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Personally relevant vs. nationally relevant memories: An intergenerational examination of World War II memories across and within Belgian French-speaking families

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ABSTRACT

We examined whether and how memories and knowledge of World War II (WWII) transmit across generations. We recruited five French-speaking Belgian families and interviewed one member from each generation. As the oldest generation had to be alive during WWII, their interviews constituted “memories” while the interviews of the middle and youngest generation constituted “knowledge”, as they were not alive during WWII. Each individual was asked about four WWII events specific to Belgium (two of which were likely to be controversial, i.e., collaboration and the Royal Question), and the source from which they learned about these four events: was it communicatively (e.g., through familial discussions) or culturally (e.g., social artifacts: books, school, monuments, etc.) transmitted? Our results suggest that transmission of memories and knowledge across generations was limited. The oldest generation, who were children during the war, and the middle generation knew about the WWII events discussed in the interviews, particularly the oldest generation. The youngest generation, however, did not. Furthermore, for the most part, all generations, in discussing memories of the WWII events, told nationally relevant memories. If the oldest generation discussed personally relevant memories, these memories sometimes transmitted to the middle generation and rarely to the youngest. We discuss these results in terms of Assmann and Czaplicka's (1995; Assmann, 2011) distinction between communicative and cultural memory.

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1. Introduction

Memories of historically important events do not die with the generation that lived through them, but are passed down from one generation to another. This paper is concerned with the intergenerational transmission of memories about World War II (WWII). We focus on WWII because, even today, over 70 years since, the mnemonic importance and consequences of WWII cannot be overstated. In surveys in which people rate the top two or three most important public events in the last 50–100 years, most individuals list events that occurred during their late adolescence or early

adulthood, with at least one exception: WWII. A substantial majority of people treat WWII as a critically important event, whether they lived through it or only had parents or grandparents who lived through it (Schuman & Scott, 1989; see Koppel & Berntsen, 2014, for an extensive discussion of this point).

In examining the transmission of WWII memories, we were primarily interested in three main research questions: (1) When asked to retell events of WWII, do people discuss more nationally relevant memories (what might be viewed as cultural memories), or personally relevant memories (what might be viewed as communicative memories)? (2) Does a preference for one type of memory over another differ across generations? (3) To what extent do each of these types of memories transmit across generations? In addressing these interests, we couch our results in terms of recalling vs. retelling memories and personal vs. national memories. In discussing the latter distinction, we also introduce the notion of communicative and cultural memories.

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1.1. Recalling vs. retelling memories

One can conceive of the intergenerational transmission of memories from at least two different perspectives. The first compares what one generation *knows about*, in our case, WWII, with what another generation knows. The second compares what each generation *chooses to talk* about when asked about the war. The former is concerned with what is *available if vigorously probed*; the latter is concerned with what is *readily accessible* when prompted to speak about particular events and becomes the topic of discussion. Both approaches have been used in the study of memory. Most laboratory-oriented research on memory is concerned with the former, that is, accessing what people can recall if instructed to remember all that they can, which is often the case in studies of eyewitness memory where accuracy figures heavily (e.g., Hope, Ost, Gabbert, Healey, & Lenton, 2008). An example of the latter approach is found in research on the well-known reminiscence bump of autobiographical memories (see Koppel & Berntsen, 2014, for a review). Here researchers examine what comes to mind when, for instance, asked to free associate from a cue word. Participants are not asked to state everything they could possibly associate with the word, only what first comes to mind. Following Marsh (2007), we refer to the former as *recalling*, the latter as *retelling*. Our interest here is how generations differ in the way they retell the story of certain aspects of WWII. As a result, we interviewed members of three generations of French-speaking Belgian families. In doing so we probed for, not what members of a generation are capable of recalling, but what they choose to retell.

1.2. Personally relevant vs. nationally relevant memories

By personally relevant memories, we mean those involving episodes or events from one's own life or the life of someone with whom one is closely attached. Thus, a personally relevant memory might be an individual's own trip to Paris, or the trip his grandmother took to Paris when she was a teenager. In both instances, we treat them as personally relevant because they have the potential to bear on an individual's identity. Nationally relevant memories are those that involve not an individual, but a community such as a nation as a whole. They are often the kinds of facts one learns in a history class. That there were four planes involved in the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 would be a nationally relevant memory for any American retelling this fact. Similarly, the fact that the winter in Valley Forge was severe for the soldiers fighting in the American Revolution would be a nationally relevant memory for an American retelling this fact. In the former, the referred-to event occurred during the rememberer's lifetime; in the latter, the event happened in the historical past. In both cases, we treat them as nationally relevant because they bear on a community's identity rather than just on the identity of any single individual. The contrast between the two can be seen clearly when considering the 9/11 terrorist attack. A memory about the number of planes may be a nationally relevant recollection, but a memory of where one was when one learned of the attack would be a personally relevant memory.

We build on Assmann and Czaplicka's (1995; Assmann, 2011) distinction between *communicative* and *cultural memories* as a means of understanding how personally and nationally relevant memories might be transmitted. As the name suggests, communicative memories are transmitted between people, often within a conversation. Importantly, they tend to be personally relevant. The family memories a parent relates to a child are prototypical of communicative memories. Cultural memories arise when communicative memories are transformed into "objectified culture." They are the culturally institutionalized heritage of a

society and consist of "cultural formations (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitations, practice, observance)" (Nora, 1996, p. 129). As such, they tend not to be personally, but nationally relevant. Critically, for our purposes, Assmann and Czaplicka (1995; Assmann, 2011) claimed that communicative memories have a limited temporal horizon of around 100 years, that is, about three or four generations. If a memory is to be preserved beyond this limited temporal frame, it must become part of "objectified culture," that is, a cultural memory.

To the extent that there is a relation between these two distinctions – that is, between cultural memories and nationally relevant memories, and communicative memories and personally relevant memories – one might expect, following Assmann and Czaplicka, that, when retelling aspects of WWII, personally relevant memories should be recollected quite consistently by the oldest generation and be less likely to figure in retellings as generations pass. That is, as the generations pass, personal stories of their grandparents' experiences during the war should be less likely to figure in their own retelling of the war. Along the same line, one might expect that nationally relevant memories may come to dominate the recollections of each passing generation so that, for the youngest generation, their retellings would reflect the cultural memories of their community.

Support for these claims can be found in Schuman and Scott's (1989) observation that people who lived through the war tended to provide personal war experiences when explaining why they reported WWII as an important event: "Lost part of my hearing [in North Africa]." "Because my husband was away from me for three and half years." What we might refer to as the middle generation, alternatively, tended to justify their treatment of WWII as important, not by referring to a personal experience or an experience of their grandparents, but by putting the war into a larger perspective: "Changed world relations", "Affected more people than any other war." Although these findings suggest that the temporal horizon of personally relevant memories might be quite short, not even one generation, it must be remembered that Schuman and Scott asked their participants to say why they thought the war was important, not simply to retell what they knew about the war. Regardless, these results suggest that, if nothing else, the oldest generation should retell a significant number of personally relevant memories.

Alternatively, several studies suggest that transmission may be more robust than Schuman and Scott (1989) suggest. Svob and Brown (2012) found that not only could a younger generation recall events from their parents' lives but also what they recalled reflected the way their parents' organized their autobiographical memories. Svob and Brown, however, did not examine how different generations remembered historical events. Welzer (2005) also found transmission, but in his case, which involved emotionally evocative material, the transmission distorted the memories. Specifically, in his study of German grandchildren's memory of their grandfather's Nazi membership, although, in many instances, the grandfather indicated that he did not hide his membership from his grandchildren, the grandchildren not only claimed that their grandfather was not a Nazi, but produced memories that "heroized" their grandfather.

1.3. The present study

The present study adds to what is clearly a developing literature. In the present study, we examined how three generations of five French-speaking Belgian families each retells Belgian-specific aspects of WWII, with a focus on (1) whether their responses reflected more personally relevant or nationally relevant

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