

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Personal and Collective Functions of Family Historical Memories

Aline Cordonnier¹  | Olivier Luminet^{1,2} 

¹Psychological Science Research Institute, UCLouvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium | ²Fund for Scientific Research (FRS-FNRS), Brussels, Belgium

Correspondence: Aline Cordonnier (aline.cordonnier@uclouvain.be)

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ABSTRACT

Memories are inherently functional, shaping identity, fostering social bonds, and guiding behaviour. We argue that family historical memories—situated at the intersection of individual experience and collective narrative—can serve both personal and collective functions. This study examines family memories of resistance and collaboration during World War II among 96 French-speaking Belgians from 42 families across three generations. Through interviews, we assessed the importance of these memories and the functions participants attributed to knowing and transmitting them. Results revealed that war-related family narratives primarily served identity and social functions at the personal level. Directive functions, providing guidance for future behaviour, occurred at both levels but were especially prominent collectively. Resistance narratives served significantly more collective functions than collaboration narratives, particularly collective directive functions. These findings demonstrate that family historical memories serve important functions at both individual and collective levels, with impact shaped by narrative content and collective significance.

1 | Introduction

Family stories, on the one hand, they are part of our DNA and maintain a level of well-being within the family cell. On the other hand, (...) if we highlight more and more the experiences of family members, but also of other members of the Resistance, well, I would like to believe that this will contribute to opposition, whatever form it may take, to the 'extremes'.

This quote comes from the end of a long interview with Julie (pseudonym), a 30-year-old woman who is the great-granddaughter of a member of the Resistance during the Second World War (WWII) in Belgium. She described how her family memories of the war matter to her identity and have an impact on family cohesion, but that they also provide guidance to her as a member of Belgian society. This quote perfectly exemplifies the aim of this manuscript, which demonstrates how family

historical memory can serve functions both at the personal and the collective level.

2 | My Memory, Your Memory, Our Memory: Conceptual Clarification of Terminology

Before we delve into the core of this paper, we wanted to start by reviewing some of the key terms we will rely on for conceptual clarity. In the memory literature, a number of related but distinct concepts are often used in close proximity, and their relationships are not always made explicit. We briefly define them here and situate them in relation to one another (see also Figure 1).

Autobiographical memory refers to the memory system through which individuals construct a coherent sense of self across time by mentally re-experiencing events they personally lived through and maintaining abstract representations of their self and their life (M. A. Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000). Following its

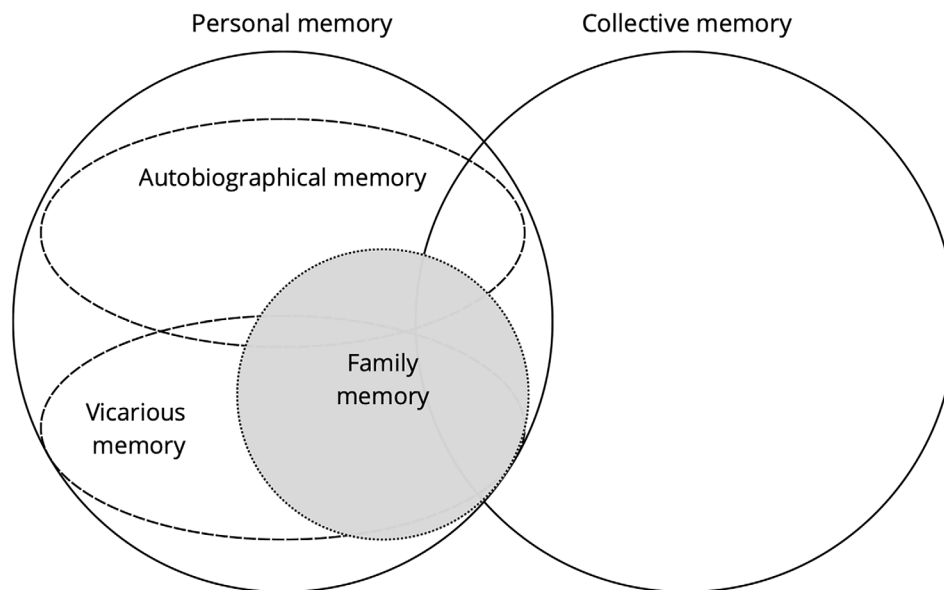


FIGURE 1 | Conceptual map of memory types. The two large circles represent personal memory (left) and collective memory (right). Personal memory refers to memories that are subjectively meaningful and self-relevant for the individual, whether or not they are based on first-hand experience. Within personal memory, the two dashed horizontal ovals depict subtypes: Autobiographical memory (upper oval: Memories of events personally lived through) and vicarious memory (lower oval: Memories of events learned about from others). The shaded circle represents family memory, that is, memories and stories that circulate within a family. Its overlap with both autobiographical and vicarious memory illustrates that some family memories are directly experienced by the rememberer, whereas others are based on events experienced only by other family members. The partial overlap between the shaded family-memory circle and the collective memory circle indicates family historical memories: Family memories of major historical events that also form part of a broader social group's past. Collective memory is defined here as memory at a supra-familial, group level; it only partly overlaps with personal memory because not all group-shared representations of the past are experienced as personally meaningful by individuals. The figure thus focuses on autobiographical, vicarious, and family memories that have been internalised as personal memories, while depicting collective memory as a broader domain of group-level representations that sometimes, but not always, become self-relevant.

Greek etymology (*auto*: self, *bio*: life, *graphy*: account), we use it here to refer exclusively to memories grounded in first-hand experience. Furthermore, in line with Conway's self-memory system, we distinguish these longer-term, self-integrated autobiographical memories from more short-lived episodic traces of recent experiences, which may be briefly accessible without becoming part of one's enduring life narrative (e.g., remembering brushing one's teeth this morning).

In this paper, we decided to use the term *personal memory* as a broader category that encompasses autobiographical memory but extends beyond it.¹ In our approach, a personal memory is any memory that is subjectively meaningful and self-relevant to the individual, contributing to their sense of who they are and where they come from, as well as to their relational self by helping them know and understand people to whom they feel close. Autobiographical memories thus form one important subset of personal memories, but they are not the only ones. Crucially, a personal memory does not need to have been directly experienced: one can hold personally meaningful memories of events one never witnessed firsthand.

This is where *vicarious memory* enters the picture. Vicarious memories are recollections of events or life stories that one did not experience personally, but instead learned about through other people (Pillemer et al. 2015, 2024). Vicarious memory is thus best understood as a subcategory of personal memory in our terminology: it is personally meaningful, but it is someone else's memory that has, through transmission, become meaningful to

me. Furthermore, just as not all episodic traces of our own past experiences become part of our autobiographical memory, not all transmitted or heard memories from close others become part of our vicarious personal memory. Some stories may be briefly retained because they are often repeated or recently heard, yet remain peripheral or purely informational; in such cases, they are not counted as personal memories in the stricter sense we adopt here. While vicarious memory is most commonly studied within the family, similar processes can occur with friends or even colleagues. In this special issue, Sawatzki et al. (forthcoming) show that teachers' vicarious narratives of colleagues' work challenges can also support identity-relevant and directive meaning-making.

Family memory refers to the memories that circulate within a family unit, such as stories of shared experiences, but also, and perhaps more importantly for the present paper, stories of events that only some family members (typically older generations) lived through, and that are transmitted to others through everyday conversation and reminiscing (Fivush and Kellas 2025; Fivush and Merrill 2016). When younger family members internalise these transmitted stories and experience them as self-relevant, family memory can become a form of vicarious memory: it is our memory as a family, even when it is not autobiographical for all who hold it.

Finally, *collective memory* refers to memories shared by members of a broader social group (a community, a nation, a social generation) and that shape their shared social identity (Hirst

et al. 2018). While the concept has sometimes been extended to the family level, we argue that family memories are better understood as personal rather than collective: they are meaningful to individuals as *individuals*, not as representatives of a wider community.² We therefore use collective memory to refer exclusively to memory operating at a supra-familial level, whether formalised through cultural institutions such as history books, memorials, and commemorations (i.e., *cultural memory*), or transmitted more informally through everyday discussion (i.e., *communicative memory*) (Assmann 1995). Because collective memories must be both shared within a group and taken to say something about that group, we do not treat every collective memory as a type of personal memory; only those collective representations that individuals also experience as self-relevant fall within personal memory, which is why Figure 1 depicts only a partial overlap between the two domains.

However, some family memories occupy a special position in this landscape. When family memories concern major historical events—what we term *family historical memories*—they carry significance beyond the personal: they transmit personalised, lived-in versions of a past that also matters to the collective (Cordonnier and Luminet 2026). In this way, family historical memories act as a bridge between the personal and the collective, connecting individual and family narratives to the broader memory of a community or nation.

Together, these concepts form a nested and relational structure: autobiographical memory sits within personal memory; vicarious and family memory extend personal memory beyond direct experience; and family historical memory connects personal and vicarious memory to the broader landscape of collective memory (see Figure 1). It is within this conceptual architecture that the present paper operates.

3 | Family (Historical) Memories

As Robyn Fivush often reports: ‘Infants are born into storied worlds’ (Fivush and Kellas 2025, 108; Fivush and Merrill 2016, 308), and the family is generally the first place where they encounter these stories (Fivush et al. 2006; Fivush and Merrill 2016). Family memories and parent-guided reminiscing play a particularly important role in the development of autobiographical memory and narrative storytelling (Fivush et al. 2009, 2011). This is illustrated in this special issue by Bühler-Wassmann et al. (forthcoming), who show that Latine parents and grandparents share personal and family stories, including memories of their own childhoods, to convey scientific knowledge alongside identity and cultural values to their preschool-aged children. But family discussions are not only about reminiscing shared experiences; they are also about passing down to the next generations memories of events that younger family members never personally witnessed (Baudet et al. 2025; Fivush and Kellas 2025; Merrill et al. 2017). Intergenerational memory transmission is indeed a frequent and valued phenomenon (Baudet et al. 2025), and these transmitted stories often become vicarious memories for younger generations (Kirkegaard Thomsen et al. 2025; Pillemer et al. 2015, 2024). At the same time, not all family experiences become part

of a shared narrative; certain topics may be left untold, avoided or minimised. These silences can be a choice, but often they are imposed, by the self or by others, in what Fivush calls ‘being silenced’ (Fivush 2010; Fivush and Kellas 2025). In such cases, silence is not just an absence of stories but a relational practice that shapes who can speak, what can be remembered, and how younger generations understand their family past. This dynamic is illustrated in this special issue by two papers. First, McLean and Weststrate’s (forthcoming) study of intergenerational storytelling between elders and youths in the LGBTQ+ community shows how trauma can be voiced, silenced, or imposed in ways that either heal or harm across generations. Similarly, Camia (forthcoming) demonstrates that undisclosed memories are often silenced to protect others or avoid shame, rather than simply forgotten. In this paper, we focus on the stories that are transmitted and how, once internalised as vicarious memories, they function in people’s lives.

Recent work on vicarious memory has shown that such memories fulfil many of the same functions as autobiographical memories, albeit at reduced intensity levels. Based on this finding, we argue that family memories, conceptualised as a type of vicarious memory, can serve personal functions for members of the family (Pillemer et al. 2015, 2024). They tell a story of who we are and where we come from, as our identity develops in relation to those we are close to (Fivush et al. 2008; Fivush and Merrill 2016; McLean 2016). They allow us to make informed decisions by learning from others’ mistakes or achievements, to understand our past and present, and to expect our future (Merrill et al. 2017). When shared, they become a bond between people, creating intimacy, passing on values and stories of old times (Duke et al. 2008; Fivush et al. 2011; Merrill et al. 2017).

Beyond these personal functions, family memories can also provide access to a collective past that was not experienced by younger generations, and thus support collective memory (Hirst et al. 2018; Kirkegaard Thomsen et al. 2025; Reese and Fivush 2008). The hourglass model illuminates this process by describing how family memory occupies an intermediate position, serving both as a bridge and a filter between collective historical contexts and individual experiences (Cordonnier et al. 2022; Cordonnier and Luminet 2026). When individuals undergo events that become integral to a group’s collective history, their transmitted personal narratives gain significance beyond the individual level. These stories offer nuanced, personal understandings of history that bridge collective and individual dimensions (Cardon et al. 2025; Cordonnier et al. 2021).

One of the clearest examples of this phenomenon is found in family memories about WWII. Around the globe, citizens were affected by the consequences of long years of hostilities between the Allied and Axis powers. Some people fought as soldiers, some joined the resistance, and others embraced the enemy and collaborated. Even for the majority who had no direct involvement in the war, their life was considerably changed. Memories associated with such conflicts tend to become integrated into individuals’ overall life narratives, and importantly, are also more likely to be transmitted to the following generations (Svob and Brown 2012). Although such communicative transmissions typically fade after a few generations, a subset of stories proves remarkably resilient, remaining in vicarious memory,

sometimes becoming family myths, told and retold, and known by all (Cordonnier et al. 2021; Stone et al. 2014).

4 | Bridging Personal and Collective Functions

While memories themselves can be personal or collective, the functions they serve can also be separate depending on whether they are useful to the person as an individual (personal function) or as a member of a group (collective function).

With regard to the functions of memory from a personal perspective, Bluck and Alea's original three-function model (2002) has been the most referenced and used model in the literature in psychology (Sow et al. 2023). This model suggests that memories serve three main functions (Bluck and Alea 2002). The first function relates to identity (*identity function*). It is by remembering events that can be representative of who we are that we can construct a long-lasting, coherent, and consistent self. The self is instrumental to the way we reconstruct our past, but the past also contributes to the continuity and the development of the self (M. A. Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000).

The second function highlights the role memories can take in our social life (*social function*). Divulging what we have done in the past or sharing snippets of our lives with others are effective ways to create bonds. Indeed, research has shown with a task called 'fast friends' that sharing personal memories was sufficient to spark a feeling of closeness with a stranger in a matter of minutes (Sprecher 2021). But it is probably mostly with friends and family members that we share the most, and this sharing reinforces the existing relationship, eliciting empathy and understanding (Neisser 1988).

The third function represents how our memories can direct present and future behaviours (*directive function*). When a decision needs to be made, whether consciously or not, we rely on past knowledge and previously encountered situations to choose a course of action (Pillemer 2003; Schacter et al. 2007). Our mistakes or, conversely, the decisions that have turned out to be right can also be transmitted to teach others or exemplify certain values (Merrill et al. 2017). This directive intent can be especially deliberate at the end of life. Cogdill-Richardson et al. (forthcoming), in this special issue, show that seriously ill older adults constructing a final life story for their family engage in positive meaning-making to explicitly pass on lessons and values to the next generation.

With regard to collective memory, researchers also suggest that they serve three main collective functions (Liu and Hilton 2005). The first one is already inherent to its definition, as collective memories must play a role in the creation or maintenance of the group's collective identity, and thus serve an *identity function* (Hirst et al. 2018). By holding similar memories of the past, members can demonstrate their belonging to the group, but also to the group's values (Pennebaker et al. 1997; Tajfel and Turner 1986). The second function could be interpreted as a *social function*, where collective memory helps the group keep track of friends and enemies and define more broadly intergroup relations (Figueiredo et al. 2017). Finally, the third function relates to the idea of 'lessons of history', how through the past,

we learn to do better in the future (*directive function*). Studies on historical analogies show that representations of the past can influence participants' understanding of current or future situations and even change their behaviours and attitudes (Ghilani et al. 2017).

Despite this striking parallelism, these functions were not studied comparatively until recently. In 2022, two important papers on the topic were published: one review article and one empirical article. First, Heux et al. (2022) offered an interdisciplinary synthesis bridging research on autobiographical and collective memory. They reviewed the numerous and important correspondences between autobiographical and collective memory and highlighted the need to approach memory studies from an interdisciplinary perspective. One of their key arguments was that both types of memory can be considered through a functionalist approach, suggesting that the three collective functions mirror the three individual functions (Heux et al. 2022, 7).

Burnell et al. (2022) also reflected on this similarity by adapting the Thinking About Life Experiences questionnaire (TALE)—which evaluates how often autobiographical memories serve directive, identity, and social functions (Bluck et al. 2005)—into a collective version (Collective TALE). The simple fact that items from the TALE could easily be transformed into a collective version already demonstrates the correspondence between the two concepts. Their factorial analyses showed a similar structure for the Collective TALE compared to the original version. Across two experiments, they found that collective memories served all three functions at rates similar to autobiographical memories, indicating that both were deemed important and functional for individuals.

In summary, there is a clear parallelism between personal and collective functions of memory. This dual functionality is particularly salient in family historical memories, which occupy a unique position at the intersection of personal and collective domains, as described in the hourglass model (Cordonnier et al. 2022). As vicarious memories transmitted across generations, they can simultaneously serve personal functions while also maintaining collective identity and providing lessons from the past that guide collective action. The present study examines how family historical memories of resistance and collaboration in Belgium during WWII bridge individual and collective dimensions.

5 | Emotional Valence and Memory Functions

Attitudes and emotions towards a particular past can affect the functional value of its memory. For example, at the individual level, studies found that positive autobiographical memories served more identity and social functions, whereas negative memories, both autobiographical and vicarious, tended to serve more directive functions (Rasmussen and Berntsen 2009; Steiner 2023). At the collective level, events that elicit pride are important for the maintenance of a positive social identity for the group (Tajfel and Turner 1986). In certain cases, shameful events can also provide a sense of identity (Choi et al. 2021; Dresler-Hawke and Liu 2006) or serve social functions, both intra-group (reinforcing bonding, encouraging pro-social

behaviour and empathy) and inter-group (shaping relations with other groups). However, when shameful events serve no useful function for the group, they might be ignored, silenced, or forgotten (Páez et al. 2006). From a sociocultural–developmental perspective, Fivush argues that cultural norms and culturally dominant narratives can play an important role in this process of silencing (Fivush 2010; Fivush and Kellas 2025). Finally, important past events, whether they are regarded positively or negatively, can serve important directive functions by providing lessons from history (Szpunar and Szpunar 2016) and historical analogies (Ghilani et al. 2017).

The present study investigates this emotional influence by contrasting family historical memories from opposite ends of the moral spectrum. We examine families whose ancestors resisted the German occupation of Belgium during WWII alongside families whose ancestors collaborated with the occupying forces. This contrast allows us to explore how historical valence—being on the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ side of history—shapes the functions these memories serve across generations.

6 | The Present Study

In the present study, we explore personal and collective functions of family historical memories related to resistance or collaboration during WWII. We conducted in-depth interviews with members of different generations. At the end of the interview, participants were invited to reflect on how important knowing and transmitting this past was for them and to explain why. We use these questions to investigate, in a qualitative manner, the functions of these intergenerational memories. It is important to note that when we refer to memory ‘functions,’ we focus on self-reported uses (i.e., the purposes participants describe for recalling and transmitting these memories) rather than assessing whether these uses serve adaptive outcomes for adaptive purposes.

Analyses are presented in three steps. First, we examine the perceived importance of family memories across generations. Second, we investigate whether these memories serve both personal and collective functions. Third, we analyse which specific function types (identity, social, directive) are most prominent.

6.1 | Step 1: Perceived Importance of Family Historical Memories

We expect overall a high level of importance for family historical memories (H1.1), but with a decrease across generations as communicative memory begins to fade (H1.2) (Assmann 1995).

6.2 | Step 2: Personal vs. Collective Functions

We hypothesise that family historical memories can serve both personal and collective functions (H2.1). Nevertheless, we anticipate that collective representations of this past—being on the right or wrong side of history—will influence the types of functions found. We hypothesise that family memories of the

resistance, as they echo collective narratives, will serve more collective functions than memories of collaboration (H2.2) (M. Conway 2012).

Regarding generational effects, we anticipate that younger generations will propose fewer functions overall for their family memories (H2.3). Furthermore, as the last generation is less likely to have known the ancestor who lived through the war, we expect them to cite collective functions more often than personal functions (H2.4).

6.3 | Step 3: Types of Functions

In this step, we further divide the different types of personal and collective functions by coding them as relating to identity, social, or directive types of function. For these analyses, our hypotheses are more exploratory, though we have some expectations.

We expect that identity functions, both at the individual and collective levels, would be higher in the resistance group than the collaboration group (H3.1), as memories of the resistance can support a positive identity for both the family and the collective, whereas there is no collective identity around the collaborative past, at least in French-speaking Belgium.³

Similarly, we anticipate higher levels of directive functions, both at the individual and collective levels, in the resistance group than the collaboration group (H3.2), as these events can be used as lessons from history and examples of how to act in similar situations (H3.2).

Finally, we predict that social functions would be rated lower than identity and directive functions at the collective level in both groups (H3.3). This prediction aligns with Burnell et al.’s (2022) finding that collective memories tend to serve social functions to a lesser degree than directive and identity functions, as historical events primarily concern group decision-making and collective identity rather than interpersonal bonding.

7 | Materials and Method

7.1 | Participants

Participants were part of a broader interdisciplinary project led by historians, political scientists, and social and cognitive psychologists that investigated the intergenerational transmission of memory in families associated with the resistance or the collaboration during WWII in Belgium.⁴ Families were contacted via word of mouth, personal contacts of members of the research team, social media, radio broadcasts, and advertisement in the CEGESOMA⁵ newsletter. They had to be a direct descendant of someone who resisted during WWII or was judged for acts of collaboration after WWII in Belgium. The aim was to recruit families with at least three generations. We allowed families to select the participating members as long as they were over 15 years of age and did not suffer from any memory-related disorders. Families were also informed that no amount of knowledge about the family past was necessary. After receiving details on the procedure of the study and being allowed to ask their

TABLE 1 | Demographic details of participants as a function of group.

	<i>N</i>	Mean age (SD)	Gender (F–M)
Resistance		21 families—59 participants	
Generation 1 (G1)	23	81 (9.7)	13 F–10 M
Generation 2 (G2)	20	52 (11.3)	9 F–11 M
Generation 3 (G3)	16	30 (10.6)	9 F–7 M
Collaboration		21 families—37 participants	
Generation 1 (G1)	14	67 (7.6)	8 F–6 M
Generation 2 (G2)	18	50 (15.1)	8 F–10 M
Generation 3 (G3)	5	29 (14.5)	4 F–1 M
Total	96	56 (21.3)	51 F–45 M

questions, participants provided their written informed consent. The study also obtained ethical approval from the Ethics Committees of the Psychological Sciences Research Institute at UCLouvain, Belgium (Project 2018-04).

In the scope of this study, we focus on the French-speaking subsample of participants. The sample comprised 96 participants from 42 different families. Fifty-nine participants discussed family stories related to the resistance during WWII while 37 participants discussed family stories related to the collaboration during WWII (see Table 1). We divided participants with regard to their generation: generation 0 (G0) are the people who were active during WWII (absent from our sample), generation 1, 2 and 3 (G1, G2, G3) are respectively their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Unfortunately, we could not access three generations in all families. This was particularly problematic within the collaboration sample and is a direct effect of the absence of collective memory related to the collaboration in French-speaking Belgium (Bouchat et al. 2020; M. Conway 2012). First, it was hard to find families willing to participate, regardless of the number of generations existing within the family. Then, even if a family was composed of multiple generations, there was a certain level of silence or shame, which led to some members refusing to talk to us (it was often members from G1, the children of the collaborator), or generations we could not contact as they were never told about this part of their family past (mostly the G2 and the G3). These differences across groups and generations will be considered in the discussion.

7.2 | Procedure and Materials

We met participants in their homes, so they would be in a familiar and relaxing environment. The interview was conducted individually and was audio recorded, lasting on average for 2 hours. There were four main subsections to the semi-structured interview: (a) family relationships, (b) family historical knowledge, (c) sources of their knowledge and (d) conclusion. During the interview, we thus spent most of the time discussing in-depth their family memories with regard to WWII and their ancestors' involvement. Some participants knew a great deal about their family past and could provide detailed accounts of what happened to their parents, grandparents or great-grandparents during and

after the war, while others knew very little (particularly when it came to younger generations).

The questions relevant to this study were asked at the end of the interview, in the conclusion section. After thanking them for sharing with us their family past, we asked them whether it was important for them to *know* these family historical memories on a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (extremely important) and why (open answer). Once they provided their answer, we asked them whether it was important for them to *transmit to the next generation* these family historical memories on a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (extremely important) and why (open answer). Responses to these two questions provided very similar answers, both at the quantitative level (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.819$) and at the qualitative level. Therefore, we combined them for the analyses. Importantly, answering these questions did not require participants to already know many details about their family past: several explicitly stated that they wished they knew more and then explained why they considered it important to know and transmit such memories.

7.3 | Coding Scheme

Each open answer was transcribed verbatim. In participants' answers, we coded whether or not they mentioned (1 or 0) each type of function at least once: personal-identity, personal-social, personal-directive, collective-identity, collective-social, collective-directive. The coding scheme was designed based on the literature describing personal and collective functions (Bluck and Alea 2002; Liu and Hilton 2005). The distinction between personal and collective functions relied particularly on the use of singular versus collective pronouns ('I' vs. 'we'), references to groups (e.g., members of the Resistance, Belgians) or references to collective memories and social representations of the past. Descriptions of each category and examples taken from our sample can be found in Table 2. The complete coding scheme with further examples can be found in [Supporting Information](#).

Two independent judges coded 25% of the sample separately, one of whom was familiar with the study hypotheses (the first author) and one of whom was blind to them. Their level

of agreement was considered ‘substantial’: Cohen’s $\kappa=0.734$ (Landis and Koch 1977). After resolving residual discrepancies, one judge coded the remaining data.

8 | Results

As described in the introduction, we start by evaluating how important these family historical memories are. Then, we investigate the functions served by these memories for the different generations within families related to the resistance or the collaboration during WWII in Belgium, first by comparing personal and collective functions, then by analysing the different types of functions, and finally by examining generational effects.

8.1 | Step 1: Perceived Importance of Family Historical Memories

Overall, participants of all generations indicated that it was very important for them to know and to transmit to the next generation(s) their family historical memory (M range: 3.8–4.7 on a scale from 1 to 5), which corroborates our hypothesis (H1.1). We ran a 2 (Group: Collaboration, Resistance) x 3 (Generation: G1, G2, G3) univariate ANOVA on the level of importance. Results showed no main effects but a significant interaction between Group and Generation, although with a medium effect size: $F(2, 86)=4.93, p=0.009, \eta_p^2=0.096$ (see Figure 2). Planned contrasts revealed no differences across generation for the collaboration group. In the resistance group, we found a significant quadratic contrast ($p=0.005$) indicating the presence of a U-shaped trend. The grandchildren (G2) of members of the resistance found it

TABLE 2 | Summary and examples of the coding scheme describing the two categories (personal and collective) and the three types of functions (Identity, Social, and Directive).

	Personal functions	Collective functions
Identity	Personal and family identity ‘It’s the name I carry, it is my identity’ ‘They are my ancestors and I find it important to know where I come from’	Group and social identity ‘Members of the Resistance are one kind of people’ ‘It’s our Belgian heritage’
Social	Relations between family members ‘It tightens family bonds’ ‘When we love someone, we need to know their past’	Relations between social groups ‘We want to explain that there were different groups of people being deported.’ ‘It helps understand relationships between different groups of people’
Directive	Suggestions on how to act in the future at the individual and family levels ‘So I learn to do better’ ‘It creates a way of life’	Suggestions on how to act in the future at the collective level ‘It opens our mind, for example about immigration’ ‘Knowing history so we don’t repeat it’

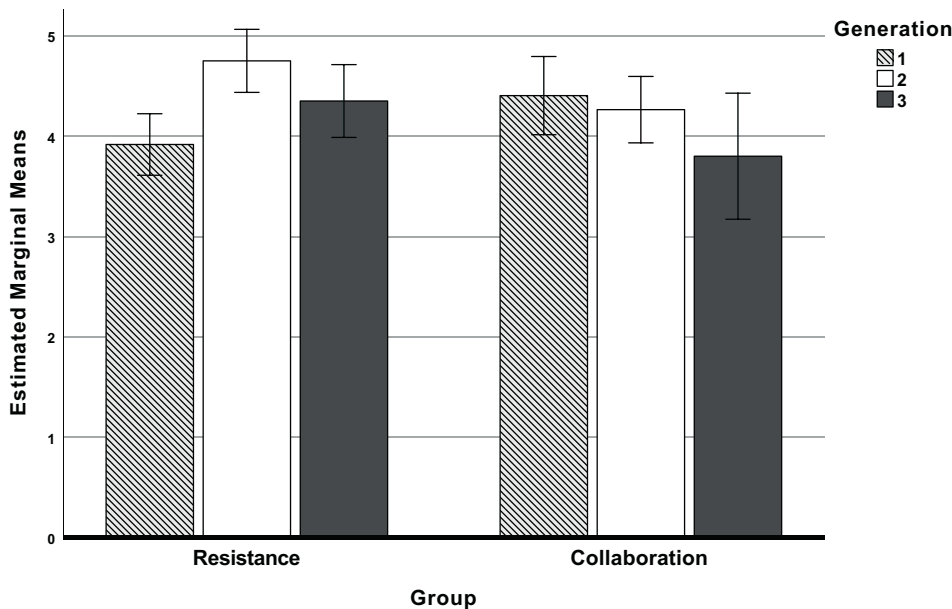


FIGURE 2 | Means and 95% confidence intervals for the perceived importance to know and transmit family historical memories as a function of group and generation.

TABLE 3 | Raw percentages of functions depending on their type and categories and for both groups.

	Resistance				Collaboration			
	TOTAL	G1	G2	G3	TOTAL	G1	G2	G3
Personal	75%	61%	80%	88%	92%	93%	94%	80%
Identity	46%	39%	50%	50%	68%	86%	56%	60%
Social	39%	35%	30%	56%	32%	21%	39%	40%
Directive	29%	17%	40%	31%	35%	21%	56%	0%
Collective	52%	52%	70%	63%	30%	36%	33%	0%
Identity	27%	35%	35%	6%	8%	14%	6%	0%
Social	5%	4%	5%	6%	5%	14%	0%	0%
Directive	46%	35%	50%	56%	16%	7%	28%	0%

Note: Percentages in bold do not represent averages of the three types. Instead, they represent the percentage of participants who provided at least one personal/collective function, regardless of which type.

more important than their parents (G1) to know and transmit their family historical memory, contrary to our hypothesis (H1.2).

8.2 | Functions of Family Historical Memories

8.2.1 | Descriptive Data

Descriptive data (see Table 3 for raw percentages) show that both personal and collective functions were cited by both groups, as hypothesised (H2.1), even if collective functions, especially for the collaboration group, were cited by fewer than one third of our participants. The most frequently cited function by our participants is the identity function at the personal level. Indeed, over half of our sample (52%) cited it as a reason for the importance of knowing and transmitting their family historical past, regardless of the group. One third of participants also cited the directive function at the collective level, showing that these family narratives also pertain to the realm of collective memory. Nevertheless, as hypothesised (H3.3), social collective functions were almost never cited (5%), which indicates that these particular memories did not help them better understand intergroup relations.

The following analyses investigate the use of functions depending on participants' group and their generation. These analyses are divided into two steps. First, we start by comparing personal and collective functions regardless of their types. Specifically, we examine whether participants provided at least one personal function (yes or no) and one collective function (yes or no) when describing why it was important for them to know and transmit their family historical memories. Second, we delve further by examining the type of functions (identity, social, directive) provided within each category (personal or collective). Because our dependent variables are binary (function present/absent), we use generalised linear models (GLM) with binomial distribution and logit link function, which appropriately models the probability of each function being endorsed. GLMs are also suited to handle our groups of different sizes and non-normally distributed data (Hox et al. 2017).

We initially attempted to run GLMM by including participant ID as a random intercept to account for repeated measures within participants. However, the model failed to converge, likely due to the sparse data structure and limited within-participant variation in our binary outcomes. When we were able to obtain model estimates, the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) was effectively zero ($ICC < 0.001$), indicating negligible clustering of responses within participants.

We ran analogous models with family as the clustering variable and again found a boundary (singular) fit, with the family-level variance estimated as 0 and $ICC = 0$, indicating no detectable clustering of responses within families. Given that our primary research questions concern group-level differences rather than individual- or family-level variation, that each participant contributed a similar number of observations, and the absence of meaningful within-participant or within-family correlation, we proceeded with standard GLM analyses treating each memory rating as an independent observation.

We present results using a stepwise method, building from simpler to more complex models. This approach allows us to examine main effects in simpler models without interactions, then add interaction terms to test whether effects differ across conditions. Importantly, once interaction terms are included in a model, the main effects represent effects at the reference level of the interacting variable rather than overall effects. Therefore, in models containing interactions, we focus interpretation on the interaction terms and estimate effects at each combination of factor levels rather than interpreting main effects.

8.3 | Step 2: Personal vs. Collective Functions

To examine the frequency with which participants indicated that their family memory served either personal and/or collective functions, we ran 2 (*Group*: Collaboration, Resistance) $\times$ 3 (*Generation*: G1, G2, G3) $\times$ 2 (*Category*: Personal, Collective) GLMs.

When only main effects were entered into the model (Table 4, Model 1), there was a significant main effect of *Category*.

TABLE 4 | GLM Fixed Effects *F* and *p* values for main effects and interactions within the different models.

Variable	Model 1 AIC: 62.40 Nagelkerke <i>R</i> ² : 0.18		Model 2 AIC: 52.78 Nagelkerke <i>R</i> ² : 0.30	
	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Group	0.51	0.500	9.77	0.089
Generation	0.43	0.669	10.56	0.087
Category	7.93	0.026	177.38	0.006
Group × generation			86.64	0.047
Group × category			10.56	0.001
Generation × category			5.98	0.143

Note: AIC corresponds to Akaike Information Criterion, which is an indicator of how well the model fits the data. Models with small information criterion values fit better. Numbers in bold represent significant results to analyse.

Across both groups, personal functions (*EM means*=0.810, *SE*=0.068) were more often cited than collective functions (*EM means*=0.478, *SE*=0.088) when explaining why it was important to them to know and transmit these memories, *OR*=0.22. Contrary to our prediction, there was no main effect of *Generation* (H2.3).

When we entered two-way interactions within the model (Table 4, Model 2), we found a significant interaction between *Group* and *Generation*. Pairwise contrasts with Bonferroni correction across all generation and group combinations revealed only one significant difference: G3 participants mentioned fewer functions for their family memories in the collaboration group (*EM means*=0.248, *SE*=0.070) compared to the resistance group (*EM means*=0.778, *SE*=0.028), *t*(2)=6.74, *p*=0.021, 95% CI [0.19, 0.87]. However, this should be interpreted with caution considering the low numbers of participants in these cells.

More importantly, we also found a significant interaction between *Group* and *Category*. Pairwise contrasts with Bonferroni corrections indicated that while personal functions were mentioned slightly more often in the collaboration group (*EM means*=0.905, *SE*=0.019) compared to the resistance group (*EM means*=0.782, *SE*=0.021), *t*(2)=4.38, *p*=0.048, collective functions were mentioned significantly more often in the resistance group (*EM means*=0.617, *SE*=0.023) compared to the collaboration group (*EM means*=0.171, *SE*=0.021), *t*(2)=12.30, *p*=0.007, 95% CI [0.29, 0.60].

These findings show that these historical family memories serve important personal functions, but when they were in agreement with the group's ideals, they also serve important collective functions, as hypothesised (H2.2). Contrary to our prediction, we did not find any generational effect or interaction (H2.3 and H2.4), which indicates that the relative use

of personal versus collective functions does not differ across generations.

8.4 | Step 3: Types of Functions

In this section, we delve a bit further by examining the types of personal or collective functions. We ran 2 (*Group*: Collaboration, Resistance) × 3 (*Generation*: G1, G2, G3) × 2 (*Category*: Personal, Collective) × 3 (*Type*: Identity, Social, Directive) GLMs. An overview of the different models can be found in Table 5.

Similarly to the previous section, we found a main effect of *Category*, with more personal than collective functions (Table 5, Model 1), and an interaction between *Group* and *Category*, with collective functions mentioned significantly more often in the resistance group compared to the collaboration group (Table 5, Model 2). We also found a two-way interaction between *Category* and *Type*. Contrasts with Bonferroni corrections indicated that there were no significant differences between the three types within the personal functions category; however, within the collective functions category, we found significantly more directive functions (*EM means*=0.249, *SE*=0.066) than social functions (*EM means*=0.030, *SE*=0.035), *t*(16)=3.31, *p*=0.013, 95% CI [0.04, 0.40]. Identity functions (*EM means*=0.130, *SE*=0.047) were situated in-between directive and social functions, but not statistically significantly different from either. In summary, across participants, collective functions were mostly cited to help make better decisions as a group, while social functions were almost never mentioned.

Finally, our model did not detect any three-way interactions (Table 5, Model 3).

As complex models do not always show differences within interactions, we also directly tested our three planned hypotheses (see Table 6 for an overview of the hypotheses). First, we expected higher levels of identity functions, both at the individual and collective levels, for the resistance group than the collaboration group (H3.1). Pairwise contrasts with Bonferroni corrections found no significant difference across groups, whether at the individual level, *t*(4)=2.20, *p*=0.093, 95% CI [−0.06, 0.50] or at the collective level, *t*(4)=1.38, *p*=0.240, 95% CI [−0.21, 0.64].

Second, we hypothesised higher levels of directive functions at the collective level for the resistance group than the collaboration group (H3.2), which was supported by our data, *t*(4)=7.70, *p*=0.002, 95% CI [0.30, 0.64].

Finally, we hypothesised lower levels of social function compared to identity and directive functions at the collective level across both groups (H3.3). Our data did not support this hypothesis. In the resistance group, pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni showed that social collective functions were only significantly lower than directive collective functions, *t*(4)=6.52, *p*=0.009, 95% CI [0.20, 0.65]; but not compared to identity collective functions, *t*(4)=2.55, *p*=0.079, 95% CI [−0.30, 0.36]. In the collaboration group, as collective

TABLE 5 | GLM fixed effects *F* and *p* values For main effects and interactions within the different models.

Variables	Model 1 AIC: 183.86 Nagelkerke <i>R</i> ² : 0.11		Model 2 (AIC: 152.42) Nagelkerke <i>R</i> ² : 0.24		Model 3 (AIC: 160.51) Nagelkerke <i>R</i> ² : 0.26	
	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Group	0.68	0.415	4.97	0.041	< 0.01	0.982
Generation	0.40	0.671	0.72	0.502	< 0.01	0.997
Category	11.68	0.002	23.82	< 0.001	< 0.01	0.979
Type	2.63	0.089	3.66	0.049	1.63	0.304
Group × generation			1.22	0.320	0.14	0.877
Group × category			8.60	0.010	< 0.01	0.985
Group × type			0.36	0.704	1.93	0.146
Generation × category			0.92	0.417	0.88	0.483
Generation × type			1.85	0.169	3.85	0.110
Category × type			7.70	0.005	10.55	0.025
Group × generation × category					0.02	0.984
Group × generation × type					1.31	0.401
Group × category × type					3.44	0.135
Generation × category × type					1.19	0.435

Note: AIC corresponds to Akaike Information Criterion, which is an indicator of how well the model fits the data. Models with small information criterion values fit better. Numbers in bold represent significant results to analyse.

TABLE 6 | Overview of hypothesis and whether results support them or not.

Hypothesis		Supported?
Step 1. Perceived importance of family historical memories		
H1.1	High levels of perceived importance overall	Yes
H1.2	Perceived importance decreases over generations	No
Step 2. Personal vs. collective functions		
H2.1	Instances of both personal and collective functions	Yes
H2.2	Family memories of the resistance serve more collective functions than memories of the collaboration	Yes
H2.3	Younger generations propose less functions overall	No
H2.4	Younger generations cite collective functions more often than personal functions	No
Step 3. Types of functions		
H3.1	Higher levels of identity functions, both at the individual and the collective levels, for the resistance group than the collaboration group	No
H3.2	Higher levels of directive functions at the collective level for the resistance group than the collaboration group	Yes
H3.3	Lower levels of social function compared to identity and directive functions at the collective level across both groups	No

functions were low overall, we did not detect any differences across types.

A summary of our hypotheses and findings is available in Table 6.

9 | Discussion

Family memory represents a unique and important arena to conduct research on how people recall and use memories of close others (i.e., vicarious memories) (Fivush and Kellas 2025;

Kirkegaard Thomsen et al. 2025; Pillemer et al. 2015). Indeed, intergenerational discussions are not merely stories passed down for entertainment; these family memories play a critical role in shaping identity, providing individuals with a sense of continuity, belonging, and meaning that extends beyond their own lived experiences (Duke et al. 2008; Fivush and Merrill 2016; Merrill et al. 2017). Yet most work on family narratives has focused on their personal and familial functions. This study extends this research by examining whether family memories embedded within significant historical events can simultaneously serve collective functions, bridging personal and collective memory domains (Cordonnier et al. 2022; Cordonnier and Luminet 2026).

Through interviews with 96 participants from French-speaking Belgian families whose ancestors either resisted or collaborated during WWII, we investigated the dual functionality of family historical memories. Following in-depth interviews about their ancestors' wartime experiences, participants rated how important it was for them to know and transmit these family historical memories and explained why. We coded their open answers to identify whether participants indicated that their family memories served identity, social, or directive functions at the personal level, the collective level, or both.

9.1 | Perceived Importance of Family Historical Memories

Our analyses were presented in three steps. First, we examined whether these family historical memories were deemed important to the following generations, which serves as a marker of their ongoing functionality. As predicted, we found high levels of importance across our sample; however, results did not reveal the expected decrease across generations. Previous studies have shown that communicative memories of such events tend to disappear relatively quickly after already two generations (Cordonnier et al. 2021; Stone et al. 2014). Although this was also the case in our sample, our results indicate that even if individuals did not know much about their family past (which was often the case for younger generation), what they knew, and sometimes wished they knew, remained important to them. This apparent paradox—wanting to know more yet knowing relatively little—seems to reflect layers of silence around the family past rather than a lack of interest. These silences can be structural (e.g., key relatives having passed away, or events perceived as too distant in time), relational (e.g., relatives choosing not to talk or feeling unable to), or protective, when details are withheld to shield oneself or others. Within such constrained communicative environments, younger generations can strongly value family history while nonetheless recalling having only a thin set of concrete memories.

In the resistance group—where this past has a general positive representation within society—grandchildren (G2) found it particularly important to know and transmit these events, even more so than their parents (G1). Content from the rest of the interviews, although not systematically analysed within the scope of this paper, can shed some light on this finding. Most children

(G1) had lived through the war, and their parents' acts of bravery were sometimes costly for their family (e.g., loss of income due to the father going into hiding, loss of life, fear of being caught, etc.). Furthermore, the resistant parent was not always seen as a positive figure: some were distant or even violent with their family. These negative personal representations of the parent and the war were thus intertwined with their acts of resistance. This was not the case with the grandchildren, who mostly considered the heroic acts only. It could also be seen as a marker of “cumulative heroization”, a concept developed by Welzer (2005) highlighting how a family past is positively transformed across generations.

In the collaboration group, we did not find such differences within generations. Qualitative analyses of their answers show that the importance of this past was often linked to the need to know and understand why their ancestor had done what they were accused of. During their interview, many participants described a certain silence about that past within their family, which they wished to break. In other words, the importance to know and transmit was based on the expected functions that these family memories would serve, whether the past was indeed transmitted or not. Overall, family memories seem to matter to family members over many generations.

9.2 | Personal and Collective Functions of Family Historical Memories

The second and third steps of our analyses explored the functionality of family historical memories at both personal and collective levels. Consistent with research on vicarious memories (Pillemer et al. 2015), we found that family historical memories served robust personal functions across both groups. Participants described how these memories helped them understand their identity and their family's place in the world (identity function), strengthened bonds within their families through shared storytelling (social function), and provided lessons that guided their personal choices and behaviours (directive function). These findings support the argument that family memories, though not directly experienced, should be regarded as an integral component of personal memory, serving many of the same purposes as autobiographical memories (Pillemer et al. 2024). Participants reflected not only on their own past but also on events that occurred to their ancestors, integrating these vicarious experiences into their sense of self and their understanding of ‘where they come from.’

Crucially, however, our findings revealed that family historical memories also transcended the personal sphere to serve collective functions (although to a lower extent than personal functions). When aligned with valued collective narratives—as it was the case for resistance families—these memories contributed to collective identity and, more importantly, provided guidance for how to act as members of Belgian society. Indeed, 46% of participants in the resistance group cited directive collective functions, describing how their family's past informed their contemporary attitudes toward extremism, immigration, and civic engagement. These familial recollections, when associated with significant collective events, functioned as a form of communicative memory that bridged

personal experience and collective history (Assmann 1995; Cordonnier et al. 2021; Kirkegaard Thomsen et al. 2025; Reese and Fivush 2008). This dual functionality demonstrates that memory operates along a continuum from personal to collective, with family historical memories occupying a unique position where both domains intersect and influence one another (Cordonnier et al. 2022).⁶

At the same time, collective social functions were almost never mentioned. As noted in the introduction, we followed Liu and Hilton's (2005) definition of the social function of collective memory as helping groups 'keep track of friends and enemies' and structure relations between social categories, rather than interpersonal bonding in the autobiographical sense. In our coding scheme, collective-social functions therefore captured references to relationships between social groups or to how particular groups are viewed or treated in society, not to social bonding within the family. This relatively narrow, intergroup-focused definition likely contributes to their low frequency in our data, where family historical memories of WWII were more often mobilised to define who 'we' are (identity) or how 'we' should act (directive) than to map present-day intergroup relations.

9.3 | Alignment With Collective Memories

This differential endorsement of collective functions between resistance and collaboration families reveals a critical theoretical point: the capacity for family memories to serve collective purposes depends fundamentally on their alignment with socially valued narratives. Resistance memories, which reflect positively on group identity and align with French-speaking Belgium's collective ideals about WWII (M. Conway 2012; Liu and Hilton 2005), could be openly shared and framed as lessons for contemporary society. In contrast, collaboration families' memories remained largely confined to the personal sphere. While we could have expected that members of the collaboration group would also highlight a directive collective function of their family's past as an example not to follow, less than one third of collaboration participants cited collective functions, instead emphasising how these memories helped them understand their personal and family identity.

Once more, qualitative insights from the interviews can provide some suggestions as to why collaboration memories could not easily transition to collective functions. Many participants described how their ancestors' actions were minimised or justified within family narratives—framed as 'small mistakes' arising from complex circumstances rather than as moral failings. For others, these events remained taboo, a shadowy presence 'lurking in the silences' of family life. From Fivush's perspective, such silences can be chosen as a way to construct a narrative self that protects a positive image of the ancestor or the family, but they can also be imposed by sociocultural expectations (Fivush 2010; Fivush and Pasupathi 2019). When family memories carry shame and exist outside dominant collective narratives, they cannot serve as public lessons from history, even when their cautionary value might seem obvious. Instead, they become tools for private identity work, as participants struggled to integrate morally problematic family

histories into coherent self-concepts. As research on shame and family secrets demonstrates, what remains hidden often weighs more heavily on individuals than what is brought into the light (Barnwell 2018; Pinto-Gouveia and Matos 2011; Rosoux and Cordonnier 2026).

This relation with collective narratives underscores a crucial methodological and theoretical point: family memory functions cannot be fully understood outside their cultural context. Our findings are not simply about resistance versus collaboration memories; they are about how French-speaking Belgian society has constructed collective representations of these pasts. This cultural specificity becomes evident when we consider how different our results might have been had we studied Dutch-speaking Belgian families. In Flanders, collective memories of collaboration occupy a fundamentally different position in the cultural landscape. There, collaborative movements have been integrated into Flemish identity and framed as part of the Flemish nationalist cause (Aerts 2018; Bouchat et al. 2020). Had we interviewed Flemish families whose ancestors collaborated, we would likely have found higher endorsement of collective functions—not because collaboration itself has inherently different properties, but because the collective context validates and legitimizes those memories differently. This comparison reveals that what determines whether family memories can serve collective functions is not merely their content, but whether that content resonates with, or contradicts, the collective narratives available within a given cultural and historical context. Collective memory thus shapes not only what families remember, but what those memories can accomplish for individuals and groups (Cordonnier et al. 2022).

Yet, even within culturally supportive contexts, our findings reveal an important caveat: not all family historical memories are deemed functional by all family members. While the *devoir de mémoire* (the duty to remember) is a recurrent societal debate with regard to WWII events (Gensburger and Lavabre 2005), some participants in our sample argued for the right to forget, in agreement with Paul Ricoeur's idea of a *juste mémoire* (just memory): the idea that there exists a balanced approach to memory that neither demands total remembrance nor permits complete forgetting (Ricoeur 2000). Others discussed the emotional cost associated with their family memories, whether for their ancestors who lived through the events or for themselves as inheritors of difficult pasts. For many, there was also an overall lack of interest, sometimes associated with a feeling that these events belong to a too distant past to matter personally.

This variability in engagement reminds us that the functional approach captures what memories accomplish for those who actively engage with them, but not all family members choose, or feel able, to engage with difficult pasts. Our coding scheme identified functions when participants articulated them, but absence of functional discourse may reflect either genuine lack of functionality or reluctance to articulate functions for memories that remain painful, conflicted, or simply irrelevant to one's current life. This nuance is particularly important when considering memories associated with shame or trauma, where active avoidance may itself serve a protective function, even if participants do not frame it as such (Rosoux and Cordonnier 2026).

9.4 | Generational Patterns

Beyond individual variations in engagement, examining how functionality evolves across generations reveals how temporal distance and cultural validation jointly influence which functions family historical memories serve. Contrary to expectations, our results showed few differences across generations, likely due to small subsample sizes, particularly with regard to G3. The only notable pattern was that great-grandchildren of former collaborators reported fewer functions overall for their family memories. This pattern did not emerge for great-grandchildren of former Resistance members, suggesting that family historical memories continue to serve memory functions across generations when they align with positive cultural narratives but may diminish more rapidly when associated with culturally stigmatised actions, regardless of participants' actual knowledge about specific events.

9.5 | Limitations and Future Directions

Our research comprises several limitations. First, due to the particular content and context, generalisation is limited. Given our qualitative, in-depth approach, our goal was to demonstrate that family historical memories can serve both personal and collective functions, not that they always do. We used this case to exemplify both the similarities between two fields of research—autobiographical memory on the one hand and collective memory on the other—and their interaction.

Second, our groups are not fully comparable. For instance, four resistance families still had living G0 members who could provide personal, first-hand accounts of this historical time. In contrast, no collaboration families had G0 members available, as individuals judged for collaborative acts had all passed away. This asymmetry means that resistance family narratives may have benefited from more direct and recent transmission from original witnesses, whereas collaboration narratives relied exclusively on intergenerational retelling. Furthermore, several G1 participants in the resistance group had lived through the war as children or adolescents, whereas most G1 participants in the collaboration group were born after the war. These differences in direct versus indirect exposure to the historical events may have influenced narrative richness, emotional salience, and the functions that family memories serve. However, it is difficult to precisely assess the extent of this influence. Relatedly, we could only access a handful of G3 participants for the collaboration group, which reduces statistical power and makes estimates for this generation less precise. In addition, participation may have been more attractive to families for whom these stories already felt meaningful, which could lead to some overestimation of the perceived importance of family historical memories and the range of functions they serve. These group and recruitment asymmetries reflect the inherent challenges of conducting ecologically valid research with real families whose historical experiences differ not only in content but also in temporal proximity to the original events.

Third, our coding scheme also contains some limitations. To highlight the links between individual and collective memory, we decided to narrow the types of functions to those serving

identity, social, and directive purposes. Thus, data was forced to fit our coding scheme. Yet, the literature on memory functions has indicated that the three-factor model is not always optimal (Harris et al. 2014; Webster 2003). For example, memories can serve an important role in the regulation of emotions, a function not present in the tripartite model (Öner and Gülgöz 2018). Furthermore, these theories mostly consider the act of recalling one's personal past; they do not include the function of the transmission itself. There is a need for future research to systematically examine the functionality of memory in social and collective contexts, as well as to distinguish between memory use and adaptive outcomes.

Finally, in the present study we focused on the perceived personal and collective functions of knowing about and transmitting family historical memories in general, rather than coding the functions of each specific memory mentioned in the interview. This global, representation-level approach allowed us to compare generations regardless of how much detailed knowledge they possessed, but it does not capture the full range of functions that particular memories may have in everyday life. In another article in this special issue (Baudet et al., [forthcoming](#)), we take a complementary approach by examining the perceived functions of specific memories that are either transmitted to the next generation or vicariously recalled by them. This study can thus be read alongside the present paper to provide a more fine-grained picture of how memory functions operate at the level of individual remembered events.

10 | Conclusion

In conclusion, humans are social creatures. Their autobiographical memories are intertwined with those of their families and friends, but also their community. Remembering the past, whether personal or collective, can thus serve a range of functions. In the present study, we demonstrated that family memories related to the resistance or the collaboration during WWII in French-speaking Belgian families were deemed important for members of different generations and served both personal and collective functions. As do autobiographical memories, these vicarious family historical memories helped individuals construct their identity as members of their family, but also as members of their community. When events were perceived as in agreement with the group's norms and ideals, they could serve as examples to direct current or future behaviour, both for individuals themselves and for society. Overall, our research argues that memory scholars should examine memory functionality as a continuum from individual to collective in which both forces interact constantly, recognising that cultural context shapes not only what is remembered, but what those memories can accomplish for individuals and groups.

Author Contributions

Aline Cordonnier: conceptualization, investigation, writing – original draft, methodology, validation, visualization, writing – review and editing, software, project administration, formal analysis, data curation, supervision, resources, funding acquisition. **Olivier Luminet:** conceptualization, funding acquisition, methodology, validation, writing – review and editing, project administration, supervision.

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Disclosure

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Quantitative data is available on OSF, https://osf.io/7xfdh/?view_only=e24a5800210f4e35926d442c5d3229f0.

Endnotes

¹ Our usage of personal and autobiographical memory thus differs from terminology adopted in the recent framework by Kirkegaard Thomsen et al. (2025) but remains compatible with Bluck and Lind’s (2024) distinction between vicarious and autobiographical memory.

² Family and nation have also been contrasted in research on future thinking, with family representing a more personal, relational group and the country or nation a more impersonal, collective level (Berntsen and Rubin 2024; Shrikanth et al. 2018). Across these studies, systematic differences in how participants evaluate the valence of the future for their family versus their nation provide empirical support for treating family-based and nation-based future thinking as distinct constructs.

³ An interesting note is that, in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, there exists a strong collective memory about the collaboration which is associated with Flemish identity (Aerts 2018). However, this aspect will not be discussed within this manuscript.

⁴ Additional work on this project has been published (Bouchat et al. 2020; Cordonnier 2025a, 2025b; Cordonnier et al. 2021; Rosoux and Cordonnier 2026).

⁵ CEGESOMA is a research and documentation center under the direction of the State Archives of Belgium and one of our research partners for this project.

⁶ We conducted exploratory analyses examining whether broader social identification (with Belgium and with one’s family) was associated with the likelihood of assigning personal versus collective functions to these memories. These correlations generally non-significant, suggesting no simple link between strength of identification and the level (personal vs. collective) at which functions were endorsed (see Table S1).

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Table S1:** Correlations between functions and identity across collaboration and resistance groups.