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Defensive representations of an uncomfortable history: The case of Hungary and the Holocaust

Gilad Hirschberger[a,*], Anna Kende[b,**], Shoshana Weinstein[a]

[a] Baruch Ivcher School of Psychology, Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, Israel
[b] Department of Social Psychology, Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary

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ABSTRACT

The current research examines how representations of a traumatic history influence contemporary intergroup attitudes. Specifically, we examine antisemitism in Hungary as a case example of how the need to defend the group's moral image motivates the assumption of a *defensive representation of history* – a modification of the group's narrative with regards to its culpability in past atrocities committed against another group. Two studies examined the link between defensive representations of the Holocaust, nationalism, and antisemitism. In the first, correlational study ($N = 348$), we found that Hungarian nationalism and antisemitism were associated, and that this association was significantly mediated by defensive representations of the Holocaust – high nationalism was associated with higher endorsement of defensive representations which in turn were associated with more antisemitism. Low nationalism was associated with greater acknowledgement of in-group responsibility for historical crimes which was associated with less antisemitism. These findings were corroborated in an experimental study ($N = 165$) which indicated that priming defensive representations of the Holocaust increased antisemitism, even when controlling for nationalism. Study 2 further showed, in a 2-step mediation model, that defensive representation primes increased secondary antisemitism, conspiratorial antisemitism, and negative attitudes towards Israel. We discuss the implications of defensive representations of history on contemporary intergroup relations.

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In the summer of 2014, a monument was erected in Budapest to mark the 70th anniversary of Hungary's occupation by Nazi Germany during World War II. The monument depicts an angel, a symbol of Hungary, warding off a Nazi imperial eagle with a plaque reading, "To the memory of all victims." Since its' erection, this monument has elicited protest against what may seem as an attempt to whitewash Hungary's role in the Holocaust, which culminated in the destruction of the Jewish community, and the death of over 400,000 Hungarian Jews. While there is little question that many Hungarians were victims during WWII (such as members of left-wing movements and other dissidents), the monument seems to represent a motivation to gloss-over the uncomfortable fact of official and widespread Hungarian participation in the Final Solution (Stauber, 2010), and represent instead an image of Hungarian victimhood. This explicit manifestation of a collective aspiration to downplay or even rewrite history resembles attempts in other European countries to modulate the role of their nation in the Holocaust, often opting to protect the image of the group, even if it requires the assumption of beliefs that do not necessarily concur with the historical record (e.g., Bikont, 2015; Gross, 2001; Judt, 1996).

* Corresponding author at: The Baruch Ivcher School of Psychology, The Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya, P.O. Box 167, Herzliya 46150, Israel.
** Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: ghirschberger@idc.ac.il (G. Hirschberger), kende.anna@ppk.elte.hu (A. Kende).

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In the current research we use the term *defensive representations of history* to refer to the need to modify the group's narrative with regards to its culpability in past atrocities committed against another group. Defensive representations include attempts to revise the collective perception of uncomfortable historical events by attributing wrongdoings to external pressure (i.e., collaboration at gunpoint), or by assuming the belief that one's group was in fact a victim, not a perpetrator (Bilewicz, Witkowska, Stefaniak, & Imhoff, 2016; Doosje & Branscombe, 2003; Imhoff et al., 2016; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007). Such modifications of collective memory not only absolve members of the group from any responsibility, but also place them on the same moral pedestal as the victim group (Moscovici & Pérez, 2009).

Members of perpetrator groups that highly identify with the group are more likely to engage in such defensive maneuvers, and are also more likely to harbor negative feelings towards the historical victim group (Bilewicz & Stefaniak, 2013; Krzeminski, 2002; Noor, Shnabel, Halabi., & Nadler, 2012). This could be the result of competitive victimhood dynamics (Noor et al., 2012), and exclusive victim consciousness (Vollhardt, 2012; Vollhardt & Bilali, 2015) wherein members of the group feel that their victimhood is unique and not properly acknowledged and feel resentful towards groups who also claim a victimhood status. It may also reflect a defensive maneuver to avoid feeling collective guilt (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998), and this need to avoid feelings of responsibility, guilt, and shame over their group's history could motivate the assumption of the status of victims (Wohl, Branscombe, & Klar, 2006).

In the current research, which was conducted in Hungary and focused on perceptions of Hungary's role in the Holocaust, we contend that competitive victimhood and related victim consciousness (Noor et al., 2012) is one facet of a more comprehensive attempt to protect a group's moral image by adopting a tenuous historical narrative that absolves the group from any wrongdoing (Vollhardt, 2012, 2013). These strategic misrepresentations of history, dubbed in the current research, *defensive representations of history*, may explain the link between nationalism and antisemitism, and reveal the process by which history casts a shadow on contemporary intergroup relations even beyond the boundaries of the national ingroup. Specifically, we examine in this research not only the proximal relationship between Hungarian representations of history and attitudes towards Jews, but also whether the need to protect the moral image of the group will extend beyond the boundaries of Hungary and influence attitudes towards Israel and the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. By doing so we may draw the path leading from collective trauma that took place seventy years ago to seemingly unrelated contemporary group dynamics.

The study of social representations of history indicates a growing understanding that the collective representation of history does not necessarily reflect the historical truth, but rather a combination of historical facts with shared myths and beliefs that are essential in forming and maintaining group identity (e.g., Liu & Hilton, 2005; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Social representations are not only based on how a group construes its' past, but also on how other groups perceive it. Discrepancies between in-group and out-group perceptions of a group's history, therefore, may be a source of intergroup tension.

The manner in which the Holocaust is represented in collective memory may present an *identity threat* (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999) to members of European groups that were involved in the Final Solution. One way in which perpetrator groups may contend with the threat posed by the historical wrongdoings of their group is by minimizing the long-term implications of the collective trauma on the victim group. For example, studies show that only about half of contemporary Germans believe that the Holocaust still has a negative impact on German-Israeli relations, whereas about 80% of Israelis maintain that it does (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2015). When German participants are confronted with the long-term implications that the Holocaust continues to have on Jews, however, they respond with greater antisemitism (Imhoff & Banse, 2009). The attempt to minimize the implications of their group's dark history, on the one hand, and the harsh reaction they display to evidence that the Holocaust still has an effect, is telling of the powerful need to protect the group's image, the magnitude gap between victims and perpetrators (Baumeister, 1996), and also indicates how perceptions of history fuel contemporary intergroup tensions.

A normative model of co-victimization might suggest that two groups sharing the pain of the same traumatic history would feel a sense of affiliation and closeness to one another that stems from the experience of commiseration. The competitive aspect of co-victimization, however, suggests that other processes are taking place (see Noor et al.,'s 2012 extensive review). It is possible, for example, that historical perpetrator groups are motivated to distort collective memory to exonerate their group from the burden of genocide. In the case of Hungary's role in the Holocaust, historians have dubbed this defensive strategy "an assault on historical memory" (Braham, 1999). This may take the form of blunt Holocaust denial, or a more sophisticated form of Holocaust obfuscation (Heni, 2013), wherein the role of the perpetrator group is altered or even reversed. For instance, Hungarians may overlook the official collaboration of the Arrow Cross government with Nazi Germany (Deak, 1979), and maintain instead that Hungarians were forced to collaborate with the Nazis against their will, or were even victims of the Nazis. This defensive explanation of co-victimization and other exonerating narratives helps understand the phenomenon of victimhood-related antisemitism (Bilewicz & Stefaniak, 2013). Namely, defensive representations of history are fragile and can be disconfirmed by the historical victim group that is sometimes accused of strong-arming the perpetrator group into a state of guilt. The victim group then becomes a contemporary threat to the perpetrator group's moral image justifying negative attitudes towards its members (Bilewicz, Winiewski, Kofta, & Wójcik, 2013). Thus, defensive representations of a historical trauma that on the surface level appear to reflect an attempt to bring victim and perpetrator groups closer together (as the sculptor of the Budapest monument, Peter Parkanyi Raab, contends; Feher, 2014), may actually aggravate intergroup tensions and lead not only to more hostility from the victim group towards the perpetrator group, but also from the perpetrator group towards the victim group, as the former are motivated to rehabilitate their group's moral image.

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