

REPLY

Argumentum ad populum: A reply to Bonikowski and DiMaggio

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Abstract

Our reply to Bonikowski and DiMaggio (2021) is in three parts. First, we clarify the aim of our research note (Eger & Hjerm, 2021). Our original critique was based on a replication of their inductive analysis, and we evaluated their work using best practices for the methodology that they chose. Our argument is straightforward: If one is going to use inductive methods to say something meaningful about the real world, one needs to make sure that the model being advanced fits the data. We present additional evidence supporting our original critique. Second, we discuss whether their new analyses bolster their original results and conclusions. Third, because their own results actually suggest that different levels of American nationalism exist rather than qualitatively different types, we question their claim of convergent validity. In short, we stand by our original critique.

KEYWORDS

civic nationalism, ethnic nationalism, nationhood/National Identity, latent class analysis, patriotism, research methods

1 | INTRODUCTION

In fact, even inverted, the fable is useless.¹ Perhaps only the allegory of the Empire remains. For it is with the same imperialism that present-day simulators try to make the real, all the real, coincide with their simulation models. - Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations"

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We thank *Nations and Nationalism* for hosting this scholarly exchange and the opportunity to reply to Bonikowski and DiMaggio's (2021) response to our research note (Eger & Hjerm, 2021). We disagree with how they have, in places, characterised our arguments. To clarify, we are not advocating for an inductive approach to the study of nationalism (the title of our research note after all is "Identifying varieties of nationalism: A critique of a purely inductive approach"). Quite the opposite; we favour a deductive approach. Yet, for the record, we are not critical of all inductive research. The explicit aim of Bonikowski and DiMaggio's (B&D hereafter) research was to use latent class analysis (LCA) to identify, from the data, specific types of American nationalism (Bonikowski & DiMaggio, 2016: 953). By their own account, they combine "LCA with an unprecedentedly broad range of indicators" (Bonikowski & DiMaggio, 2016: 951)–23 ordinal indicators plus 10 covariates—without specifying expectations about what they would find. In our research note, we evaluated their efforts using best practices for the methodology that they chose. What underlies our critique is the notion that, if one is going to use purely exploratory methods to say something meaningful about the real world, one needs to make sure that the model fits the data.

2 | FOUR TYPES OF AMERICAN NATIONALISM?

Why does the model need to fit the data? In LCA, the goal is to fit individual responses to latent classes. This is not too different from the goal of structural equation modelling (SEM), which fits manifest variables to latent ones. If we do not have fit, the model simply does not account for the variance in responses and does a poor job of assigning individuals to clusters. Our analyses show that there is virtually no fit between their model and the data. Since that is the case, we fail to see how they can advance a four-class typology of American nationalism.

B&D's arguments imply that the cluster solution with the *least bad fit* will always be sufficient. However, even that argument falls short, as there is little evidence that any solution is actually the least poorly fitting. There are a number of statistical ways to assess fit. Yes, we must talk about model fit statistics—not because we have a love affair with them, but because they are the most appropriate tool for evaluating exploratory analyses. We favour using a variety to ensure that the solution selected is robust. Ideally, they all should point in the same direction. BIC, preferred by B&D, suggests that the four-cluster solution is the least bad. Yet, the other fit statistics, some of which others argue are superior to BIC, imply that it is not possible to discriminate between cluster solutions. This is an important finding. In our research note, we use the Bootstrap Likelihood Ratio Test (BLTR) to highlight that, but B&D dismiss this out of hand. We also use posterior analyses to demonstrate that all models are equally poor (or good) at allocating respondents to various cluster solutions. B&D did not comment on this in their response. Other fit indices, which we did not report, such as average weight of evidence (AWE), suggest a two-cluster solution. Further, the very low item R^2 s also suggest a poorly fitting model (results available upon request).

3 | EVALUATING NEW EVIDENCE

In their response, B&D ostensibly followed our lead by testing six-item nonsparse models, which they repeatedly claimed were theoretically derived (Bonikowski & DiMaggio, 2021:9). We agree that using nonsparse models is a much better empirical approach, but it is not obvious to us how any of their choices follow from theory. They never actually explained, from a theoretical standpoint, why they chose these particular six items and from only three of the four categories of nationalist sentiments. B&D jettison a theoretically important sentiment—identification with the nation—because, according to them, it "has not proven to be particularly influential in [their] past analyses" (page 9). How is this not a purely inductive approach? Further, we are not aware of any theory of nationalism that emphasises pride in the arts over identification with the nation.

Of course, we recognise that they were motivated to find empirical support for their typology. We replicated their empirical results, but we come to a different conclusion. Even if we ignore its poor absolute fit altogether

(and meddling with error term correlations) and agree that the best fitting six-item model has four classes, we disagree that this is a good model. Pride in the arts and pride in democracy are virtually unimportant in discriminating between clusters (as indicated by the R^2 for the individual items: .02 and .09). Put simply, these variables contribute little to the four-class solution, which begs the question why they were included in the featured model. We disagree with their statement (Bonikowski & DiMaggio, 2021:10) that this exercise bolsters their original results.

4 | ONE TYPE OF AMERICAN NATIONALISM?

Throughout their response, they claim that we advance a one-class solution (Bonikowski & DiMaggio, 2021: 3, 7). Nowhere have we argued that there is one type of American nationalism. Again, our point was to show that *no* cluster solution (based on these 23 variables) fits the data well enough to validate the existence of a typology.

However, a visual inspection of B&D's new four-quadrant figure (Bonikowski & DiMaggio, 2021: 8) has actually inspired us to consider the possibility that one type does exist. Noticing the similarity in the pattern of average cluster-specific item responses across quadrants, we replotted the data in the same graph (see Figure 1). Here, it becomes evident that these are not four distinct types of nationalism that differ in *quality*. Instead, these patterns suggest that what distinguishes Americans from one another is mainly a difference in their *degree* of nationalism. We leave this to future research to investigate, although previous studies are suggestive. Despite B&D's claim that the explanatory power of their fourfold typology is further evidence of its existence, a "typology" based mainly on levels of nationalism would, of course, be related to a variety of social and political attitudes and behaviours. Indeed, this is what the empirical literature on nationalism has previously shown.

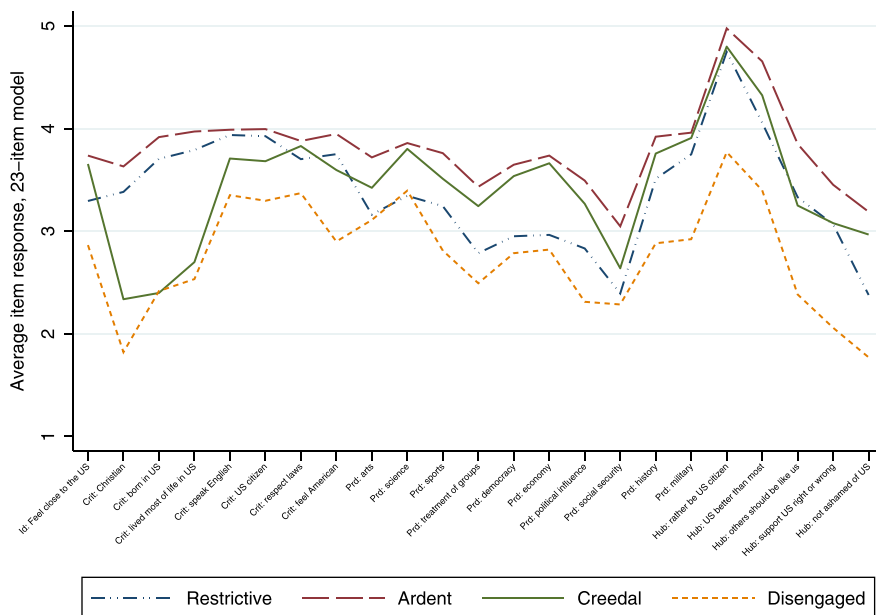


FIGURE 1 Types or levels? Cluster-specific means from B&D's original 23-item model, four-class solution [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

5 | CONCLUSION

To recap, we criticise B&D's purely inductive analysis of American nationalism. They respond that it is we who favour inductive methods because we maintain that their model should fit the data and then use their chosen tool, LCA, to demonstrate that it does not. In reality, we use fit indices *not* because we prefer exploratory methods to theoretically driven attitudinal research, but because fit indices are the *most appropriate* tool for judging exploratory research—which is exactly what their original article is. Further, their subsequent analyses prove to be an exercise in fitting variables to a model that few would argue are the six essential features of American nationalism. In the absence of fit, the authors point to convergent validity. Revisiting their original results (Figure 1), it is likely that the correlations between their four classes and other social and political outcomes stem primarily from quantitative differences in American nationalism (i.e., levels) and not qualitatively different types of American nationalism.

Before concluding, we would like to comment on the notion that common practices are equivalent to best practices. To justify not reporting measures of absolute fit, B&D (Bonikowski & DiMaggio, 2021:5) argue that very few articles in top American sociology and political science journals do this. They report they only found five instances out of an undisclosed sample of 34. Without knowing to which 34 they refer, our own cursory inspection indicates that many of those articles do report absolute fit statistics (based on Chi-squared statistics appropriate for nonsparse models) but do not use the language “absolute fit.” Nevertheless, we fundamentally disagree that just because a majority of scholars engage in a methodological practice that this is a good reason to follow suit. Being in the majority does not automatically make one's practices best, as meta-studies and simulations at times reveal (e.g., Schmidt-Catran & Fairbrother, 2016).

B&D (Bonikowski & DiMaggio, 2021:11) write that “At the heart of the matter appears to be the authors' distaste for our claim that people hold overarching dispositions towards the nation, comprising a range of specific attitudes.” Nothing could be further from the truth. In critiquing their work, our intention was to contribute to the field of nationalism and in particular the study of nationalist sentiments. Although we favour a deductive approach to LCA, where expectations derived from theory are stated a priori, we do not categorically oppose using LCA inductively. Yet, especially in cases of exploratory research like B&D's, the empirical evidence must be conclusive. As there is no new evidence to support their conclusions, we stand by our original critique.

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ENDNOTE

ⁱ In this quote, Baudrillard refers to the Borges' fable featured as the epigraph to Bonikowski and DiMaggio's response to our critique.

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