



Review

Making room for negative emotions about the national past: An explorative study of effects of *parrhesia* on Italian colonial crimes



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ABSTRACT

In this paper we discuss the utility of *parrhesia* (Foucault, 1983, 2001) in intergroup relations, in particular we examine the importance of the communicative choice of speaking frankly when narrating in-group war crimes to perpetrators' descendants. Our study explores, through a quasi-experimental procedure, the effects of two different kinds of text addressed to young Italian students, which convey either in a *parrhesiastic* or in an evasive way war crimes that happened during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (1935–1936). Although historically well-proven, these colonial crimes are covered until now by a widespread intergenerational silence (Pivato, 2007) and are therefore surprising for these participants. 67 Italian university students (average age: 23.51) read two online versions (*parrhesiastic* vs. evasive) of the same historical text, inserted in a self-administered questionnaire (<http://www.psychopy.org>). Each participant was videotaped when filling in the questionnaire and reading the text. Quantitative results of self-report showed that reading the *parrhesiastic* text affected experienced emotion more than the evasive text. Participants' identification with the in-group showed no significant interactions with the narrative's effects. A fine-grained (Ekman et al., 1978; Poggi, 2007) analysis of participants' video-recordings confirmed this quantitative data, showing rich emotional reactions of participants. We propose that these emotions, if well regulated (Frijda, 2013), could play a positive role, making more evident the need to repair the moral image of the Italian in-group (Allpress et al., 2014). The choice of *parrhesia* may therefore help perpetrators' descendants to cope at the same time with the two opposed aims of protecting the state symbology (Liu et al., 2014), and of advancing intergroup reconciliation processes (Nadler & Shnabel, 2008).

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1. Introduction

The basic aim of this study is to explore the psychological effects of different ways to convey information about past in-group wrongdoings to new generations. More in particular, our study addresses effects due to the use of *parrhesia* (Foucault, 1983): the communicative choice of “frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, (...) the moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy” (Foucault, 2001, p. 19). When applied to moral indignities referred to national history, a text may therefore be defined as *parrhesiastic* when conveying not only difficult facts that were formerly frozen in a collective silence, but also a clear-cut moral judgment on them.

While current technologies of the state tend to celebrate positive aspects of the national history, or glorify its own suffering (see Paez & Liu, 2011), *parrhesia* is another strategy of communication that offers the possibility of a more comprehensive knowledge of past facts. In spite of its immediate risks, *parrhesia* could be a pivotal choice to end a collective amnesia on negative aspects of national past (Nora, 1989), resulting in the long run in an empowering of national symbolologies (symbolism and meaning attached to the nation, Fisher Onar, Liu & Woodward, 2014; Liu, Fisher Onar, & Woodward, 2014), in a new and more open direction, including the ability to narrate negative aspects of national history. We propose in fact the idea that *parrhesiastic* communication of past misdeeds leads younger generations of perpetrators' group to acknowledge in-group responsibilities – a social act that is essential for a firm intergroup reconciliation to be reached (Vollhardt, Mazur, & Lemahieu, 2014). In the case of the breaking of a long lasting amnesia, we expect however that this acknowledgment could be reached only by coping with the emotional impetus due to the end of the social silence about these past crimes.

Unfortunately, when victims are not powerful enough to make their own sufferings evident and national and international pressure to address the issue of past violence is not strong enough to balance the natural inclination of peoples to escape from the discomfort of such difficult memories, collective amnesia of perpetrators on their crimes often hinders the launch of such difficult social processes as *parrhesia*. In this case, the denial of national moral responsibilities may last in time, affecting the historical narratives passed down to perpetrators' descendants. This could explain the rarity of self-criticism by younger generations for previous generations' mass violence (Leach, Zeineddine, and Čehajić-Clancy, 2013). When the time to confront in-group moral indignities is at last come – thanks both to the social action of in-group minorities and to a growing international recognition of the urge to cope with effects of past violence – a *parrhesiastic* narrative on national war crimes could be a way to develop a more realistic representation of the moral image of the in-group. However, this could be reached only if perpetrators descendant succeed in regulating their emotions (Frijda, 2013) about receiving a clear knowledge on in-group past crimes. According to some scholars (see for instance Allpress, Brown, Giner-Sorolla, Deonna, & Teroni, 2014; Gausel & Leach, 2011; Gausel, Leach, Vignoles, & Brown, 2012), in fact, subtle differences may provoke alternative effects: it is the perceived threat to moral image of the in-group that may eventually lead that may either lead descendants of perpetrators to starting up the processes of intergroup reconciliation (Nadler, Malloy & Fisher, 2008; Nadler & Shnabel, 2008), or the perceived threat to social image of the in-group may provoke defensive processes of avoidance and denial.

In order to better clarify this theoretical point, however, more theoretical discussion is needed. First of all, the concept of *parrhesia* has to be distinguished from the more general concept of telling the truth (Foucault, 1983, 2001) and reasons for applying this concept to the case of collective amnesia on in-group war crimes have to be discussed.

Second, the complex interactions between psychological effects of the communicative choice of *parrhesia* on perpetrators' descendants have to be examined in the short and long run. In this sense, we have to consider how *parrhesia* when narrating wrongdoings blemishing their national past to new generations may be seen simultaneously as a threatening and as a wise communicative move.

1.1. Why advocate *parrhesia* when studying collective amnesia about past in-group crimes?

In recent years, also because of relevant historical examples of intergroup reconciliation, as for instance the Truth and Reconciliation Committees in South Africa, truth-telling has become a debated yet also contentious issue in the literature on post-conflict reconciliation (for a review, see for instance Gibson, 2006). As a starting point of our theoretical discussion, therefore, we have to consider what the old concept of *parrhesia*, as recovered in Foucault late works (1983, 2001), adds to existing conceptualizations of truth-telling and how it relates to them.

It must to be stressed, first of all, that Foucault's lectures on *parrhesia* did not directly address the issue of new generations' knowledge of crimes committed by their national in-group before their birth, but were more generally aimed at recovering

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