young people is assessed in a wide variety of studies, the most prominent study on attitudes of young people is the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS). In the ICCS 2016, attitudes towards Europe were examined using four items. The students were able to indicate the degree to which they agreed with each statement on a four-point response scale. The statements used to examine the sense of belonging are "I see myself as European" and "I feel part of Europe". Another statement focuses on the valuation of the membership: "I am proud to live in Europe". The fourth statement assesses the ranking of the sense of belonging to Europe in relation to the sense of belonging to the world: "I see myself as a citizen of Europe and then a citizen of the world" (Jasper et al., 2017, 122). Similar to the fourth item, in the Eurobarometer studies the identification with Europe is also assessed in relation to another membership – the national identity (European Commission, Brussels, 2021). These items, however, do not clearly indicate what the students understand as "European" and why they feel this sense of belonging. To find predictors for European identity, researchers combine the results with additional factors (i.e. Matafora, 2021). In previous research about European identity some factors influencing European identity have been found, such as individual psychological factors (e.g., political interest), social factors (e.g., gender and migration background) and country-level characteristics (e.g., EU-fundings) (Jugert et al., 2019, 438 ff.). Knowledge about Europe is also relevant for research in didactics or educational studies (i.e., Ziemes et al., 2019; Oberle & Forstmann 2015). Regarding the content of European identity, Jugert et al. (2019) have found that the link between national and European identity depends on country-level characteristics like amount of trust in the EU. Additionally, a study by La Barbera et al. (2014) has shown variable effects of different contents of European identity on cooperative behaviour – with project-based European identity being more effective than heritage-based European identity.

This overview of the state of research concerning European identity of young people has shown that it is highly relevant how Europe is understood, yet this question more often than not remains open when European identity is probed. The study presented in this paper aims to answer these questions: What is the understanding of Europe and how does this understanding connect to why do young people identify with Europe? However, the answers are not sought in predictive factors, but an exploratory approach is pursued in which the students themselves get a chance to speak and explain their identification.

1.2 Cross-border integration in the Greater Region

The border regions between the member states of the European Union are impacted by the European integration. In these regions, the possibilities that people usual-

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ly enjoy, have become clear, when they were severely limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated national policies: supplies of medical equipment were disrupted and cross-border workers could not travel to their workplace. In the communication of the European Commission of 2021 *EU Border Regions: Living labs of European integration* (COM(2021) 393 final), the Commission emphasises the achievements made due to the implementation of the 2017 action plan *Boosting Growth and Cohesion in EU Border Regions* (COM/2017/0534 final). Additionally, the Commission presents the new goals for cross-border integration, in the fields of institutional cooperation, cross-border public service, labour markets as well as climate change, and financial tools like the b-solutions or Interreg, that should enable the achievement of the objectives. These efforts are adopted because the border regions were "places with a high potential for economic growth, encouraged by their cultural and linguistic diversity, complementary competitive advantages, unspoilt nature and less trodden tourism destinations" (Commission of the European Union, 2021, 14). The EU perceives it as their responsibility to strengthen border regions, since "[w]hat Europe offers to its border regions is emblematic of its commitment to further integration" (ibid.).

Roose argues already in 2010 that the longer the conditions of border opening and the reduction of structural differences are in effect, the stronger the effects of social cohesion should be in border regions. One form of social cohesion is a sense of belonging together. In accordance to this proposition, Delhey et al. (2020) describe Europe as the "Network Europe", a community in form of different communication networks. Concerning the role of cross-border mobility in strengthening identification with Europe as part of a European citizenship, there have been contradictory findings in previous studies (Fernández et al., 2016; Mitchell, 2012; Sigalas, 2010; Wilson 2011). Mazzoni et al. (2018) found that both short-term and long-term mobility had a significant indirect effect on participation on EU issues, mediated among others through European identity. Kuhn (2012) critically notes that in the investigation of transnational mobility, young people are surveyed who already have a positive attitude towards the EU while young people, who are unlikely to have a European identity, leave the education system before they even have the possibility to go abroad. In the studies mentioned cross-border mobility is defined as the voluntary visit to another European country for a limited period of time. The following study was conducted in an area where cross-border mobility is possible in everyday life. Therefore, the question is examined whether the border region plays a role in the pupils' reasons for identifying with Europe.

The interviewed pupils live in Rhineland-Palatinate, which is part of the border region called Greater Region. The border region between Germany, Belgium, France, and Luxemburg is characterised by a transnational reality of life, the best-known example being the cross-border labour market: in 2019 there have been over 250.000 cross-border commuters in this region (IBA, 2021). Durand and Decoville (2020) analysed the cross-border integration in the border regions in Europe and

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differentiated following Van Houtum (2000) three dimensions of integration: the flow-approach, which comprises labour flow, capital flow, and public service trade, the cross-border cooperation approach, and the people approach, which deals with perceptions, identity formation and trust. The Greater Region is part of the type of integration "Western Continental Model" (Durand & Decoville, 2020, 174). This model of integration is characterised by strong functional integration, high cross-border flow, and longstanding cooperation, while regarding the people approach the image of the neighbours is still shaped by stereotypes.

In the field of education examples of cooperation in the Greater Region are the university network Uni.GR and the Interreg-Programme Sesam'GR, which addresses young people of the Greater Region in various projects. In addition to European programmes such as eTwinning and Erasmus, it is until now the responsibility of schools and teachers to realise cooperation across borders and meet the requirements of the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder (KMK) in Germany for *European education at school* (2020). Among other things, the KMK calls for the strengthening of cooperation between schools and institutions in border regions including the use of digital formats by policymakers, the implementation of European education at school through visits to European institutions, and international exchanges between pupils.

In summary, it can be said that the lives of people living in the border region are shaped by Europe or the EU. Due to the numerous entanglements in the Greater Region, it can be understood – just like other border regions within Europe – as its own transnational region within the region. It forms a space of action and experience for its inhabitants. It can therefore be assumed that the transnational reality of life changes the relationship of the individuals to Europe or the EU. This article explores the extent to which the border influences justifications for identification with Europe, based on a survey of students in Rhineland-Palatinate.

1.3 Method

The research article examines the data from a self-conducted survey of lower secondary school students in Rhineland-Palatinate. The survey with a semi-standardised digital questionnaire asked 410 pupils, who are 15 and 16 years old, about their conception of Europe, identification with Europe, European education at school and transnational activities in the Greater Region. The questionnaire comprises 170 to 200 items, depending on filter questions, and the implementation takes approximately 45 minutes. The questionnaire was carried out under the supervision of a teacher in the course of a lesson. The study is of an exploratory nature and gives an exemplary insight into the students' perspective. Conducting the study with a representative sample at a later date would be certainly profitable. For this study the sample includes pupils in the 9th and 10th grades of the Gymnasium. Of the students surveyed, 94.8 % have German citizenship and 91.9 % were

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born in Germany. Many grew up bilingual or multilingual: 2.7 % speak another language of the Greater Region (French or Luxembourgish) at home, 11.8 % another European language and 13 % a non-European language, including most frequently Russian, Ukrainian, Turkish and Arabic. Only 22 of the 410 respondents do not speak German at home.

This article focuses on the item of the questionnaire regarding the identification with Europe. 294 pupils answered the question, whether or not they identify with Europe, and 248 pupils also gave a justification. Of these pupils, 72 % live within 30 km of the border and 25 % live in greater distance to the border, which is the criterion given by the EU for the border region (European Union, 2006). To assess the pupils' identification with Europe, an own item was developed: an explanation of 'European identity' as 'feeling European, belonging to Europe or identifying with Europe' was given. Students were then probed in their justifications of their answers to whether or not they identify as European. These justifications are examined with qualitative content analysis technique developed by Kuckartz (2018). First, thematic categories were inductively formed from the students' free-field answers. In a second step, these categories were structured and hierarchised into analytical main categories. In a third step, the categories were deductively applied to the pupils' statements by two second-coders. The statements were double-coded, i.e. they could be assigned to several categories according to their meaning units. The intercoder reliability measures Fleiss-Kappa 0.87 and is thus almost perfect according to the definition of limits by Landis & Koch (1977).

2. Justifications of European identity in the border-region

When asked about their identification with Europe, the majority of the surveyed students (77 %) reported that they do identify with Europe. Compared to the results of the ICCS 2016, this percentage is quite low: in North Rhine-Westphalia, the Land of Germany examined in that survey, 90.8 % of the pupils claimed that they "feel European" and 76.5 % feel "part of Europe" (Jasper et al., 2017, 123). In the ICCS 2016, the European identity among German pupils was low in international comparison.

With the explorative approach and giving the pupils a possibility to explain themselves the reason for the (lack of) identification, the analysis of the justifications showed that the pupils answer the question on different levels: they describe their concepts of identity, which can be related to the dimensions of social identity mentioned above, or their perception of Europe. The analysis of the students' statements first revealed a multitude of justifications. Through the qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz, ten categories could be formed, which will be presented here: belonging through *Origin*, *Nested identity, Culture*, *Socialisation and Education*, *Othering, Civic Europeaness, Attitudes, Knowledge and Experience* and *Individual Practice* as well as *'Unbelonging'*. When justifying their identification with

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Europe, the students mostly used several different arguments, so that the statements were double coded. The following table shows, to what percentage the statements could be placed into the different categories, which will be described and afterwards placed in the model of the dimension of identity.

Table 1: Frequencies of justification-types in percentages

Category	Percentage (n=248)
Origin	20.2 %
Nested identity	14.1 %
Culture	16.9 %
Socialisation / education	13.3 %
Othering	4.4 %
Civic Europeanness	12.1 %
Attitudes	6.5 %
Knowledge & Experience	7.3 %
Individual Practice	29.4 %
National/world identity	6.5 %
Critique of question	6.5 %

Source: own calculation

2.1 Origin

When identity and a sense of belonging is concerned, one common factor that often comes into effect is one's origin. Factors such as place of birth or the citizenship of one's parents, as is the case in Germany, determine one's citizenship within the framework of the nation-state system. These arguments are translated by the pupils to the European level: They state that they feel European or identify with Europe, because they were "born here", in Europe. 15.1 % of the surveyed students used this reasoning, which makes it the second most used subcategory. Also, the belonging by descent, jure sanguinis, is applied to the European level, which gives "being European" a notion of ethnicity. *"Yes, because I was born there and both of my parents are European"*, one pupil stated. Statements that referred to the "roots" are also counted in this subcategory of origin. One pupil differentiated which argument is stronger: *"I was born in Europe, but I don't have European roots, therefore I don't feel that way"*. This shows that the argument of origin can also be used to justify not identifying with Europe. Since citizenship is also determined by origin, statements that base European identity on holding several (European) citizenships were also included in this category. The justification of European identification using the origin, argue along the cognitive dimension of group-identification: The students express their knowledge about the membership. The origin was referred to in 20.2 % of the statements.

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2.2 Nested identity

There are statements that also base the justification of European identity on origin, however, they do not refer to Europe but to the nation state. The identification is based on belonging to the state and since this state belongs to Europe or "is European", the person also feels that he or she belongs to Europe. The term "nested identity" is used to describe that "near" identifications are integrated into "further" identifications (Der-Karabetian et al., 2019). While the term does not imply a causal correlation, the students' argumentation establishes this connection: Because they belong to Germany, they also feel they belong to Europe. Partly, the statements are formulated in a matter-of-fact way; only the fact that Germany is located in Europe is mentioned: *"Yes, because Germany is in Europe"*. This also makes the personal belonging to Europe seem like a fact and not a feeling, therefore the justification of nested identity is allocated in the cognitive dimension of identity. The justification of nested identity was used by 14.1 % of the surveyed students.

2.3 Culture

Another reference point for European identity is culture. In the students' statements, they either mention that they feel European "because of the culture" or they name what constitutes this culture. Elements of the culture that the students mentioned, are values, virtues and moral beliefs, religion – in particular "being christian" – languages and being "typically european". Unfortunately, when claiming *"I feel European because I also fit many typical stereotypes"* the students did not explain, what stereotypes they mean. However, merely citing various characteristics of European identity already fills it with meaning. The argumentation refers to the horizontal level of group identification and discusses the definition of the group. The culture is often combined with the category socialisation and education. The students reflect that they share the culture, because they grew up in this culture, were socialised this way, or taught that these are the "right" values. This becomes apparent in the following exemplary statements: *"I feel European because I was part of European culture already as a child."* or *"Yes, because I was born in Germany and thus learned the same values."* Of course, the culture can also be an argument, why the person does not identify with Europe: *"Not really, since I grew up with a different culture."* While the subcategories are only mentioned by individual persons, the culture is often used as an amplification in addition to other arguments, so that 16.9 % of the statements could be placed in the category *Culture*.

2.4 Socialisation and Education

Students are aware of the fact that one's belonging and identity is shaped by how one grows up or is brought up. "*Yes, because I was born and brought up like that. I enjoy the benefits and therefore feel I belong."* This also shows an awareness of the contingency of belonging: if they had grown up somewhere else, they might think

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and feel differently. In this category, following the scientific concepts of socialisation and education, a distinction is made between whether the words "grown up" or "brought up" are chosen. While socialisation expresses the contingency of being brought up this way, being raised this way implies an intention. The justification of a sense of belonging due to socialisation and education is allocated in the cognitive dimension of identity. 13.3 % of the students used socialisation or education as a reasoning for why they feel European.

2.5 Othering

> *"I grew up with 'European' culture, so I would now consider myself European. However, Europe is not a country, which you don't seem to consider in your questions, and there is a different culture in every country in Europe. Maybe they are a bit similar, but feeling 'European' can only be answered by comparing it to feeling American or African." (Quote from student in survey)*

The respondent cited above criticises the questionnaire by arguing that what is European is only formed in distinction to something else and thus should be judged in comparison to another continent. This process, to build the in-group in exclusion to the "other", corresponds to the concept of social identity. In the context of European identity, this argumentation pattern can be used in three ways. Firstly, like suggested in the introductory statement, Europe's unity can be founded on its difference from a non-European other, as this other student did: *"Yes, because when I observe American culture, I notice many differences"*. Secondly, the unity of Europe can be questioned, when the "other" are the other member states and the variety between them is perceived as too great. *"I was born in Europe, but the continent is so big and full of absolutely different countries and cultures. I don't feel I belong to Italy or Finland, for example. So no?"* Thirdly, similarities can be perceived between the member states that justify the unity. *"I identify as European because the culture is similar in countries, but there are also some countries in Europe where you have to get used to the way of life and culture."* When the unity is based on similarities, oftentimes there is no criteria that distinguishes what is "European" from what is "non-European", since the characteristics that unite the European states can also be found in other countries. In this last statement the student seems to notice differences to "some countries", but for some reason be willing to accept the differences. While not stated explicitly, it can be suspected that this reason would be the underlying uniting characteristic. The formation of a European identity through differentiation from an "other" addresses the definition of Europe and thus the horizontal level of our model. Although the debate about what is European and what is excluded as non-European is widely received in public and academic discourse, this pattern of justification was not common among the students. Only 4.4 % of the statements were placed into this category.

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2.6 Civic Europeanness

Similar to the category *Culture*, in the category *Civic Europeanness* abstract parameters are referred to in order to find a definition of the group. With respect to *Civic Europeanness*, however, Europe is understood as a political and not a cultural space. The term is based on the concept of Civic nationalism, which refers to a legal-political community with a general principle of equality (see Weber, 2018, 112 f.). The political achievements are attributed to the EU or Europe and thus Europe is understood as a space in which individuals can also be civically active. As characteristics of Europe as a political space, security, capitalism, peace, stability, democracy and freedom were mentioned. In addition, abstract references were made to politics and economics as well as laws and rights. The reference to the definition of Europe, i.e. the horizontal dimension of the model on identity, is linked to the vertical dimension on the evaluative level: It is evident from the statements that the students value the opportunities that political cooperation offers them. For example, rights are translated to an individual level – *"Yes, because you can feel safe and you can rely on the politicians"*–, or explicitly stated to be enjoyed – "*I feel European because we can be happy that we are not at war with each other and we can achieve more together and we can go on holiday there etc"*. This justification was used in 12.1 % of the students' statements.

2.7 Attitudes towards Europe

In this reasoning pattern, *Attitudes*, identification with Europe is based on an attitude or feeling towards Europe. The statements in this category express that the person has a positive attitude or feeling towards Europe: *"I feel European because I live in Europe and feel comfortable in most European countries."* Conversely, the argument can also be used to justify why the person does not identify with Europe: they do not "like" Europe. This justification pattern, found in 6.5 % of the statements, refers to the affective dimension of social identity: *"I feel very European, it's great here"*. The emotional nature of the statements, makes them appear not as justifications of identification, but rather as an expression and consequence of felt belonging.

2.8 Knowledge and experiences

"...Europe is my horizon (I have never been outside Europe)" (Quote from survey)

In this justification pattern *Knowledge and Experiences* are the foundation for the identification with Europe. There are four variants to this argument. The first two variants refer to experiences. To feel a sense of belonging, the students argue, you need to "know" all of Europe, so you would have to have already been to all European countries. Not knowing all of Europe is named as the reason, why this person does not identify with Europe: *"No, because I don't even remotely know all of Europe"*. The second variant of this justification pattern consists of only knowing

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Europe. This can be used to explain the identification with Europe as well as the non-identification. *"I feel European because I have never left Europe and I don't know how it feels outside Europe"* but also "*I think that's hard to say because I don't know anything else. Probably my opinion would be different if I had more personal experience with non-European culture"*. Here once again the contingency becomes visible, that the opinion could also be different and is influenced by the circumstances.

The third and fourth variants refer to knowledge. Because the person has a lot of knowledge and information about Europe, they also feel European: *"I know a lot about European culture and history"*. And, as an equivalent, missing knowledge is used as a reason, why a person does not identify with Europe. 7.3 % of the students' statements could be placed in this category, which relates to the evaluative dimension of identity.

2.9 Individual practices

The most common pattern of reasoning to explain the identification with Europe, was, at 29.4 %, the *Individual Practice.* Because the students are "experiencing Europe", they also feel European. A subcategory of this justification pattern is that the pupils argue they feel European simply because they "live here". 18.3 % of the statements referred to this argument. It is oftentimes not clear, if they perceive themselves living in Europe and thus identifying as European as a fact – the cognitive dimension of identity–, or if they really notice it in everyday live. But some students explicitly stated: *"Yes, it surrounds you in everyday life... on many issues: Corona and Ukraine Conflict"*. Some also cited the lifestyle, the border proximity and attending a European school as reasons. Another interesting group of statements, and at 10 % the sixth most used subcategory over all, refers to personally profiting from the politics of the EU. Statements like *"Yes, because I was born here and benefit daily from the advantages, e.g. the easy crossing of borders between EU states"* make evident that the students reflect, how political decisions impact their lives and in return they feel connected to Europe. Therefore, the *Individual Practice* category over all is related to the evaluative dimension of identity. Surprisingly, the students do not refer to cultural exchange or the cultural experience in another European country, when they talk about how they experience Europe in their personal life, but relate to Europe as a political space.

2.10 Non-belonging

15 % of the students surveyed said that they did not identify with Europe. One reason the students gave for not identifying with Europe was that another order was more important to them. They either identified only with the nation state – *"No, I only feel German"* – or with the whole world – *"I feel like a citizen of the world"*. To argue, why they answered "No", 6.5 % criticised the concept of a European identity. Some pupils state that *"there is no European identity"* or "*From my point of view*

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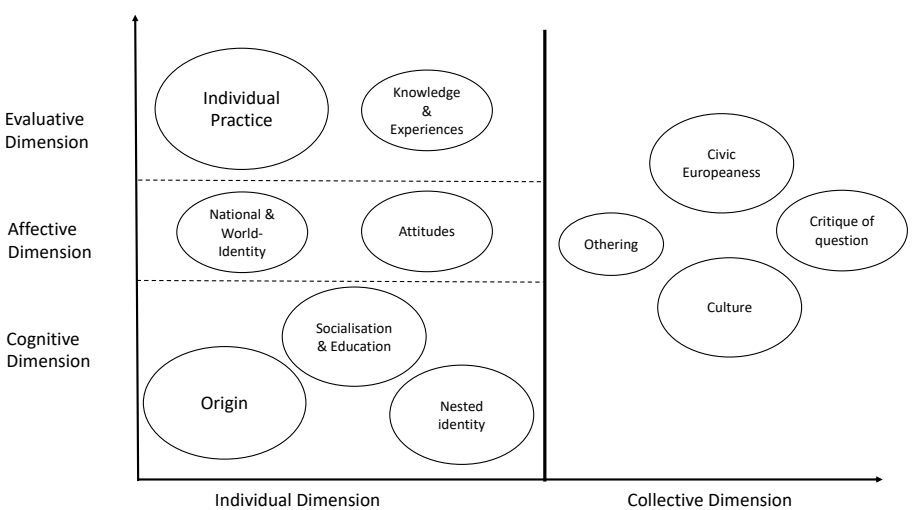
there is no European feeling". From their perspective Europe is simply a continent and does not influence, how they feel. Others argue that descent, origin and spaces don't influence their identity, but rather their interests. Additionally, the legitimacy of identifying with Europe is questioned: *"No, I feel like a human being. I don't think identity should be based on origin, because that has nothing to do with the person"*. Although it is only a handful of students who criticise the question or the concept of European identity, it is remarkable that they understand the contested nature of the concept of a European identity and independently defend their opinion once the space was given.

2.11 Relating the justification-types to a model of social identity

In chapter 1.1, a model of social identity was presented following Westle (2003), which understands identity as a sense of belonging on different levels. On the vertical level, the focus can be on the cognitive dimension, the affective dimension or the evaluative dimension. For this article, the distinction of the individual dimension or the collective dimension was also introduced on a horizontal level. Having presented the different patterns of justification for students' identification with Europe, these are now integrated into the model of identity. The size of the bubbles is meant to visualise how often this category appeared in the students' statements.

Table 2: Visualisation of the Justification-types in the model of social identity



Source: own illustration

The distinction between the individual and the collective dimension illustrates that students refer to the two components of European identity in their justifica-

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tions: referring to the individual dimension, students argue why they personally identify with Europe, whereas referring to the collective dimension, they discuss what constitutes Europe as such. It should be noted that this mapping concerns the ideal-typical categorisation of the statements. The statements themselves were double-coded, as they often referred to different aspects of European identity and thus also to several dimensions of this model.

Within the individual dimension, the statements of the categories *Origin, Nested identity* as well as *Socialisation and Education* referred to the cognitive dimension of identity. Knowledge about the membership was expressed and the sense of belonging was treated as a fact. Especially in the category of *Socialisation and Education*, the contingency of belonging was also reflected: if the students had been born somewhere else, if they had lived in a different country and if they had grown up differently, they would not feel that they belonged. The categories *National and World belonging* and *Attitudes* refer to the affective dimension, the felt sense of belonging. The categories *Individual practice* and *Knowledge and Experience* were assigned to the evaluative dimension, as in these statements, one's own activities were reflected and placed in the European context. Because the students perceive references to Europe in their lives, e.g. by taking advantage of the EU-freedoms or learning about Europe, they feel a sense of belonging.

With regard to the collective dimension of European identity, the justifications of *Civic Europeanness, Culture, Othering* and *Criticism of the question* were found. These justifications each relate to an understanding of what constitutes Europe: in the argument of *Civic Europeanness* Europe is understood as a political space and the justification of *Culture* as well as some statements in reference to the *Other* conceptualize Europe as a cultural space, while in the category *Critique of the question* precisely these concepts are being questioned and Europe is seen as a geographical space. Also, in statements that compare Europe to other continents the focus is on Europe as a geographical space. While it wasn't the focus of them, also the statements that were allocated in the other categories, refer to an understanding of what constitutes Europe. For the investigation of the border region, the category of *Individual Practice* is relevant, since in these statements Europe is conceptualised as a transnational space for action and experience. While the concepts of Europe as a cultural, political or geographical space are relatively abstract, the concept of Europe as a space for action and experience directly refers to the individual. The question therefore arises as to whether this justification is related to the distance of the border to students' home.

3. Experiencing Europe – identity concept of the border regions?

With regard to the effect of the border region on the identity of students, the question follows as to whether the understanding of Europe as a space of experience and action is a distinct concept of European identity in a border region. This could

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be because a border region may provide unique opportunities to experience Europe through everyday transnational life. The first thing to note is that the activities are obviously relevant to the students as they use them as justifications. However, when examining whether the proximity to the border of the place of residence is related to the justification pattern, it turns out that the variables are statistically independent of each other. There is also no correlation between the activities in the Greater Region, both in terms of frequency and type of activity, and the justification patterns. One reason for this could be that the scale of 30 km does not correspond to lived transnationality. Almost 25 % of the students interviewed say they are in Luxembourg regularly, i.e. at least every 2 months. This means that the surveyed group as a whole leads a relatively transnational life, especially between Luxembourg and Germany. The towns categorised as far from the border are also located in Rhineland-Palatinate and thus in a federal state that lies on the border. Another reason could be that meanwhile not only people close to the border, but everybody in Europe (can) lead a transnational life, and thus the networks within Europe can be experienced. To examine these hypotheses, more research is necessary and it would be interesting to assess the study presented here with pupils who live in the inner part of the country and even further away from the border. Following this lacuna, we plan to conduct the questionnaire study in other border regions of the Greater Region which also would offer international comparison of pupils' perspectives on Europe and the European identity.

4. Discussion and implications

This research showed that the students' justification of the identification with Europe refer to different levels of social identity: the individual and the collective dimension. The pupils' justified their identification with Europe by referring to their individual practice, their experiences and knowledge, their attitudes toward Europe, their origin, a nested identity, their socialisation and education, the culture, a civic Europeaness, in distinction to an Other and by criticising the concept of European identity. They constructed Europe as a geographical, political, cultural space or a space of action and experiences. Their answers reflected the contested nature of Europe and European identity and as a sum illustrate the diverse discourses existing in our society and academics. Depending on how Europe and the European identity is understood, the pupils feel they belong or not. Instead of focusing on the question, if the pupils identify with Europe, this study showed, what content they assign the European identity and what concept of identity they share.

Although no correlation could be established between the proximity of the place of residence to the border and the justifications, the justification pattern of individual practice is important for European education in the border region, in this case the Greater Region. The research shows that the students have different concepts of identity and Europe, and that they can reflect and justify them. There is no

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"right" reason to identify with Europe and it is in the responsibility of the pupils' to build their own opinion about Europe and decide, if they want to identify with Europe. While in the academic discourse of didactics it has so far been discussed whether or not European identity can represent the goal of European education (Eis & Moulin-Doos, 2018; Oberle, 2020), I would like to suggest that it should not be understood as a goal but as a topic of teaching about Europe. The pupils were capable to independently discuss these ideas, therefore the discussion of different justifications for the identification with Europe could be relevant to their everyday life and thus a topic of interest. The space to discuss the contested nature of what constitutes Europe and different conceptions of European identity could be given in class and this study could serve as an orientation for that. Additionally, the transnational reality of life in Europe and the Greater Region in particular can be addressed as well. For political education it would be desirable to include the pupils' experiences reflected in their justification of identity through individual practice and to address the political conditions for these activities.

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