

Historical Narratives of Victimhood and Support for European Integration

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Abstract

This working paper asks if a country's narrative of its role in history affect its propensity for international cooperation. To answer this question, the project employs survey experiments in five European countries to explore whether exposure to victimhood narratives affects the subjects' attitudes towards financial aid, the establishment of a common army and generosity in international negotiations. We find that the direction and magnitude of this "victimhood effect" depends to a large extent on the type of cooperation and the country's actual victimhood experience. It is modified by the subjects' religious identification and political leaning. In contrast, positive historical narratives have no bearing on the subjects' attitudes toward international cooperation.

Keywords

European Integration, Victimhood Narratives, International Co-operation, EU Policy

1. Introduction

Does a country's own narrative of its role in history affect the way it engages with other countries today? The combined research of behavioural and social psychology, as well as conflict studies, suggests that it does. A group's sense of itself as a historical victim has been shown to diminish trust towards former perpetrators, perceived or real, and third persons alike. A narrative of victimhood may thus reduce a country's willingness to engage in deep forms of international co-operation that require trust in other parties' ongoing co-operative intentions (Keohane 1986, 21; Rathbun 2011).

If narratives of collective victimhood may impair relationships between countries, then research into this topic is of direct and growing relevance for European integration and international co-operation. Populists to the left and to the right typically employ a moralistic language that is defined by narratives of how a hitherto passive 'silent majority' is constantly 'betrayed' by an internationalist elite (Mudde 2004, 557, 563; see also Müller 2015, 11; de Vreese et al. 2018). Because it casts them and their supporters as victims, the populist narrative can be seen as carrying the risk of eroding general trust in and within national and international institutions.

This working paper presents exploratory research on the relationship between victimhood narratives and public attitudes towards international co-operation and, more specifically, European integration. We find that exposure to victimhood narratives may indeed reduce a person's willingness to have his/her country make more 'generous' concessions in negotiations with European partners. However, this effect cannot be generalised to other aspects of European integration and is itself conditioned by additional factors, such as the person's religious beliefs and political leaning.

2. Narratives and co-operation

Perceiving oneself as a victim, defined as a mindset that results from the perception of having been intentionally harmed, can make people less co-operative vis-à-vis

Perceiving oneself as a victim, defined as a mindset that results from the perception of having been intentionally harmed, can make people less co-operative vis-à-vis the former perpetrator and third actors alike. Experiments in psychology demonstrate that when subjects are asked to reflect on situations

in which they were treated unfairly, they are subsequently more likely to discount the co-operative intentions of others towards them (Gollwitzer et al. 2012; Zitek et al. 2010, 247). Behavioural psychologists (Tversky and Kahneman 1973) suggest that these effects occur because narratives about the past function as 'availability heuristics': they highlight in one's mind events that fit a

narrative plot, whilst de-emphasising information that does not. This process skews perceptions about the frequency of a class of events in the past and, consequently, one's assessment of the probability that similar events may occur in the future (Kahneman 2011, 200; Morden 2016, 452).

Research in conflict studies has established the same negative effect of victimisation and victimhood narratives on general trust at the group level. Bar-Tal and his colleagues (2009, 238) show that a group's collective victimhood narrative, irrespective of the severity of past victimisation, is positively correlated with a siege mentality—a defensive, even paranoid belief that others are deliberately hostile towards oneself.¹ Precisely because narratives are a means of transmitting and emphasising information, these effects have been shown to extend beyond direct experience across several generations (Wohl and Branscombe 2008; Lupu and Peisakhin 2017).

The fact that narratives about the past leave a powerful imprint on a group's collective identity is not news to historians. Indeed given that narration is a common way of disseminating historical knowledge, there has been an intense debate about whether or not the discipline has itself been complicit in the construction of national identities and myths.² Similarly, sociologists are well aware of how narratives help individuals and groups achieve intellectual coherence in a complex world, and a sense of purpose within the broader social context.³ What has received less attention in these literatures, and what is the focus of this present study, is: a) how, to what extent, and under what conditions precisely narratives exert a causal effect on the formation of attitudes; and b) how these narratives shape general (dis)trust towards the international community.

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3. Methodology

For the purposes of this research, we assume that a country's preference for international co-operation is partly shaped by public opinion and, furthermore, that when undergoing the formation of their opinions members of the public are (through media and conversations) frequently and inevitably exposed to different historical narratives. However, because historical narratives may also be used in order to justify or rationalise pre-existing preferences, identifying a causal effect of narratives on public opinion poses a formidable methodological challenge (King et al. 1994, 185). At this point, where methods that rely on observational data reach their limits, it is useful to turn to

¹ Cassar and colleagues (2013) find that a group's experience of collective violence undermines general trust even within the broader community and towards third parties.

² White 1984. See also McNeill 1986; Anderson 1983; Schöpflin 1997; Berger and Conrad 2015; Morden 2016

³ This literature shows how narratives link the individual and the collective, as individuals engage these collective stories through their own cultural participation, while narratives provide a ready-made palette of images, plots, and metaphors that embody shared meaning. See Bruner 1987, 1; Bruner 1990; McAdams 2001, 27; McAdams 2013, 28; Hammack and Pilecki 2012.

experimental methods. We therefore use survey experiments that, by randomising exposure to historical narratives, generate data that allow for isolating the hypothesised effect and for controlling for known and unknown confounding factors.

We conducted a series of survey experiments in September 2019 on five discrete samples, each consisting of 1,000 citizens, from five different countries: namely Germany, Poland, France, Spain, and Sweden. These countries, all EU members, were selected for their diverse experiences in the shared history of the second world war and the post-war era.⁴ The survey was distributed through Dalia Research on mobile devices and its completion incentivised through various techniques.⁵

By comparing the means of three different experimental conditions, the study sets out to measure the effects of exposure to victimhood narratives on the subjects' propensity for international co-operation. The first treatment condition (victimhood) consists of a short essay task where participants are asked to reflect on the history of their country.⁶ The remaining subjects are randomly assigned to two additional conditions where they are primed to access either a countervailing narrative or a mix of both. A positive format flips the victimhood narrative to one in which European countries showed solidarity with each other.⁷ The responses from the previous two formats are compared with those from a condition where respondents receive both formats simultaneously.⁸

The main outcome variable—international co-operation—is measured through stated preferences regarding 1) the extension of concessions to other countries (reciprocity) and 2) contributions to international public goods. To measure the subjects' willingness to engage in reciprocity, we ask 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. To measure the subjects' willingness to contribute to EU public goods, we ask for their willingness a) to offer financial aid to another EU country in need and b) to establish a European army.

⁴ Germany has been seen as the primary aggressor in the second world war, and she, of course, ended up on the losing side. Poland was the first victim of the war, and did not regain full independence until the erosion of the Warsaw Pact in the early 1990s. France was also one of the first victims, but ended up liberated and victorious as one of the four Allies. Spain's role in the conflict is ambiguous: the Franco regime never officially entered the war but it did provide some support for the Axis powers.

⁵ Dalia uses targeted quota sampling with the aim of achieving representative samples at the end of the fieldwork. The samples for this survey are matched to the full populations of the five countries using age, gender, and education.

⁶ "Please think of historical events when other European countries treated [COUNTRY] badly. Describe in 1–2 sentences how you feel about these events today."

⁷ "Please think of historical events when other European countries came to the help of [COUNTRY] in a difficult situation. Describe in 1–2 sentences how you feel about these events today."

⁸ "Please think of historical situations when other European countries [assisted COUNTRY] or [treated COUNTRY badly]. Describe in 1–2 sentences how you feel about these events today."

To evaluate whether or not treatment effects are modified by other factors, we collect additional data on the subjects’ personal sense of victimhood, their general levels of trust, religious identification, gender, age, education, and geographical location.

4. Analysis and results

We start out with an analysis of the aggregate data across all five country surveys.⁹ Using the control condition as a baseline, regression analyses with the victimhood condition and the countervailing narrative

Contrary to our expectations, though, respondents receiving the victimhood treatment were slightly more supportive of the idea of an EU army...

as independent variables show quite different treatment effects across all outcome variables. Respondents in **the** victimhood condition are slightly more wary of extending financial aid and engaging in diffuse reciprocity. Contrary to our expectation, respondents receiving the victimhood treatment are slightly more supportive of the idea of an EU army.¹⁰ Interestingly, the effect of the opposite (positive) frame is negligible across all three outcome measures. However, none of these effects meets strict conditions of significance. In other words, we cannot rule out that any differences we observe across our experimental conditions are due to chance.

Considering that some subjects might not have paid full attention to the survey, we proceed to dropping observations that did not give any substantive answers in our essay task.¹¹ We then repeat the analysis of variance. This time, our thought experiment on reciprocity achieves significance at the 0.05 level, while the other two measures (EU army and financial aid) show little change.¹² Again using the control condition as a baseline, subsequent regression analyses show that respondents in

⁹

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
eu_army	5,299	5.334591	2.88308	0	10
fin_aid	5,299	5.373655	2.695023	0	10
thought_ex~m	5,299	1.147575	0.7389039	0	2

¹⁰ The average response changed by -.125 units (financial aid), 0.93 (EU army), and -.021 units.

¹¹ These included random letters and answers such as ‘None’, ‘Don’t know’, or ‘Nothing’. The number of observations dropped by 659 to 4,640.

¹² One possible explanation for this result could be a combination of the design of our thought experiment and the willingness of less enthusiastic participants to choose an answer carefully. The dropped respondents were on average much closer to our outcome measures’ median response. But since the subjects were offered fewer choices in the thought experiment than in the other measures, it is possible that the effect from dropping unenthusiastic respondents is much stronger in the former than in the latter case.

	Dropped Respondents Only			Dropped Respondents Excluded		
	Financial Aid	EU Army	Thought Experiment	Financial Aid	EU Army	Thought Experiment
Victim Question	4.953	5.008	1.188	4.953	5.008	1.188
Historical Aid Question	5.146	4.971	1.098	5.146	4.971	1.098
Control	5.080	4.745	0.995	5.080	4.745	0.995
Deviation	0.173	0.257	0.212	0.736	0.685	0.273

Note: Deviation calculated as sum of the square root of the squared deviation from the median value of the question (5 for EU Army and Financial Aid and 1 for the Thought Experiment), summing across all three experiment groups

the victimhood condition are slightly more wary of financial aid and diffuse reciprocity among EU partners, while they are somewhat more likely to support an EU army.¹³ Of these treatment effects, the one regarding the respondents' willingness to engage in diffuse reciprocity meets higher barriers of significance. As before, exposure to the positive history format has little effect on the outcome measures. For a more straightforward interpretation, we present the results in a table comparing the means across experimental conditions. We can see that exposure to the victimhood treatment makes our subjects about three percent less likely to support their governments' engagement in diffuse reciprocity, compared with subjects receiving both frames at the same time.

	Financial Aid (0–10)	EU Army (0–10)	Thought Experiment (0–2)
Victimhood	5.350	5.429	1.117
Positive history	5.444	5.402	1.179
Control (both)	5.471	5.352	1.169
Victim – Control	-0.121	0.077	-0.052
Percentage	-1%	+1%	-3%

In order to investigate whether the treatment effect is modified by other variables, we interact the victimhood dummy variable with measures of religion, gender, age, political leaning, and education, as well as with variables measuring the subjects' personal disposition for trust and victimhood.¹⁴ Interestingly, the effect of the victimhood treatment on the respondents' willingness to engage in diffuse reciprocity receives a negative boost in subjects identifying as Catholic as well as in subjects supporting far-right parties. In other words, Catholics are more susceptible to this experimental manipulation and become significantly less supportive of generous concessions to other countries than other subjects receiving the same experimental treatment. At the same time, subjects identifying as Catholic become significantly more supportive of an EU army when exposed to a victimhood frame than other subjects in the corresponding treatment group. Women and subjects in rural areas are also far more susceptible to the victimhood treatment with respect to their support of financial aid and the establishment of an EU army in the sense that these groups are even less supportive of international co-operation than other subjects in the same experimental condition.

¹³ The average response changed by -.117 units (financial aid), 0.079 (EU army), and -.051 units.

¹⁴ We also tested whether or not individual traits, such as viewing oneself as a victim and the subjects' general levels of trust, affected the respondents' susceptibility to the victimhood treatment. We find that none of these personal modifiers, if interacted with a victimhood treatment, significantly affect the magnitude of the aforementioned treatment effects.

Notably, the inclusion of country dummies into our regressions strongly affects all outcome measures, suggesting strong variation across all surveyed countries in their aggregate disposition for EU co-operation (see Table 6). On aggregate, Polish citizens turn out to be most willing to agree to financial aid to countries in need as well as to the establishment of a European army, while they are least willing to engage in a system of diffuse reciprocity, that is to make concessions to other

Women and subjects in rural areas were also far more susceptible to the victimhood treatment with respect to their support of financial aid and the establishment of an EU army...

countries without demanding a direct quid pro quo. German citizens showed the opposite pattern in that they are, on aggregate, much less willing than their Polish counterparts to establish a system of financial aid or a European army, while they are more enthusiastic about concessions that are not tied to immediate quid pro quos.

These country-specific differences raise the question of whether or not a country's historical context modifies the treatment effect. We therefore look at country-specific differences in treatment effects, starting with the respondents' willingness to engage in diffuse reciprocity. We find the predicted negative effect in Spain, France, and Sweden, where subjects—after having been exposed to a victimhood narrative—are between two to six percent less likely than subjects in the control condition to support their governments' engagement in diffuse reciprocity.¹⁵ Curiously, subjects in both Germany and Poland—countries with very different victimisation experiences—become slightly, albeit insignificantly, more supportive of their countries' engagement in diffuse reciprocity. With respect to our other outcome measures, German and Swedish respondents in the victimhood condition are less likely to support an EU army, while French and Spanish respondents are more likely to support financial aid than their co-nationals in the control group. However, with the exception of the Spanish support for financial aid, none of these conditional effects meets high barriers of significance.

5. Discussion

We started this study with the expectation that exposure to victimhood narratives makes respondents generally less willing to engage in international co-operation. Our experiments partly support this expectation. We get the most conclusive results regarding the subjects' willingness to engage in diffuse reciprocity, i.e. in not insisting on specific quid pro quos in negotiations with other European partners. After exposure to the victimhood narrative, our subjects are on average slightly less willing to have their countries 'pay it forward'. This effect nearly triples and meets high thresholds of significance when we disregard inattentive respondents.

¹⁵ Difference in percentage of mean values between control group and victim group for large dataset: Spain: 2.4 %; France: 2.3%; Sweden: 2.4%. Difference in percentage for small dataset: Spain: 2.1%; France: 2.8%; Sweden: 6.1%.

So while exposure to victimhood narratives can under certain conditions affect citizens' preferences for international co-operation, the overall results of our experiment paint a nuanced picture and suggest various avenues for future research. First, differences in the direction of the treatment effects across the three outcome measures underscore the fact that we should be careful about generalising from attitudes towards a certain European policy to other aspects of international co-operation. Reminders of past victimisation may lead citizens to be less generous in everyday EU negotiations, yet such reminders may also make citizens more supportive of the establishment of an EU army.

Second, the treatment effect of the victimhood narrative is consistently much larger than the negligible effects of the positive history frame. It is possible that most subjects already associate European integration with a positive path in history, so that highlighting this association in the positive experimental condition yields little to no effect. This redundancy effect might also explain why the victimhood treatment was ineffective among Polish respondents, despite the fact that past victimhood is a very salient topic in Polish public discourse. Simply put, if a certain narrative is already salient in the minds of the subjects, experimental manipulations that aim at raising this salience remain ineffective.

Third, the fact that some subjects' identification as Catholic boosts the victimhood treatment effect suggests that this narrative highlights in the subjects' minds not only a certain historical trajectory but also a certain role ascribed to victimhood itself. Victimhood, of course, plays a special and sacred role in both Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity where suffering is associated with redemption and the grace of God.¹⁶

6. Policy recommendations

Historical narratives are ubiquitous in public discourse and diplomacy. Arguably, politicians employ such narratives because they intuit that they structure their own thoughts as well as those of others. How exactly narratives exert this effect is still an open question and has been the subject of this paper. Although we caution against any generalisations from our results, it seems sensible to advise that politicians and diplomats should be wary of employing narratives in ways that suggest an inescapable historical path or certain role behaviour. This is especially relevant in countries where there is not (yet) a dominant and salient public narrative about their role in history or where the dominant narrative is changing. Our null findings from Poland and Germany—two

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¹⁶ A similar view exists in Judaism. However, we did not have enough observations to investigate the modifying effect of these other religious beliefs.

countries with salient historical discourses but very different victimhood experiences—suggest that mention of a historical narrative that is in line with a salient dominant discourse will be redundant, while mention of a historical narrative that runs counter to the dominant discourse will likely recoil.

For the same reason, we are sceptical about communication strategies that portray the EU as a peace project. The fact that the positive frame yielded very little to no effect in citizens' attitudes towards European integration indicates that citizens already view the EU this way: thus highlighting this more positive historical narrative remains redundant. To be sure, this does not mean that the adoption of this frame in official communication is superfluous: it may well stabilise attitudes in times of contestation, but it will do little to change citizens' attitudes towards Europe.

In other contexts, however, where discourse about the country's historical relationship with its neighbours is less set in stone, the use of a victimhood narrative may well affect attitudes regarding international co-operation. We found the strongest and most significant treatment effects regarding attitudes towards reciprocity in EU negotiations in the sense that subjects exposed to this frame became less willing to support generous concessions to other countries. We theorised that historical narratives bias perceptions of frequency and of historical trajectories. The fact that this effect was even stronger among respondents identifying as Catholics indicates that certain historical narratives also evoke perceptions about roles and associated behaviour. Thus, if the goal were to break this pattern, it seems imperative to highlight not necessarily different narratives, but additional historical events in the country's past that break a perceived historical trajectory and which, accordingly, indicate that the future is more open and shapeable than victimhood narratives suggest.

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