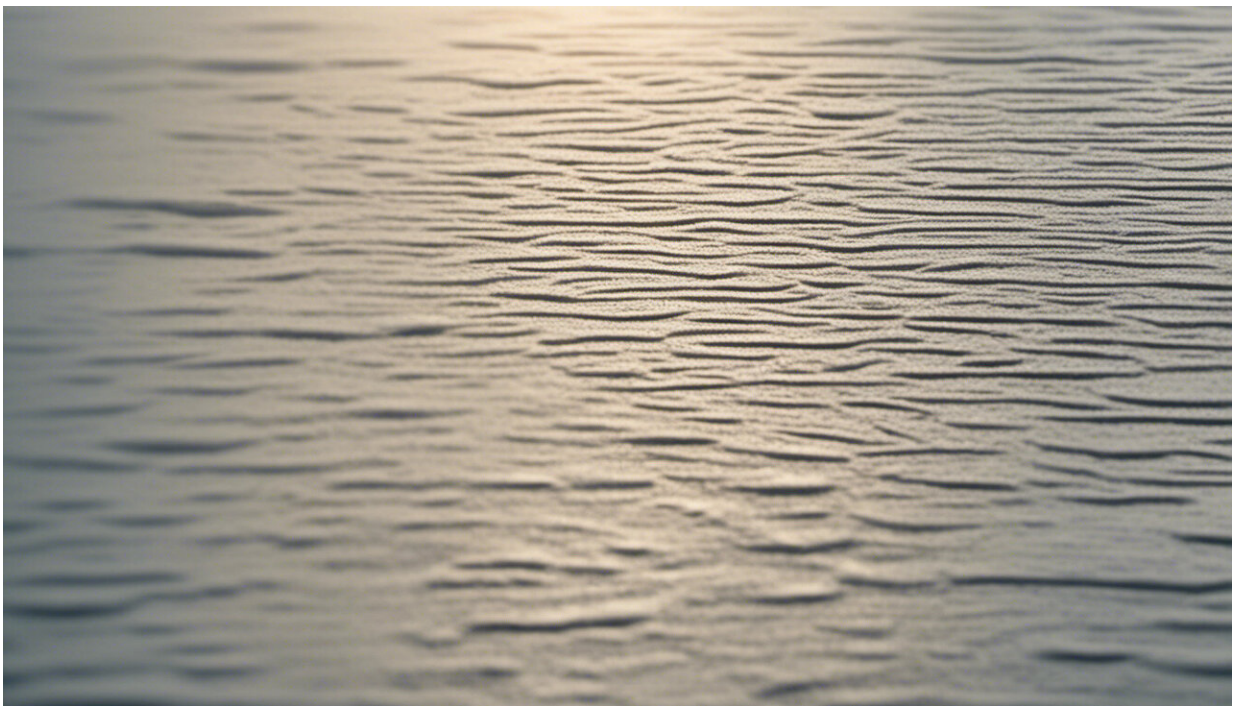


What if the world was one country? A psychologist on why we need to think beyond borders

January 15 2021, by Steve Taylor



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

There are countless different species on the surface of this planet. One of these is the human race, which has over seven billion members. In one sense, there are no nations, just groups of humans inhabiting different areas of the planet. In some cases, there are natural borders formed by

sea or mountains, but often borders between nations are simply abstractions, imaginary boundaries established by [agreement or conflict](#).

[Rusty Schweikhart](#), a member of the 1969 Apollo 9 [space mission](#), explained how when he looked at the Earth from space, he experienced a profound shift in perspective. Like most of us, he was brought up to think in terms of countries with borders and different nationalities, but seeing the world from this new angle changed his view. He felt "part of everyone and everything". As he [described it](#): "You look down there and you can't imagine how many borders and boundaries you cross, again and again and again, and you don't even see them."

Schweikhart's perspective reminds us that we belong to the Earth rather than to a nation, and to a species rather than a nationality. And although we might feel distinct and different, we all have a common source. Our species originally developed in eastern Africa around [200,000 years ago](#) and migrated out into the rest of the world in a series of waves. If there was an ancestry website that could trace our lineage back to the very beginning, we would find that we all have the same great-great (followed by many other "greats") [grandparents](#).

How then do we explain [nationalism](#)? Why do humans separate themselves into groups and take on different national identities? Maybe different groups are helpful in terms of organization, but that doesn't explain why we feel different. Or why different nations compete and fight with one another.

The psychological theory of "[terror management](#)" offers one clue. This theory, which has been validated by [many studies](#), shows that when people are made to feel insecure and anxious, they tend to become more concerned with nationalism, status and success. We seem to have an impulse to cling to labels of identity to defend ourselves against insecurity. There has, however, been [criticism](#) of the theory by some

psychologists who believe it overlooks wider factors that [contribute to human behavior](#).

That said, the theory could go some way to help explain why nationalism grows in times of crisis and uncertainty. Poverty and [economic instability](#) often lead to [increased nationalism](#) and to [ethnic conflict](#). An increased sense of insecurity brings a stronger need for conceptual labels to strengthen our sense of identity. We also feel the impulse to gain security through the feeling of belonging to a group with shared beliefs and conventions.

On this basis then it's likely that people who feel the [strongest sense of separation](#) and the highest levels of insecurity and anxiety, are the most prone to [nationalism, racism and to fundamentalist religion](#).

Beyond nationalism

One pertinent finding from my own [research](#) as a psychologist is that people who experience high levels of wellbeing (together with a strong sense of connection to others, or to the world in general) don't tend to have a sense of group identity.

I have studied many people who have undergone profound personal transformation following intense psychological turmoil, such as bereavement or a diagnosis of cancer. I sometimes refer to these people as "shifters", since they appear to shift up to a higher level of human development. They undergo a dramatic form of "post-traumatic growth". Their lives become richer, more fulfilling and meaningful. They have a new sense of appreciation, a heightened awareness of their surroundings, a wider sense of perspective and more intimate and authentic relationships.

As I report in my book, [The Leap](#), one of the common traits of "shifters"

is that they no longer define themselves in terms of nationality, religion or ideology. They no longer feel they are American or British, or a Muslim or a Jew. They feel the same kinship with all human beings. If they have any sense of identity at all, it's as global citizens, members of the human race and inhabitants of the planet Earth—beyond nationality or border. Shifters lose the need for group identity because they no longer feel separate and so have no [sense](#) of fragility and insecurity.

Why we need trans-nationalism

In my view, then, all nationalistic enterprises—such as "[America First](#)" or Brexit—are highly problematic, as they are based on anxiety and insecurity, so inevitably create discord and division. And since nationalism contravenes the essential reality of human nature and human origins, such enterprises always turn out to be [temporary](#). It's impossible to override the fundamental interconnectedness of the human race. At some point, it always reasserts itself.

Like the world itself, our most serious problems have no borders. Problems like the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change affect us collectively and so can only be [solved collectively](#) – from a trans-nationalist approach. Such issues can only be properly solved by viewing humans as one species, without borders or boundaries.

Ultimately, nationalism is a psychological aberration. We owe it our ancestors and to our descendants—and to the Earth itself—to move beyond it.

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