"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
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Document type: Article de périodique (Journal article)

Référence bibliographique
DOI: 10.1016/j.jarmac.2014.08.002
Personally relevant vs. nationally relevant memories: 
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Article history:
Received 13 January 2014
Received in revised form 31 July 2014
Accepted 30 August 2014
Available online 10 September 2014

Keywords:
Families
Nationally relevant memories
Personally relevant memories
Transmission
World War II

A B S T R A C T

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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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jarmac.2014.08.002
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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 “objectivized 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 “objectivized 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. Svb 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. Svb 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
memories and (2) the source of these memories: are they transmitted via communication with others or through cultural artifacts (i.e., textbooks, monuments, etc., see Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995)? Inasmuch as we wanted to investigate what the three generations of the family would spontaneously remember about WWII, we adopted a semi-structured interview format. The rich textual analysis we wanted to undertake precluded a larger, more robust quantitative study.

We expected to replicate Schuman and Scott’s (1989) observation that the oldest generation (those who lived during the war) would remember the war in terms of personally relevant memories. We remained uncertain whether the recollections of the middle generation (the oldest generation’s children) and the youngest generation (the grandchildren) would include personal stories they might have heard from the oldest generation. Regardless, we expected the oldest generation to retell more personally relevant memories relative to nationally relevant memories. We expected the opposite to be true of the middle and youngest generations. That is, their retellings would reflect a more nationally relevant perspective of the war.

2. Method

In order to accomplish a detailed analysis of the responses of our participants, we limited our recruitment to five French-speaking Belgian families. The only requirement was that the oldest generation was at least 8 years old (i.e., have been born by 1936 at the latest) at some point during WWII. Three members from each family were interviewed (N = 15), one from each generation, i.e., a grandparent (oldest generation) (M = 84.40 years of age, SD = 3.36), a parent (middle generation) (M = 52.00, SD = 6.71), and a grandchild (youngest generation) (M = 22.40, SD = 7.44).

The first family was recruited through university contacts, the next three through patriotic groups, and the fifth through an acquaintance of the second author. We contacted one member of the family, who, in turn, connected us with the other members. For the first family, the contact was through the youngest generation; for the next three families, through the oldest generation; and for the fifth family, through the middle generation. All families approached agreed to participate.

For each family, we conducted semi-structured interviews with just one family member from each of the three generations. For example, we would interview the grandmother, the daughter and the granddaughter. If both grandparents were alive or the grandparent had multiple children, we still only interviewed one member from each generation. In cases such as these, the member of each generation we interviewed was determined by availability. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and in the families’ home, and individually. Each participant was instructed not to talk to the other participants about the interview.

Our semi-structured interviews were composed of three main sections: (1) memories and knowledge of specific Belgian topics/events of World War II; (2) the source for their memories and knowledge; and (3) questions about social identity and demographics.

Participants were asked about four specific events that occurred in Belgium during WWII. Specifically, they were asked “Tell me all that you can about X during WWII,” where X was either “rationing,” “the bombings,” “the Royal Question” and “acts of collaboration.” For the Royal Question, we dropped the qualifier “during WWII” since the demonstrations growing out of the “Royal Issue” occurred after the war.

Each of the topics was relevant to what happened to Belgians during or immediately after the war. Rationing occurred throughout Belgium during the occupation. As for bombing, it was a constant feature of the war. Inasmuch as Belgium surrendered to the Germans after only 18 days of fighting, most of the bombing came from Allied forces. The Royal Question involved issues about whether the Belgian King should be allowed to return to the throne after surrendering to the Germans during the war. As to collaboration, although it is commonly believed by French-speakers that most of the Belgian collaborators were Dutch-speakers, recent studies indicate that the actual proportion of people who collaborated with the Germans did not differ for Dutch- and French-speakers (Lagrou, 2000).

Participants were given as much time as needed to provide their answers. After they informed the interviewer that they had nothing more to say on the topic, the interviewer asked each participant the importance or consequence of the topic, both from their own personal perspective and from a historical perspective. Responses were recorded using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not important at all; 7 = very important). Immediately following these two questions, participants were asked about the source of their knowledge or memories of each event supplied in their narratives. Participants were asked what percentage of the time did their memories of the war come from the following sources: (1) living through the war, (2) from other people (e.g., family, friends, etc.), (3) through a more authoritative source, e.g., radio, TV, newspaper, textbook, and so on, and (4) other sources that do not fall into these three categories, e.g., they are unsure of the source. After completing these questions for all four topics, participants were asked a series of questions about their social identity (e.g., “How closely do you identify with being a French-speaker?”) and demographic information (e.g., “What city/region were you born?”).

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Elaborations of memories across generations

We transcribed the responses and then, using the transcription, examined whether the oldest generation remembered and talked more about each of the topics than the middle generation and whether the youngest generation trailed the other two as previous research suggests (Schuman & Scott, 1989; Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat, & Duncan, 2007). The dependent variable was the number of

1 Belgium was attacked by the Germans on May 10, 1940 and quickly succumbed to the invading forces. It remained occupied until the Allied forces liberated it in late 1944. On the one hand, Belgium’s collective memory of WWII is in many ways similar to that of other occupied sections of Europe, in that there is no real national consensus on the interpretation of the events surrounding WWII (Benwido & Peeters, 2012). On the other hand, in Belgium, tensions about how to interpret the events of the war became heated almost immediately after the war. For instance, there was intense debate (known as the Royal Question) about the role of the King during the war. He quickly surrendered to the Germans, did not flee with the rest of the government to England, met with Hitler, and remarried at a time when Belgians were living in the dire economic circumstances arising out of the German occupation. After the war, the King remained in exile in Switzerland, while his brother served as Regent. Major demonstrations occurred between those who favored the King’s return and those who opposed it. Moreover, unlike most other European countries, perhaps because of the state’s reluctance to develop a specific Belgian collective memory, in high school and college, students do not take specific courses emphasizing Belgium’s place and role in WWII (Hirst & Fineberg, 2012; Lunen et al., 2012).

It is worth noting, however, that since the 70s, when the different political regions and communities across Belgium received the authority to administer in matters such as education and culture, the situation changed a bit. These new authorities became progressively active in using some aspects of the past to legitimate their existence (Bennivo & Peeters, 2012). This is particularly evident now in Belgium with the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the beginning of WWII.

2 Differences in terms of importance failed to have any important mnemonic consequences and, therefore, are not included in our following analyses.
words used by each participant to describe what he or she knew about each specific topic. Two coders only counted the words relevant to the four topics for two families. Any additional words were included under the rubric, “No Category.” There were no discrepancies between the coders. The first coder proceeded to code the remaining three families. In what follows, we report the results of statistical tests, even though the sample size is small. That we repeatedly find significant differences underscores the robustness of the results.

We conducted a MANOVA with Generation as a fixed factor and the number of words mentioned for each question (Rationing, Collaboration, Bombing, the Royal Question, and “No Category” and overall total of words mentioned) as the dependent variables. Across all categories we found a main effect for Generation, [Rationing] F(1, 2) = 6.78, p = .01, \( \eta^2 = .53 \); [Collaboration] F(1, 2) = 5.56, p = .02, \( \eta^2 = .48 \); [Bombing] F(1, 2) = 10.26, p < .01, \( \eta^2 = .63 \); [the Royal Question] F(1, 2) = 7.45, p < .01, \( \eta^2 = .55 \); and [“No Category”] F(1, 2) = 3.93, p < .05, \( \eta^2 = .40 \) (see Fig. 1).

In a series of planned t-tests, we found that the oldest generation remembered or talked significantly more than the youngest generation across all topics: Rationing, Collaboration, Bombing, the Royal Question and “No Category”, t(8) = 3.17, d = 6.86, p < .05; t(8) = 2.81, d = 6.99, p < .05; t(8) = 3.70, d = 7.27, p < .01; t(8) = 3.61, d = 5.45, p < .01; and t(8) = 2.17, d = 11.04, p < .06, respectively. In contrast, the only significant difference between the oldest generation and the middle generation was for the topic of Bombing, t(8) = 2.87, d = 5.10, p < .05. This limited finding, however, may reflect our sample size. Fig. 1 clearly shows substantial differences for all topics between the oldest and middle generation. As to differences between the middle and youngest generation, there were significant differences for Rationing and the Royal Question, though, again, other differences appear to be present with visual inspection of Fig. 1. Rationing, \( t(8) = 3.47, d = 3.07, p < .01 \); [the Royal Question], t(8) = 2.54, d = 2.89, p < .05, respectively. Notably, overall we found that the youngest generation (M = 737.00; SD = 662.38) remembered or talked marginally less than the middle generation (M = 2393.80; SD = 1783.08) and significantly less than the oldest generation (M = 6217.00; SD = 3609.18), t(8) = 3.34, d = 1.31, p < .05 and t(8) = 3.34, d = 2.15, p < .01, respectively. Furthermore, the middle generation remembered or talked marginally less than the oldest generation, t(8) = 2.12, d = 1.46, p < .06.

Clearly, significant differences existed across generations in the amount they remembered and discussed about the four topics about the war. The middle and youngest generation responses were 38.50% and 11.85% as long (in terms of number of words) as the oldest generation, respectively. The ability of the youngest generation to provide elaborate responses to our queries was extremely limited. On average, their responses were 737 words long, compared to 6217 words by the oldest generation. Clearly, neither the knowledge that the grandparents had about the war trickled down to the youngest generation, nor had the cultural memories available to them had much of an effect. Interestingly, in Belgium, students are rarely formally taught the role Belgium played in WWII, which may explain, in part, the youngest generation’s poor performance.

### 3.2. Content of the responses

In order to explore the content of the memories, following Hirst, Manier, and Apetroaia (1997), we divided the collected protocols into idea units and then, going beyond Hirst et al., coded them as to whether it was personally or nationally relevant. An idea unit could refer to a past episode. One idea unit/episode could be one or more events that occurred at a specific time and place. For example, “I was standing in the breadline one day and a German soldier came up and began questioning me and asking for identification. I was terrified.” or “The King signed the surrender act with the Nazis on May 28th.” Alternatively, an idea could a fact, proposition that captures a particular state of the world. For example, “During World War II, food was scarce.” “I lived in terror during the war.” Each episode or fact was classified as personally relevant or nationally relevant. If an episode or fact was thought to be both personally and nationally relevant, the coders were instructed to choose the one that they thought was most relevant. On the basis of this coding, we divided the episodes and facts into those that were personally or nationally relevant. Two coders coded two different families. The percentage of differences across coders was very small for each of the two dual-coded families (3% and 5%). The coders resolved these few disagreements. The first coder then assessed the remaining three families using the exact same coding procedure as agreed upon with the second coder.

In Table 1 we have provided the total number of personally and nationally relevant memories retold in response to the four topics. There was a strong correlation between the total number of elements (regardless of type) and the number of words in a response, r(15) = .95, p < .001. We conducted an ANOVA treating Generation as a between-subject factor and Type (Personally vs. Nationally Relevant) as a within-subject factor. The number of elements mentioned was the dependent variable. Our results revealed a significant main effect for Generation, F(2, 12) = 11.38, p < .02, \( \eta^2 = .52 \), and an interaction between Generation and Type F(2, 12) = 6.20, p < .02, \( \eta^2 = .51 \).

In a series of planned t-tests, we found that for national memories, the oldest and middle generation retold more memories than the youngest generation, respectively, t(8) = 2.53, d = 1.60, p < .04 and t(8) = 2.48, d = 1.57, p < .04. For personal memories, the oldest told more than the middle and younger generations, respectively, t(8) = 2.29, d = 1.45, p < .05 and t(8) = 4.82, d = 2.84, p < .04. There was only a trend for the middle generation to tell more personal memories than the youngest generation, t(8) = 1.94, d = 1.24, p = .09. Moreover, it was only the older generation who differed in
the number of national and personal memories they retold, with more personal than national memories, \( t(4) = 3.48, d = .66, p < .03 \). Although there appears to be a trend for the younger generation, and perhaps the middle generation, to prefer national memories, we must treat this trend cautiously because the differences did not approach significance, \( t(4) = 1.91, p = .13 \). These results indicate that the interaction between Generation and Type arose because the oldest generation clearly preferred to tell personally relevant memories, whereas the middle and younger generation began to show either no preference, or most likely, a preference for nationally relevant memories (see Table 1).

We also examine whether the same memory was repeated across generations, that is, was there evidence in our data of mnemonic transmission. A similar ANOVA was performed, but now on the overlapping memories (see Table 1). It did not yield significant main effects or interactions. We can examine the overlap data not in terms of absolute number, but the proportion of overlap. When the middle and youngest generation retold nationally relevant events, 21% and 34%, respectively, of their retellings overlapped with the oldest generation. When the middle generation retold personally relevant memories we found that the overlap between the middle and older generation did not change much (30%). However, for the youngest generation we found that, when they retold personally relevant memories, their responses greatly overlapped with those of the oldest generation (76%). It is possible that the youngest generation only knows the personal memories that are the most accessible, or at least most frequently, retold memories by the oldest generation.

These results suggest that while limited, there does appear to be an established, socially defined, rendering of the war in that up to a third of the nationally relevant memories retold by the middle and youngest generation overlapped with those nationally relevant memories retold by the oldest generation. Furthermore, these results indicate personal memories do transmit across generations. This transmission became extremely impoverished by the youngest generations, however. Nevertheless, if a personally relevant element was mentioned by a member of the youngest generation, an equivalent could be found in the oldest generation’s rendering. However, to what extent were these nationally and personally relevant memories transmitted from the oldest generation to the youngest generation through communication? Or were their sources cultural artifacts that form Belgium’s cultural memory?

### 3.3. Sources of memory for the middle and youngest generation

In order to explore the sources of memory or knowledge for the three generations, we first examined the extent to which their memories or knowledge about WWII came through personal experience, through communication with other individuals or through more cultural means, such as books, movies, or other cultural artifacts. As Table 2 indicates, the source for the oldest generation was primarily lived, personal experience. The two topics for which they also referred to other sources were the two topics for which there is no uniform agreed-upon interpretation within Belgium at the moment: Collaboration and the Royal Question (Beyen, 2012). For these topics, they acquired some of their knowledge through cultural artifacts.

As for the other two generations, the middle generation was over three times more likely to identify the source of their knowledge as communication with other people compared to the younger generation (see Table 2). This is consistent with the finding that they also were more likely to have personally relevant

### Table 1

Number of memories retold in response to open-ended probes as a function of memory type and generation, as well as the number of nationally and personally relevant memories retold by the middle and youngest generation which overlap with the oldest generation’s retelling.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Nationally relevant memories</th>
<th>Nationally relevant memories overlapping with the oldest generation</th>
<th>Personally relevant memories</th>
<th>Personally relevant memories transmitted overlapping with the oldest generation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Youngest</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>54</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Youngest</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
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<td>32.2 (14.1)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>20.8 (11.1)</td>
<td>4.4 (2.7)</td>
<td>13.6 (11.4)</td>
<td>4.0 (2.2)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Youngest</td>
<td>7.6 (4.2)</td>
<td>2.6 (0.9)</td>
<td>3.4 (2.7)</td>
<td>2.6 (2.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2

The percentage of source knowledge according to topic assigned to either communicative memory, cultural memory, lived through memory or no source of memory.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oldest generation</th>
<th>Middle generation</th>
<th>Youngest generation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communicative</td>
<td>Cultural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bombing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal question</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
memories (presumably memories relayed to them by a member of the older generation, though not necessarily the grandparent we interviewed). The youngest generation reported few personally relevant memories, and, not surprisingly, rarely attributed the source of their knowledge as communication with other people. The one exception was rationing. About 50% of the youngest generations’ knowledge of rationing was cited as coming from communication with others, whereas they cited communication with others as responsible for less than 20% of their knowledge for the remaining three categories. It is noteworthy that the Royal Question was the topic most likely to have its source in cultural artifacts for all three generations. Not a single member of the youngest generation learned about it from other people. It is also interesting that it was the topic that the youngest generation spoke the least about, using, on average, 80 words.

4. General discussion

Two primary aims guided our research. First, we were interested in whether there were differences across generations in terms of nationally relevant or personally relevant memories (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Assmann, 2011). Second, we were interested in the extent to which these types of memories transmit across generations.

Overall, our results support the results of Schuman and Scott (1989), in that we found that, not only did the oldest generation retell more personally relevant memories than the middle and youngest generation, the oldest generation also retold more personally relevant memories relative to nationally relevant memories. This pattern differs from the one evidenced in the middle and youngest generation. If anything, these two generations retold more nationally relevant memories than personally relevant memories. Especially, in the middle and youngest generation, our results underscore the power of nationally relevant memories on the way people retell the historical past. Even for the oldest generation, who experienced the war, nationally relevant memories still play a prevalent role in their retelling. The salient role of nationally relevant memories in theolder generation is surprising in that (a) one would expect memories related to the self to be more accessible than national events and overwhelmingly dominate their retellings. Psychological research suggests that self-referential memories are more memorable than other types of memories (Symons & Johnson, 1997). And (b), arguably, if the experimental demands did anything, they biased participants to retell personal stories in as much as we asked participants to discuss topics locally relevant to particular people and communities, e.g., bombing. On the surface, there should be few cultural artifacts from which to help scaffold participants’ retelling of the neighboring village being bombed, for example. Furthermore, participants were told to tell the interviewer “all that they could,” not just what they learn about the various topic in textbooks. Both of these considerations point to the power of nationally relevant memories—and presumably the institutions responsible for preserving these memories through cultural artifacts. Even though we implicitly prompted for personally relevant memories, nationally relevant memories still significantly impacted even the grandparents’ retellings.

In stressing the power of nationally relevant memories when retelling a historical even such as WWII, we do not mean to imply that personally relevant memories do not play any role, indeed, personally relevant memories greatly shaped the way both the oldest and middle generation retold the events of WWII. However, this role quickly diminishes as generations pass. There may have been transmission to the middle generation, but grandchildren almost never included in their response anything about their grandparent’s war experience.

We suspect that the differences across generations reflect the way each generation frames their “WWII story.” As a substantial psychological literature indicates, the schemas people have of the to-be-remembered material often guides mnemonic retrieval. If one believes a story is about a burglary at the time of retrieval, then one remembers details from the story relevant to burglary (Anderson & Pichert, 1978). The schema the youngest generation had of the war was the one offered in school, or through various cultural artifacts. These schemata would be tailored to a story about the nation as a whole, not the specific personal events experienced by the citizens of this nation. As such, to the extent that these schemata governed the retelling of the youngest generation, the memories making up this retelling will be nationally relevant events. As for the oldest generation, their framing of the war most probably reflects their own personal experience. This framing might be modified over the years to reflect the cultural artifacts built by the nation subsequent to the war. But there would still be a personal tint to the framing that would be absent for the younger generation. As such, the oldest generation should be more likely to feature personally relevant memories in their retellings relative to the middle and youngest generations.

Note that in treating our results as reflecting the schemata our participants used to guide their retrieval, we are not claiming that the youngest generation has not formed memories of the stories their grandparents may have told them. We have no evidence about what participants actually knew of their grandparents’ war experience. Svob and Brown’s (2012) results suggest that some of these stories are probably passed down, at least from the oldest to the middle generation. We can only claim here that our younger participants’ retellings suggest that their retrieval schemata do not facilitate the recollection of their grandparents’ stories.

Of course, there may also be an encoding deficit on the part of the younger generation. The younger generation may not rehearse the personal stories of the older generation as much as the older generation does. As a result, the memories may be less accessible (see Roediger & Butler, 2011 for the importance of rehearsal and long-term memory). The same differential rehearsal might not hold for nationally relevant memories. Institutionalized societal artifacts provide automatic, arguably forced, rehearsals of nationally relevant memories (Hirst et al., 2014). Clearly, though, more research is needed to better understand how different generations both encode and retrieve personally and nationally relevant memories.

Whether an encoding or retrieval problem, our findings suggest, perhaps even more so than suggested by Assmann and Czaplicka (1995; Assmann, 2011), that the transmission of personally relevant memories through communication is severely limited, at least when considering how people retell the story of WWII. By the youngest generation, knowledge of personally relevant memories was minimal. And, perhaps because of the impoverished historical instruction Belgians receive about Belgium’s role in WWII, the youngest generation’s overall knowledge was quite limited. At least they had little to say when questioned.

The present results, then, suggest that the memories about Belgium held across the generations are nationally relevant and most probably institutionally acquired. This result maps on nicely to Anderson’s (1983) conception of an imagined community. Anderson argued that when a particular community reaches a particular size, making personal interactions impossible, the community, in our case, a nation, becomes, to a certain extent, imagined. Our results suggest that this “imagined” community then begins to dominate the memories community members have of historical events. Indeed, these community relevant memories may even displace more personally relevant memories. Personally and nationally relevant could, of course, coexist, that is, there’s the
national narrative of the past and the family narrative, both of which are not mutually exclusive and in balance with each other. Our results suggest, however, that the nationally relevant memories come to dominate the retellings of lived-through, historical events. Although these speculations remain to be empirically examined further, they underscore the association between the youngest generations relatively limited knowledge of Belgian history and the importance of cultural artifacts in transmitting “collective” events about the past.

4.1. Practical application

Generations, then, do differ in the way that they discuss and retell WWII. The retellings of all three generations depended, for the most part, on what might be conceived of as their nation’s cultural memory. Thus, the temporal limits of communicative memory posited by Assmann and Czaplicka (1995; Assmann, 2011) may be more severe than they anticipated. The personal experiences of those who lived through the war do not make it much beyond one generation, and even for these children of oldest generation, the preponderance of what they discuss reflect the cultural memories available to them. It is possible that the younger generations felt that personally relevant memories were not important enough to report. If we asked specifically for personally (or family) relevant memories across all three generations, we may have found an increase in transmission. Even so, the marked contrast of personally relevant memories to nationally relevant memories in the oldest generation suggest that perhaps, with time, even the personally relevant memories for those who lived through it (let alone transmitted) become displaced by nationally relevant memories. However, the extent to which this result stems from the individual nature of interviews remains to be seen. It is possible that when given a more personal audience (i.e., other family members) to discuss WWII with, more personally relevant memories may emerge (see Pasupathi, Stallworth & Murdoch, 1998 for an example of the importance of the audience). We are currently examining this possibility.

Whether these results extend to other nations remains to be seen. To the extent to which nationally relevant memories come to dominate memories of lived-through, historical events, we might expect to find more nationally relevant memories at each generation in countries with stronger, more centralized governments than Belgium (e.g., France and the United Kingdom). For countries with weaker, less centralized governments, we might expect more personally relevant memories. Moreover, the extent to which these personally relevant memories are transmitted across generations may depend on only familial dynamics, for instance, close vs. distant, as well as the topic, for example, memories of family members of survivors of the Holocaust. Future research is needed to better understand the interaction between family dynamics and national narratives in shaping how individuals remember historical events personally relevant to the family.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by a Louvain University Academia (AUL) the Marie Curie Actions of the European Union (Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium) fellowship to Charles B. Stone.

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