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Mnemonic differences and similarities across opposing social groups: The linguistic conflict at the University of Leuven as a case study☆

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ABSTRACT

In the 1960s, a historical event occurred at one of Europe's most prestigious universities: The Dutch-speaking students forced the French-speaking students to relocate and establish their own university. We compared the extent to which members of each social group developed elaborate memories of the events surrounding the conflict and whether they were associated with differences in rehearsal type (media, conversational, rumination) and initiating conditions (importance, political engagement, and negative/positive emotions). All participants were university students at the time of the conflict. We found that Dutch-speakers exhibited more elaborate memories compared to French-speakers and that importance was associated with elaborate memories only for the Dutch-speakers. However, positive emotions appear to be critical in the formation of elaborate memories across the social groups. We found no such associations for negative emotions. We discuss these results in terms of the social/cognitive processes transcending social group membership in understanding how individuals remember past conflicts.

People who personally experience public events often form long lasting memories of these events (Pillemer, 2009). These memories can then help shape both the individuals' autobiographical memories and the community's collective memories and, in turn, the individual's and the community's collective identity (Hirst & Manier, 2008; Pillemer, 1992, 1998, 2003). Memory researchers traditionally interested in public events have typically examined what are known as "flashbulb memories" (FBMs). FBMs occur when individuals are able to vividly recollect, over a long period of time, the context in which they learned about the event (Brown & Kulik, 1977). In most instances, though, these individuals did not experience the FBM-inducing event itself, only the circumstances in which they learned about the event.

In this study, we depart from most of the work on FBM and focus on those instances in which one directly experienced the event. In such cases, the autobiographical memory is of the event itself, not the circumstance of learning of the event. People can learn about an event from afar, as much of the world did when they learned about the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Here we might classify this event as semantic, rather than strictly autobiographical, inasmuch as it is about the facts of the event rather than the experience of living through the event. Alternatively, people can play a direct role in the unfolding event – as those at Ground Zero no doubt did. They experience the event itself rather than learning about it indirectly. A number of researchers are beginning to emphasize the importance of this distinction between "autobiographical event memory" and "semantic event memory" (Er, 2003; Manier & Hirst, 2008; Neisser et al., 1996; Pillemer, 2009). Few, however, have systematically studied autobiographical event memory, that is, memories for an emotionally charged, directly experienced, public event. Building on the FBM literature, we focus here on two issues: (1) whether an emotionally charged, directly experienced, public event elicits elaborate memories and (2) the factors that might affect the degree to which these memories are elaborate. FBMs are often thought to be more elaborate than "ordinary" autobiographical memories (see Talarico & Rubin, 2007, for a review). This elaborateness is often thought to be predicated on a variety of factors, e.g., the event's relation to an individual's social identity (Berntsen, 2009; Brown & Kulik, 1977; Curci, Luminet, Finkenauer, & Gisel, 2001; Kvavilashvili, Mirani, Schlagman, & Kornbrot, 2003; Luminet & Curci, 2009; see also Sahdra & Ross, 2007); the event's perceived importance (Er, 2003), the degree to which it is rehearsed

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(Bohannon, 1988), the emotions the event elicits (Bohn & Berntsen, 2007; Finkenauer et al., 1998), and the extent to which individuals are involved with the unfolding events (Berntsen & Thomsen, 2005; Conway et al., 1994; see Talarico & Rubin, 2007, for a review). We are specifically interested here in which of these factors might affect the elaborateness of long-held memories of an emotionally charged, directly experienced, public event.

Surprisingly, the number of studies addressing this issue is small, perhaps because it is difficult to assemble a reasonably large sample of those who directly experience public, emotionally charged events. One exception to this rule is sporting events. This exception may be the result of the fact that, in general, sporting events have wide-spread popularity and, therefore, alleviate the difficulty in recruiting participants. The extant studies examining memories of sporting events suggest that social identity, defined here in terms of team loyalty, matters (see, for example, Breslin & Safer, 2011; Hastorf & Cantril, 1954; Talarico & Moore, 2012; see also Sahdra & Ross, 2007). Hastorf and Cantril's (1954) landmark study of the contentious Princeton/Dartmouth game showed that team loyalties influenced the content of the memories of the opposing fans. Talarico and Moore (2012) found that the memories of the outcome of the game were affected by team loyalty: Fans of the winning team had more accurate memories than the fans of the losing team. Furthermore, personal rehearsal did not fully mediate this relation between team loyalty and accuracy. Breslin and Safer (2011) found similar results when comparing the memories of New York Yankees and Boston Red Sox fans for two World Series in which each team either won or lost. They found that fans had more elaborate memories of the game their teams won; however, this relationship was mediated by the extent to which they rehearsed the events of the game. Alternatively, Kensinger and Schacter (2006) modified this conclusion, finding that, not only was there no difference between accurate or elaborate memories of New York Yankees (losers/negative) fans and Boston Red Sox (winners/positive) fans who experienced the same World Series, but that the different groups of fans also did not differ in terms of level of rehearsal.

What becomes clear is that the relevant, previous research is conflicted: in some instances being fans from the winning team leads to accurate and elaborate memories (Talarico & Moore, 2012), sometimes this effect is mediated by rehearsal (Breslin & Safer, 2011) and still, in other instances, emotional appraisal and rehearsal has no influence on accurate or elaborate memories at all (Kensinger & Schacter, 2006). The present research hopes to better clarify this relation between emotional appraisal and rehearsal and their role in creating elaborate memories across, not team loyalty, but linguistic identities for a politically and emotionally charged event.

We chose to examine politically, as well as emotionally, charged events because so often FBMs are of this kind and are often involved in the forging of collective memories relevant to the social groups involved. Some FBM studies have examined participants' event memory for a political event itself, but these participants rarely experience the event directly. That is, they examine memory for an event participants learned about indirectly rather than actually experienced. Sharot, Martorella, Delgado, and Phelps (2007) suggest that whether one directly experiences an event or not matters (Er, 2003). They found that participants who were near Ground Zero at the time of the terrorist attack on 9/11 reported more elaborate memories of the event 6 months after the attack than those who were in other parts of New York City. Therefore, individuals experiencing a public event may have memories with profoundly different features compared those who did not experience it. However, at the moment, such studies are limited (but see, for example, Er, 2003; Sharot et al., 2007).

Thus, the present study is a rarity in the literature in that we examine the memories of individuals who personally experienced an emotionally charged, public event: The linguistic conflict at the University of Leuven[1] at the end of the 1960s, in which, due to pressure from the Dutch-speakers, the French-speakers had to leave the university and relocate to Wallonia (the South of Belgium). Before moving on to the details of the study, we will first provide a brief history of the events leading up to the separation of the university (for a more detailed overview, see Jonckheere, 1979; Laporte, 1999).

1. A concise historical overview

The University of Leuven was founded in the 15th century. At its inception, all academic classes were taught in Latin. However, this all changed in 1834 when the university shifted from Latin to French. During this time, French was the language of the upper social class throughout the country and considered the language of the elites. The Belgian working class, alternatively, spoke Dutch (more specifically, Flemish, a dialect of Dutch) in the North and Walloon (a set of dialects close to French) in the South of Belgium. Dutch was not spoken at the university until 1930, at which point the university officially became bilingual and remained so until the separation in the 1960s.

During the 1960s, the entire university administration remained localized in Leuven, a city located in the Dutch-speaking area, but every department, as well as the central administration, was divided: one conducting business in French, the other in Dutch. But, in the fall of 1964, over-population worsened. The administrators started to envision an extension of the university in the French-speaking region (Wallonia), near the linguistic border. The Dutch-speaking students strongly supported this proposition. In 1965, the French-speaking students organized a march in Houte-Si-Plou, a small Walloon village, where 4000 students expressed their desire to remain in Leuven. In 1966, the bishops, who collectively ruled the university, opposed any division of the university. Dutch-speaking students expressed their dissatisfaction with this ruling with violence, including brawls and the degradation of public spaces. In the beginning of 1968, the violence reached its pinnacle. Marches became a part of the daily routine and systematically ended in degradations of the city and brawls between Dutch- and French-speaking students. Three hundred students were arrested. As a result of this crisis, the Belgian government resigned. The new government asked the French-speakers to prepare their departure, to be completed within ten years. In 1971, the construction of the French-speaking Université catholique de Louvain in Louvain-la-Neuve (south of the linguistic border) began. Eight years later, in 1979, the transfer was complete (for more information about the historical context see Klein, Licata, Van der Linden, Mercy, & Luminet, 2012; Jonckheere, 1979; Laporte, 1999; Luminet et al., 2012; Taminiaux, 1966).

Thus, here we have a conflict in which one group was clearly politically involved in an attempt to implement an agenda and won (the "winners": the Dutch-speakers) and another group who wished to maintain the status quo but lost (the "losers": the French-speakers). However, the outcome of this conflict remains culturally and historically important for both social groups. For this reason, we were interested in whether this conflict led to differences across social groups in terms of the formation of elaborate memories and subsequent rehearsals. Furthermore, we wanted to examine

[1] Leuven is the Dutch name of the city in Flanders, and Louvain is its name in French. In this paper, we will refer to the city in Flanders as Leuven, to the university in Flanders as the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, to the city in Wallonia as Louvain-la-Neuve, and to the university in Wallonia as the Université catholique de Louvain.