

Prisoners of the Past? Historical Narratives as Heuristics in International Cooperation

Pre-Analysis Plan

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Rationale for the study

This study explores if historical narratives of victimhood negatively affect a country's propensity to engage in international cooperation, by fostering the impression that other countries are not to be trusted. It builds on the combined research of conflict studies as well as behavioral and social psychology, suggesting that a group's sense of victimhood reduces general trust toward former perpetrators, perceived or real, and third persons alike (Gollwitzer et al. 2012; Zitek et al. 2010; Wohl and Branscombe 2008). This is likely because narratives function as "availability heuristics," emphasizing in one's mind past events that fit the plot, while deemphasizing events that do not (Tversky and Kahneman 1973). Narratives about the past thereby skew one's sense of what happened and, therefore, what is likely to happen next (Morden 2016; Kahneman 2011). What has received less attention in these literatures is a) how and to what extent precisely narratives exert a causal effect on decision-making and b) how these narratives shape general (dis)trust toward the international community.

The proposed study applies research on the behavioral effect of narratives to questions of international cooperation. Recent work in European studies suggests that behavioral factors may be crucial in at least two ways for understanding cooperation among members of the European Union: (1) by affecting public opinion, not least because political elites employ narratives strategically in order to mobilize support (De Vries 2018), (2) when EU elites themselves are susceptible to behavioral manipulation (Naurin, Naurin, and Alexander 2019). Moreover, scholarship in International Relations increasingly suggests that a country's disposition toward the international community – its degree of (dis)trust – influences its willingness to cooperate internationally (Ostrom 1998; Rathbun 2011). It is therefore plausible that when narratives of victimhood influence a country's disposition for general trust, they also affect its propensity for international cooperation. To investigate this relationship, this study proposes to conduct a survey experiment with citizens in various European countries that randomizes exposure to historical narratives of collective victimhood.

Survey implementation

The survey experiment will be conducted with Dalia Research in an online survey, distributed on mobile devices, with nationally representative samples of 1,000 participants. The surveys will be implemented in Germany, Poland, France, Spain and Sweden in August and September 2019.

Dalia follows an open recruitment approach that leverages the reach of a highly diverse set of third-party apps and mobile websites. The publishers of these apps and websites offer users immediate monetary and non-monetary rewards for completing a survey. In order to approximate a random sample of the adult population, Dalia uses matched sampling, which involves taking a stratified random sample of the target population and then matching available internet respondents to the target sample. As a result, the samples are nationally representative with regard to age (18-65), gender, education, and region.

Outcome of interest

The immediate objective of this project is to demonstrate that historical narratives of victimhood negatively affect a country's preferences for cooperation. The proposed behavioral mechanism is expected to be general and, therefore, to travel across different contexts.

Hypotheses and operationalization

The experiment therefore tests the hypothesis that exposure to historical narratives of victimhood reduces people's willingness to engage in diffuse reciprocity and to contribute to public goods, regardless of their socialization and their country's actual history of victimhood. The main outcome variable, international cooperation, is measured through stated preferences regarding a) the extension of concessions to other countries (reciprocity) and b) contributions to international public goods.

To measure the subjects' willingness to extend concessions, the project adapts a vignette used in an elite survey conducted by Naurin (2015). A vignette is a hypothetical situation to which subjects respond. This specific vignette asks subjects to imagine themselves in a negotiation situation and to consider the level of concessions that they are willing to extend to other EU governments. The questions measuring the subjects' willingness to contribute to EU public goods were adapted from the EUpinions survey to allow for a potential comparison of effects.

Experimental design

The project devises a between-subjects survey experiment that randomly assigns subjects to one of three conditions. Each condition involves a brief essay tasks in which participants are asked to reflect on various situations in the history of their country. In order to invoke in the subjects' minds latent historical narratives, the treatment condition, respondents are asked to reflect on situations in which their country was treated badly by others.

Please think of historical events when other European countries treated [COUNTRY] badly. Describe in 1-2 sentences how you feel about these events today.

Following Druckman (2001), the project establishes an empirically derived baseline that approximates the subjects' preferences in the absence of a treatment effect. For that

purpose, subjects are randomly assigned to two additional conditions where they are primed to access either a countervailing narrative or a mix of both.

Other survey items

It is likely that any hypothesized effect is moderated by additional factors that reduce people's susceptibility to behavioral manipulation, especially with regard to general trust. The survey includes indicators to measure the following potential modifiers:

- Religion
- Personal victimhood
- Socialization in EU institutions
- Left-right leaning
- General trust

In addition, Dalia provides demographic and political data on the respondents as background information:

- Region
- Gender
- Age
- Education

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